

# **A History of Benjamin Franklin School (Mesa Arizona)**



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(Original Model for the Thomas Edison Charter Schools)

No history of Thomas Edison Charter Schools (TECS) is complete without a mention of Benjamin Franklin Elementary School (BFES) in Mesa Arizona. BFES was the model for TECS and therefore deserves recognition as the original inspiration of the TECS educational philosophy and program. The original BFES is a school of choice that predated charter schools by 15 years, thus, was well ahead of its time. Following is the detailed and fascinating history of BFES written by H. Marc Mason – first Benjamin Franklin Elementary School Principal.

## **Originally written in January 1986, and updated in July 1994**

Benjamin Franklin Elementary School was started in 1976 when a group of parents became concerned about their neighborhood schools. Much of the controversy was centered around the physical design of the schools. Many of the schools were based on an open classroom concept, where 120 children were being taught by 4 teachers in the large pod. Parents were concerned that their children were not receiving an opportunity to think and study as they should in this setting. Other parents were disturbed by the curriculum at their neighborhood schools. As these parents attempted to work through their school administrators and district administrators, they encountered resistance to their requests for a program that would meet their particular desires for their children. Early in 1976, a group called People for Basic education was organized, and made a series of formal requests to the school district administration for the development of an alternative school. The district administration turned down the requests by the group, forcing them to approach the school board directly with their request. The school board also turned down their request for an alternative school.

Subsequent to that, People for Basic Education were joined in force by two additional groups of citizens. The first of these groups were basically anti-administration. The motivation of this anti-administration group was triggered by several occurrences involving district employees with the community and the schools. One incident in particular involved the dismissal of a district employee, which generated significant public support on behalf of the employee. During that same time period, a controversy surrounding the personal life of the superintendent of schools triggered a third group of citizens who requested his resignation on personal and moral grounds. In the great American tradition of “grass roots” movements, these three groups of citizens formed a coalition and began working through the political process to elect a more sympathetic school board.

In November 1976, through the work of that coalition, three new school board members, who favored the establishment of an alternative school, were elected to the school board. Those new school board members were: Dr. Marion Peterson, Dennis Lambson, and Darl Anderson. On June 29, 1977, the new school board, having been approached by People for Basic Education with a request for an alternative school, voted to establish an alternative school under the direction of the superintendent by a vote of three to two.

In November 1977, Mr. Marc Mason was appointed principal of the new alternative elementary school while still serving as principal of Lindbergh Elementary School. In December of 1977, the initial registration for the alternative school took place and the parents of 236 students registered their children, even though they were not familiar with the principal, the teachers, the curriculum, the textbooks, and did not know where the new school would be located. These parents were so concerned with their children’s education in the neighborhood schools that they were willing to risk enrolling them in Benja-

min Franklin School, even though the final school program had yet to be developed.

In January of 1978, these same parents were encouraged to meet and present their feelings as to what this new school should be. No guarantees were made, but the intent was to develop a school that would come as close as possible to providing the type of education the parents desired. During that four day period, the parents filled out nearly 2,000 sheets of paper, answering questions and giving suggestions in 47 different categories that had been developed (category #47 was "other" so there was absolutely no area that a parent couldn't respond to). Those original papers and parent responses are still on file at Franklin Elementary School [as of July 1994]. Parents were then given the opportunity to volunteer for a number of committees including: temporary steering – to determine how parental representation and leadership would be chosen: curriculum: textbooks: discipline: dress code: student activities: retention: and report cards. Each of these committees were given the responsibility of handling all of the comments (from those 2000 sheets of paper) related to their area and making recommendations to the soon-to-be-elected parent leadership. The elected representatives then made their recommendations for the school to the principal, Mr. Mason who subsequently compiled and submitted them to the school board in March of 1978 for their final approval.

As the school began to take shape, it became apparent that the parents' stated priorities centered around a curriculum that would provide a solid basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic in structured, self-contained classrooms. The parents also wanted the school to have calm, orderly structured, self-contained classrooms. The parents also wanted the school to have a calm, orderly atmosphere. High on the list of parent priorities were that the children would demonstrate respect for teachers and staff, learn independence and responsibility, have homework, and have high goals for which to strive. Extra-curricular activities including field trips would, for the most part, be the responsibility of the home, not the school. There would be limits placed on the scope or what teachers could present in the classroom. It would be an alternative school, attended by those children whose parents desired something other than what their neighborhood schools offered.

The next step was the practical aspects of putting the school together. The school board had initially decided that the location of the school would be on the site of the current Irving Elementary School, but in April of 1978 the decision was made to move the site from Irving Elementary to the current Franklin West Elementary campus. This building was old and in disrepair. The district did not have the manpower to refurbish it before the beginning of the next school year. Parent committees were formed and parent volunteers helped paint, do carpentry work, fix up the school, hang curtains, and generally get Benjamin Franklin School into shape ready to receive students in August of 1978.

There were many difficulties to be overcome during that first year of existence. The toughest were the selection of the textbooks and the training and familiarization of the teachers with the language arts program, The Writing Road To Reading (also known as the Spalding program). This program was unfamiliar to all of the teachers at the time the school started and, in fact, the Open Court reading program was selected as the second choice and had been purchased to be available in order to have a solid program to use in the event that the Spalding program did not work out appropriately for the students at the school. However it was found that there was a strong desire on the part of the teachers to learn more about the Spalding program, and a series of in-service lessons were given so they could learn as much as possible about it. The teachers volunteered their own time for 3-1/2 hours each Monday night beginning October 11 and running through December 13, 1978 in order to receive this instruction. Several of the Franklin teachers are now instructing teachers from other schools on

how to teach the Spalding program [as of 1994].

Another difficult situation that occurred in that first year centered around the attitudes of some of the other educators within the school system. The faculty, staff, and administration of the school began to feel resentment from other educators towards the establishment of the basic school. In addition, there was some redefinition of what Benjamin Franklin School should be and would be as the administration and staff ran into the practical applications of implementing standards and policies that had been set up i.e. dress codes, etc. In reality, all the careful planning that had been done by so many parent committees was still not universally acceptable to each and every student and parent. Since that time, parents and teachers have had to learn how to work cooperatively together matching staff abilities with parental expectations. The educational philosophy of the school also solidified to form a firm operating base from which to make decisions.

During the first two years of the program, registration was on a first-come, first-served basis. Enrollment increased from the original 236 to 380 by May of 1979. By that time, the school was completely filled, with two sections of each grade level Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> and one section of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. During those years, significant waiting lists were being generated. Parents would actually camp out in front of the school for periods of time up to a week in advance of enrollment in Kindergarten. Those not able to get in made up the waiting list. After years of waiting lists being developed on a first-come first-served basis, the school was directed to implement a lottery style draw to select incoming Kindergarten students.

Demand for the school steadily increased and the school board voted in the spring of 1981 to expand the school by adding one section to each grade level Kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup>. In 1982 and 1983 telephone registrations generated not only enough students to fill that expansion, bringing the total number of students in Benjamin Franklin to approximately 800, but also provided the school with a waiting list in excess of 400. Vacancies were filled from this waiting list and it was determined that no further expansion would be possible at the original site. From that point forward, each year's kindergarten class was filled by lottery with the excess names forming the perpetual waiting list for that group of students.

In 1989 the Governing Board with input from the superintendent, decided that the facility at 236 S. Serrine was in need of repair. This need coincided with the need to alter the special education program at Parkway School at 1753 E. 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Mesa. Franklin parents at that time had been asking for a new facility too. A decision was reached to remodel the Parkway facility to accommodate the 800 Franklin students and have the administrative responsibilities of the Parkway Special Ed program be absorbed by the Franklin principal and staff. The last part of the 1989-1990 school year was marked by major construction concerns and organizational problems associated with moving an entire school to the new location. Parents were a great help by using their own pick-ups and trucks to help the move take place smoothly. The 1990-1991 school year was one of adjustment to a new building, a new computer system and the acquisition of the MSH program that had previously occupied the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue site. During the summer and fall of 1991, discussions about the possibility of expanding the Franklin option to two campuses began to take place and in November of 1991 the Governing Board voted to expand the Franklin option by reopening the original campus as an annex to the program. In August of 1992 the Franklin West campus opened with a mixture of veteran Franklin teachers and new teachers under the direction of one principal. A head teacher was also appointed to assist in the oversight of the two schools. The executive council of the PTO was ex-

panded in representation to include parents from both campuses who met as a single council. Again it was a year of adjustments the two schools worked to meet the needs of over 1200 students.

During the 1993-1994 school year, as the routine of two campuses began to smooth out, expansion began to unfold as discussions about adding a 7<sup>th</sup> grade to the program began to occur. In October of 1993 a group of approximately 75 parents got together to discuss the possibility of starting a school for secondary age children (grades 7 through 12) modeled after the Benjamin Franklin and Alhambra type schools. Once again, like the original group of parents in 1976, this group of parents were motivated by what they were experiencing in the neighborhood junior and senior high schools. Many parents were concerned with the erosion of the core academic curriculum in favor of such programs as environmental education, aids education, sex education, self-esteem courses and the ASAP testing program. They were concerned that their youngsters were receiving instruction in areas that had little or no academic content. Some of the parents were fed up with the lack of discipline on many campuses and the growing dangers related to gangs and the violence that is spawned by that environment. And finally, a significant number of parents knowledgeable about the new "progressive" education programs such as "Outcome Based" Education had started to see elements of these programs begin to be introduced into their schools and were extremely upset by it.

By early November the parents had started to form committees to define the type of school they would like to have. These committees were structured with a steering committee whose membership was made up of the chairs of each of the sub-committees and any other interested parents that wished to participate. The steering committee provided the strategy and planning for the program with input from the sub-committees and any other source available to its members including written materials and interviews with community leaders, school board members, school district administrators, legislators, students, and parents at large. The working committees that were established to do the detailed work were: planning: school policies: education program: textbooks/teaching materials: finances: facilities: public relations/communications: and political action.

During the months of November and December, due to the holidays, it was difficult for parents to get together on most of the sub-committees so the steering committee decided to start meeting weekly to develop a plan with the intent of going forward with a secondary school program that would be in operation by the fall of 1994. By early January of 1994 the steering committee had arrived at a focused master plan including, parent education and information forums, parent recruitment, detailed design of the program, political action, education research, legislative liaison, and the development of a small group of public spokesmen. In addition, it was decided that the group needed to establish an identity and from that discussion the name Parents Unified for Traditional Education was adopted. By the end of January, the group had grown to approximately 250 families.

Through conversations and interviews with various individuals the steering committee saw the need to demonstrate to the school board and district administration that a significant interest for this concept existed within the community. The steering committee decided that a survey/petition drive would be the most effective means to demonstrate this interest. So, once again in the great American tradition of "grass roots" movements, with much hard work and effort on many parents part, the list of families interested in establishing a back to basics style program for 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades grew to over 1000 families within a 2-1/2 week period. One of the most interesting aspects of this effort was that less than [108] of the families that signed the surveys were current Franklin parents showing a larger than expected interest in the district at large. The other interesting fact that came

out of this effort, was that the parents that signed on to the program represented every zip code in the Mesa school district.

Armed with this information, test score data on the performance of both Franklin campuses, and a focused and articulate presentation, Parents Unified for Traditional Education began lobbying school board members and the district administration for an alternative secondary school program. On March 21, 1994 a proposal for the program was submitted to the superintendency under the districts "New Initiatives" program for review and approval by the school board. On April 12, 1994, the school board voted and approved a compromise program that would expand the Benjamin Franklin West campus to include 4 sections of 7<sup>th</sup> grade for a one year trial beginning in the fall of 1994. The vote once again was three to two in favor of the program. In addition to the approval of the program, it was announced by the superintendent that Mr. Eldon Budge would be re-assigned from his position as principal at Carson Jr. High to the Franklin campuses to serve as co-principal with Mr. Mason.

The PTO councils of both east and west campuses met on April 12, 1994 in a special session and established a 7<sup>th</sup> grade steering sub-committee as part of the west campus council to work on the development of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade program. This steering committee was made up of parents from Parents Unified for Traditional Education and the Franklin Schools that currently had 6<sup>th</sup> graders and would potentially enroll in the program for the 1994-1995 school year.

The steering sub-committee for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade began the process of establishing committees to design and develop the program and have it ready for students in August of 1994. These parent committees, worked closely with Mr. Mason and Mr. Budge on all areas of the program including policies, curriculum, textbooks, enrollment procedures, and structure. The process of designing the overall program was accomplished in the same manner as the original program back in 1978. On May 24, 1994, Mr. Mason and Mr. Budge held the first lottery to select 120 students to fill the initial positions in the program. During the summer of 1994, the program began to take its final shape due to the hard work and sacrifice of Mr. Mason, Mr. Budge and many other people committed to the success of the program.