

Britton Phillips reflects on his 34 year career in La Porte ISD



Britton Phillips, top left, and his wife, Gayle, top right, relax with family recently at their daughter's home in Shoreacres. In front are his grandson, Craig Wade, and granddaughter, Jennifer Wade, and in the middle row are his oldest daughter and son-in-law, Debbie and Jeff Wade.

In observance of the 100th anniversary of La Porte ISD, The Leader will be featuring stories about some of the educators who had a significant impact on the history of the district. Britton Phillips' career in La Porte ISD spanned 34 years, and he continues to be actively involved in the community today. Many former students have known and respected Phillips as their teacher, coach, or principal.

School started late the year Britton Phillips joined the La Porte ISD team. Because Hurricane Carla ravaged the Texas coast on Sept. 10, 1961, several schools in the district were being used as shelters, and the start of classes was delayed for a week.

Phillips had been in Crosby ISD for one year before coming to La Porte, where he remained for the rest of his career. Ralph Pierce hired him as a coach and science/math teacher for La Porte Junior High School, and although Pierce wasn't the superintendent at the time, before the summer was over, he was named to the post when James H. Baker retired.

Phillips coached and taught several years at La Porte Junior High School before being named assistant principal there. He worked with Principal Jack Jackson for four years and John Campbell for three years in that role.

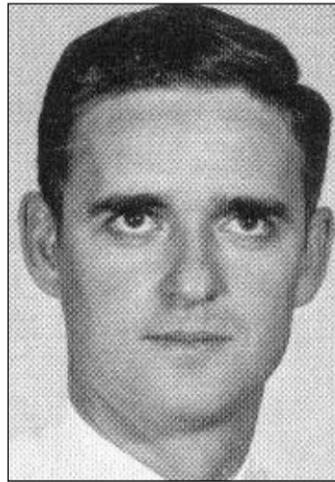
In 1973, Phillips was named principal of Baker Junior High School, and then-Baker principal James Sitton went to La Porte Junior High School. Phillips served as principal at Baker for 19 years and then went back to La Porte Junior High as principal for three more years before retiring in 1995.

Phillips moved to Baytown at the age of five and later graduated from Robert E. Lee High School. After attending nearby Lee College, he went on to earn his bachelor's degree at the University of Texas and his master's degree at Sam Houston State University.

He and his wife Gayle raised their family in La Porte, with all three of their children and two of their grandchildren being products of La Porte ISD. Daughter Debbie Wade and her husband Jeff graduated from LPHS in 1979 and 1978, respectively; their children, Craig and Jennifer, earned their diplomas in 2005 and 2008. Middle daughter Diane Phillips graduated in 1982, while the youngest, Dena Michna, graduated in 1984.

With 34 years in education in La Porte, Phillips has countless memories, but several things stand out in his mind.

"In 1981, the sixth grade students were moved to the junior high schools, so we brought in the sixth grade teachers from the elementary schools to the two junior highs," he said. "The sixth graders were on the south side of our campus, although there was some overlapping with P.E. classes and electives and those kinds of things."



Left: Britton Phillips taught and coached one year in Crosby before becoming a teacher and coach at La Porte Junior High in 1961. He retired from La Porte ISD in 1995. Right: Phillips served as principal at Baker Junior High for 19 years.

In the mid-1980s, after much research and discussion, the Baker Junior High School faculty and staff developed a team approach to teaching. He explained that teachers were placed on teams with each discipline represented, teaching a core group of students for that year.

One of the biggest challenges he faced in his career was when the district was building the new Lomax Junior High School. Although the expectation was that it would be ready for the start of the school year, as the summer wore on, it became apparent that it would not be completed in time.

"When school started, we had the students from Lomax Junior High and Baker Junior High together (at Baker) for seven weeks, and we had students all over the building for classes," he said, explaining that around 1,180 students started school at Baker that year.

"Every place we could find for a classroom, we had it!" he said, noting that some teachers traveled from one room to another, while makeshift classrooms were set up on the stage, in hallways, or in partitioned areas. Teachers, counselors and nurses from both schools shared spaces, working cooperatively because they knew they had to make the temporary arrangement work.

"For seven weeks, we worked very well together," he chuckled. "I don't know what it would have been like if we'd gone eight weeks, but for that seven weeks, we survived, and everyone got along well."

In 1982, Phillips had detached retina surgery, and since he couldn't go to the office, his office came to him. While he recuperated at home, his long-time secretary, Roberta Martin, would come to the house, take notes, and relay his instructions back at the school.

"She was working from school and my house, too, for a little bit," he remembered.

Phillips is humble about the impact he had on La Porte ISD and its students, instead pointing to the men and women who worked alongside him. He surrounded himself with high quality faculty and staff members who shared his work ethic and commitment to the students of La Porte ISD.

"I hired people who were excellent teachers, and I was fortunate to be able to do that," he explained. "They had to be top-notch or I didn't take them."

In reflecting on his years in La Porte ISD, Phillips notes that the community's support of students and the educational programs has been strong.

"People here have always been very supportive of the schools, and we were appreciative of that," he said.

Unbeknownst to Phillips, when he retired, several members of his staff "passed the hat" in La Porte to try to send Phillips and his wife on a weekend trip to Galveston. In the end, they collected enough for an all-expense-paid trip to Hawaii—a testament to the respect they felt for him.

"There were a lot of people in this town who made that possible, and it was unbelievable," he recalled.

Having served as a teacher or principal in the community for so many years, Phillips often runs into former students around town, and he whole-heartedly enjoys catching up on their lives.

"I see kids I've taught all the time—in Kroger, in Walmart, in restaurants and at church," he said. "Sometimes they'll call me 'Coach' if they were back in the early 60's. All of them are 'my kids' from day one, and it's nice to see them."