Success Story

School excels after dropping bilingual education

Ernesto Aguilar participates in a language lesson in Marisa Russo's Bennett-Kew Elementary first-grade class.

Disadvantaged kids learn phonics, score at top on state’s tests

This article is the third in a series about bilingual education.

By JONDI GUMZ
Sentinel staff writer

FOR 25 YEARS, Bennett-Kew Elementary School Principal Nancy Ichinaga has done it her way.
Ichinaga rejected bilingual education long before California voters did.
As long as she's been at Bennett-Kew Elementary, Spanish-speaking students have been taught in English. But that's not the only thing she's done differently.
To Ichinaga, good teaching means using a phonics-based reading program instead of the literature-based programs popular in Santa Cruz County. It means having teachers stand up and deliver lessons instead of having students work on their own. It means kindergartners who aren't ready for first grade get an extra year of instruction.
"It's nothing spectacular — just common sense," Ichinaga said.
Her methods defy conventional wisdom yet produce success for Spanish-speaking students. Traditionally these students perform poorly in school, but Bennett-Kew's test scores rival those in affluent communities like Scotts Valley and Rio del Mar.
Though Inglewood is a relatively poor, ethnically mixed community, Bennett-Kew's first-graders scored in the 80th percentile in reading and math on the state's standardized tests last spring. That means they did better than 80 percent of the students tested nationwide.
When the state issued its first Academic Performance Index last month, Bennett-Kew earned a 1.0 out of 10 — the highest possible score — when compared to other schools with similar demographics.

Bilingual education

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Notably, the students have done well even though a large number of teachers at Bennett-Kew lack full teaching credentials.
Although Ichinaga's methods have come under attack by the state Education Department, she also has been attracting positive attention in this era of school accountability.
The Inglewood district superintendent was so impressed by the results at Bennett-Kew and nearby Kelso, which has similar demographics and similar curriculum, that he insisted other schools adopt the same phonics-based reading program.
Last year, Inglewood joined a project by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to pay for reading coaches for 27 school districts using the reading program pioneered by Bennett-Kew. Some Inglewood teachers resisted the change, but reading scores improved districtwide last spring.
The results at Bennett-Kew could offer a valuable lesson for schools struggling to find new ways of teaching students since the passage of Proposition 227 restricted bilingual education.
What makes Ichinaga's success so remarkable is that Bennett-Kew students don't come from wealthy families. About half the students have parents who speak Spanish. The other half are African-American. Only a handful are white.
The school is about six miles from the Los Angeles airport. Parts of the working-class neighborhood aren't safe at night.
Some students go to school at 7:40 a.m. to eat a free breakfast. Four out of five qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.
Many educators say test scores are more a reflection of family income than of teaching quality. Yet by second grade, Bennett-Kew students can write compositions on how they spent their summer vacation with very few spelling or grammatical errors. In an essay posted on the classroom wall, Erick Jimenez, a second grader, boasts of reading 10 books while in Mexico over the summer.
A 'Believing kids can learn'As a younger in Hawaii, she grew up speaking Japanese. She learned English once she started school, and it didn't take three to five years, the amount of time experts in the state Education Department say it should take.
"It's not a long process," said Ichinaga.
system of the day. The students are taught by a team of five teachers, each with their own style and approach. When they test students on a weekly basis, they use a combination of oral and written assessments.

To keep the students engaged, Ichinaga incorporates interactive activities like role-playing sessions, group discussions, and cultural exchanges. She also assigns homework to reinforce the material covered in class.

Despite the challenges, Ichinaga remains committed to her students. "We want to provide them with a solid foundation in both English and Spanish, so they can succeed in any environment," she said. The school also offers additional tutoring and enrichment programs to support student learning.

In conclusion, the Mandarin Chinese Program at Bennett-Kiew is a valuable resource for students interested in learning a second language. It prepares them for future academic and professional opportunities in the global workforce. With a focus on cultural immersion and language proficiency, the program offers a unique learning experience that sets students apart from others.
**TAKING the first STEP**

English classes for adults who tutor children seen as a $50M proposition

By JONDI GUMZ  
Sentinel staff writer

LIVE OAK Every Tuesday and Thursday night, Alejandro and Leticia Arredondo have a date. They gather up their 7-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter and head to Green Acres Elementary School to take classes to improve their English.  
The Arredondos, who speak Spanish, are getting better at deciphering homework assignments for their son, a second-grader in an English-only class at Green Acres.

"We're finding out it's not so difficult to help," said Alejandro Arredondo, 26, who came to Santa Cruz seven years ago.

Ron Unz, the author of Proposition 227, had people like the Arredondos in mind when he decided that the proposition should include $50 million per year for 10 years to start free English classes for adults who promise to tutor children.

"It's pretty obvious," said Unz. "Children learn English most effectively when their parents also know English."

Others such as San Fernando Valley Assemblyman Tony Cardenas are skeptical about the investment because the program failed to include provisions for accountability.

The Live Oak school district, which had never sponsored adult classes before, was the first in Santa Cruz County to take advantage of the money.

About 100 parents have enrolled in classes, which are offered in five locations, during the day and at night. One class teaches computer skills along with English. The district is spending $41,000 from the state on the program and seeking money to do more.

Alejandro Arredondo got a new job after taking English and computer classes sponsored by the Live Oak School District. Just before Christmas, he sold his mobile home in Live Oak and bought a house in Capitola.

"We're proud of it," said Bob Morgan, who supervises the program for the Live Oak district. "The need for adult classes is evident, he said. About 20 percent of the district's 2,200 students are not fluent in English. When the district eliminated bilingual classes last year, 377 students formerly in bilingual classes were assigned to classes taught in English.

Even though students are exposed to more English at school, that is the only place some of them use it.

"At home, everybody talks in Spanish," said Juan Guevara, a fourth-grader at Del Mar Elementary.

Morgan views the parent classes as an important way to help students.

"There's only so much you can do in the classroom," he explained. "Whether it's English, Spanish or Swahili, if you don't get parents involved, it's for naught."
Learning

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Most of the adults classes are taught by
district employees, but evening sessions at
Green Acres Elementary are staffed by
volunteers.
Parents in the class want to help their
children and, at the same time, improve
their own lives.
Aguilera, 39, came to Santa Cruz from
Guatemala. He was 15, but he didn't go to
district school.
"I had to work," he explained.
For 11 years, he toiled in the brussels
sprouts fields. Now he's married with two
children, ages 8 and 9, and works at a
mushroom farm in Pescadero. He wants to
get a job doing maintenance. To do that, he
said, he needs better English, like his wife,
who went to adult school and works at a
deli.
David Fierro, 45, who is from Durango,
came here to work. He said he wants to
write better and improve communication
with his son, who is 15.

When children know two languages, they
start "playing games" with their parents,
said Fierro. "You have to be bilingual, too."
Maria Guzman, 58, is taking advantage
of this opportunity to learn English after
living in Santa Cruz 28 years.
"Now is my time," she said. "It's never
too late."
The most unusual class in the county
was co-sponsored by the Live Oak
district and Dominican Hospital (see page
16).
Not only did a dozen parents improve their
English, but just before Christmas they took
home a free computer — and an incentive to
those who attended all 16 sessions.
The computers came courtesy of the
Gateway Business & Community
Coalition, a non-profit organization that
collects and refurbishes high-tech equipment
that companies deem obsolete.
To get the computer, parents went twice a
week to the hospital's computer lab to learn
about word processing, the World
Wide Web and e-mail.
"It's very exciting," said Alejandro
Arredondo, one of the few men in the class.
"When you're going to get a computer —
that's the whole thing."
David Fierro, who attended the high-
tech sessions as well as the night classes,
got more than a computer for his efforts. He
said the classes helped him get a new,
higher-paying job at Plantronics.
"It makes you feel like you can do it."
Fierro said.
Many parents from Mexico don't
understand how American school work
They tend to view education as the job of
the teachers, not realizing the important role
that they can play themselves. And many
have grueling schedules, juggling more
than one job along with family
responsibilities.
"If they're not well educated, they're not
asasticate," said Susana Escoto, principal
at Del Mar Elementary in Live Oak.
Escoto, who grows up in a neighborhood
where high school graduation was a major
accomplishment, said she sees more Latino
parents helping their children with flash
cards at home or setting aside time for
reading.
But many of them don't expect as much
as affluent parents who are college graduates.

Morgan's strategy for boosting Latino
participation includes offering a
course on how to navigate the school
bureaucracy. The district has hired the Par-
ent Institute for Quality Education, at a
cost of $12,500, to teach an eight-week
series of classes that started this month.
Starting the parent classes was not an
easy task.
The demand was so strong that the Vol-
unteer Center couldn't staff all the classes.
The district ended up hiring instructors.

Other difficulties included finding space
for classes at schools that are jammed full
of students and recruiting a babysitter —
esential to attract parents with preschool-

Initially, the school's information
Department ruled out spending Proposition 237
money for child care, but backed down after
getting complaints from local school admin-
istrators.

While Live Oak's classes began almost a
year ago, others are just getting
started.

Santa Cruz City Schools, which already
offers English as a second language in its
adult education program, started a new
class at the Neary Lagoon housing complex
last year.
The turnout was poor because child care
wasn't provided. In addition, the class
attracted professionals whose knowledge of English
varied so much that the instructor found the
job difficult.

In November, with $8,000 from the initi-
atives, the district hired a babysitter and
rented space at the Masonic Hall next to
Branching Elementary School.

The school, which has a large Spanish-
speaking enrollment, had offered night
classes to parents since winning a federal
grant two years ago. Principal Mary
James, who wanted to offer daytime classes,
said that accompanying their parents
didn't come to school sleeping, but she didn't
have an empty classroom.

About 20 moms drop their children off
at school before going to class next door. A
couple of dads come, too.
"You have to make it easy for people," said
Assistant Superintendent Don Iglesias.
The Sequoia district, which got $21,000, of-
fered a six-week adult class at the fall at
Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary School.
20 more parents enrolled.

The Pajaro Valley district, which has the
largest Spanish-speaking enrollment in the
county, didn't start any new classes for par-
ents until January. The district's adult edu-
cation program already offers English as a
second-language classes that enroll 3,000 people
per year.

With $8,000 from the initiative. The Paja-
ro Valley district opened a parent re-
source center at the new district office on
Green Valley Road. The center includes a
computer lab.

A new staffer, Francesca Hampton, is
attaching a morning class on how parents
can help their children succeed in school.
Babysitting is provided. Hampton also will
talk with the principals at all 24 of the
district's schools to find out what else parents
need.
"We're expecting miracles from this pro-
gram," said Claudia Grossi, the director of
adult education.

While Utz contends the new program
"seems to be working out very well," with
"tens of thousands of parents learning Eng-
lish," others are less certain.

Hilary Novak, who oversees distribution
of the money for the state Education
Department, said she couldn't say whether
the program is a success. That's because there
is little state oversight.

"It's basically free money — you just tell
us you're interested and we put you on the
list," said Novak.
This year, 404 districts of 1,047 statewide
applied, down from 456 that got money last
year. Novak isn't sure why.
State officials aren't keeping track of how
many people enrolled in the new classes
of whether they are actually learning English.
Districts don't even have to report how
much money was spent. Utz didn't require it.
If he knew there should be more controls,
said Novak.
Legislators tried to remedy the situation
by passing a bill requiring an audit and pro-
gram evaluation, but Gov. Gray Davis
vetoed the measure, citing financial concerns.
The audit and evaluation could have cost
$500,000.
Some local school officials question whether
the Utz program will live up to ex-
pectations.
"We're helping parents, but it takes a long
time before you're literate," said Iglesias of
Santa Cruz City Schools. "The reality is the
work gets harder and it's in a lan-
guage you don't understand."

When Proposition 237 went to a vote, Ale-
jandro Arredondo said he wasn't in favor
of it. The only part he had heard about was
how it would change the schools. He didn't
realize it would bring him new opportuni-
ties.
Now he's had a change of heart.
"It's better for kids to learn English
because that's what they need to succeed in
high school and college," he said. "They're
not going to use Spanish."
Arredondo, who used to make a living do-
ing yard work, has a new job at a bakery.
"I don't think I could have gotten that job be-
fore," he said. "In the bakery, you have to
know a lot of English."