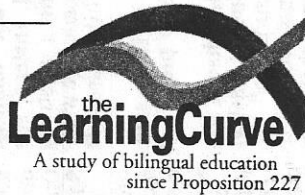


Sentinel

Success Story



School excels after dropping bilingual education



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

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

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

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

By JONDI GUMZ
Sentinel staff writer

INGLEWOOD

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 10 out of 10 — the highest possible score — when compared to other schools with similar demographics.

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'The state people don't have a clue. They're bureaucrats. They're not in the trenches.'

— Nancy Ichinaga, principal who spurned 'whole language' and bilingual teaching methods

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.

Asked what he likes about school, first-grader Ernesto Aguilar has a ready answer.

"Working," he said.

'Believing kids can learn'

Parent Carolyn Moseley, whose son is a fifth-grader, called Ichinaga "the best administrator in the United States" because "she's all about believing kids can learn."

Ichinaga, who is almost 70, doesn't speak Spanish but knows the challenge her Spanish-speaking students face.

As a youngster 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.

naga, citing new studies by researchers at the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia. They found that newly developed phonics programs helped 6-year-olds make dramatic gains in skills that beginning readers need.

A petite grandmother, Ichinaga doesn't appear overbearing. It's not unusual to find her wearing a denim jumper and flat-heeled shoes.

The one-time school psychologist began developing her own education philosophy while teaching at an all-black junior high school in Oakland. Her students didn't learn like they were supposed to. The theories she had heard in college didn't seem to apply.

Finally, when she got angry about her students' behavior and dragged them to the principal's office, she got their attention.

Many educators bemoan the lack of parent involvement, but Ichinaga doesn't worry about it. Instead, she concentrates on building a strong work ethic at school to counter whatever difficulties a child faces at home.

"School is serious," Ichinaga said. "You don't come here to play. You come here to learn."

At Bennett-Kew, well-behaved students can earn play money to buy toys from the school's "treasure box."

It's rare when students are sent to the principal's office for misbehavior. When two children were fighting, Ichinaga made them sit and hold each other's hand.

"They used to laugh at it, but it works," said Norma Brizuela, who supervises the play yard.

Bennett-Kew wasn't always known for academic achievement. In 1974, reading test scores were dismal, the 48th percentile.

"When I first came here, nobody could read. Either they were retarded or teachers weren't teaching them," Ichinaga said with typical bluntness.

She looked for a better way.

Teachers agreed to adopt the Sullivan system, which emphasizes phonics, the relationship between letters and sounds. After just four years, third-grade test scores jumped to the 68th percentile.

Ichinaga wasn't satisfied. The system worked, but it was boring. Ichinaga wanted children to learn about classic literature, too. She found an anthology published by a small com-

pany called Open Court.

When she discovered the company had a program that combined phonics, vocabulary and reading comprehension, she put it to a test.

She asked one of her least experienced teachers to try it with students who were falling behind. In a year, those students were reading so well that all of the teachers wanted to use the program.

In 1987, when the state Education Department endorsed a different approach called "whole language," Ichinaga stuck to phonics.

"We got away with it because our test scores were good," she said. "The state people don't have a clue. They're bureaucrats. They're not in the trenches."

Five years later, Ichinaga's blunt talk got her in hot water.

She told the Los Angeles Times, which did a front-page story on Bennett-Kew's high test scores, that she didn't do bilingual education. The Open Court series doesn't come in Spanish, just English.

The state Education Department investigated. Ichinaga spent all summer writing a document to defend her curriculum, and she won a waiver to keep it.

Six Bennett-Kew teachers have enrolled their own children at the school this year. One, kindergarten teacher Adriana Perez, said Bennett-Kew's experience shows English immersion works.

"It depends on how it's done," she said. "This school has done a good job with it and children can succeed."

Method encounters skeptics

Still, skeptics question Bennett-Kew's success. Jeff McQuillan, a professor of education at Arizona State University, complained that the school is trotted out as a poster child for opponents of bilingual education.

"We have lots of research which has, in fact, looked systematically at schools and predictors of success," McQuillan said. "None of that research suggests heavy phonics, lack of bilingual education, the absence of HeadStart or ending social promotion are keys to raising achievement."

Such criticism doesn't faze Ron Unz, the author of Proposition 227.

"The fact that they are teaching kids English is very controversial," he said. "When a school actually works

and the test scores are good, it casts a negative light on other schools."

Ichinaga has her own definition of teacher quality.

About 25 percent of the teachers at Bennett-Kew lack a university credential. Instead, they have an "emergency permit," which allows them to teach temporarily. Most education experts view such teachers as unqualified.

Ichinaga disagrees. She isn't impressed by university credential programs.

"Eighty percent of the professors haven't taught in inner-city schools," she said. "How can they teach what they don't know?"

She would rather interview a candidate recommended by a teacher on staff and provide on-the-job training herself.

"The first thing she looks for is intelligence," said Assistant Principal Lorraine Fong.

At some schools, a poor teacher might be ignored. Not at Bennett-Kew.

"If kids aren't learning, we go in and see why, and try to fix it," Ichinaga said.

One teacher left after Ichinaga found her first-graders weren't keeping up.

While most education experts say special methods are needed to teach Spanish-speaking children to read in English, Bennett-Kew teachers use the same textbooks and same curriculum for all the students.

Disciplined classrooms

In some ways, the classrooms seem old-fashioned. The children wear uniforms — white pants and navy blue pants, skirts or shorts. The teacher leads every lesson. When children want to speak, they must raise their hands. If they talk out of turn, they are admonished.

Teachers demand students perform. Poverty or poor English skills are no excuse.

"You need to listen," teacher Adriana Perez said when a few of her kindergartners got restless during a word game. "You're going to need your ears and your brain."

After seven minutes of instruction, she awarded several children stickers for their efforts, then moved on to the next lesson.

Kindergartners are expected to learn all the letters of the alphabet

along with colors, shapes, and numbers. If they don't, they aren't promoted to first grade. Instead, they are assigned to a class called "junior first," an all-day program designed to shore up their basic skills. About 18 percent of the first graders are in this category.

At other schools, this might be viewed as repeating a grade, a practice most education experts contend harms children's self-esteem. Bennett-Kew teachers see it as a way to give children the extra time they need.

"It's better to be on top and older than always be behind and young," said first-grade teacher Marisa Russo. "Most parents agree that's true."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm so tough on these babies," said Russo, who presses on anyway. "If they don't learn to read by first grade, it's really difficult."

Every few weeks, children take a test to see how much they have learned, a small-scale version of the fill-in-the-bubble standardized exams.

Even these details don't escape the principal's attention. She reviews every test to see if students are making the grade. She also demands weekly lesson plans.

"I want to know what's going on," Ichinaga said. "Sometimes I don't know what's going on and I can't stand it."

Starting in first grade, Spanish-speaking children are assigned to small-group lessons with a language specialist to improve their grammar and pronunciation and build their vocabulary and confidence. Sessions are scheduled during recess and lunch so students won't miss out on classroom instruction.

Teacher Carol Harmatz requires every student to participate. When she told the second-graders she would tape each one reciting a poem from memory, Fernando Muro wasn't enthusiastic.

"I hate tape-recording," said Fernando, who didn't speak much English when he started school. "People will laugh at us."

Harmatz tried to soothe his fears.

"You can do it with a partner," she said.

Two days later, when Fernando's turn came, he walked to the tape recorder by himself. After he fin-

ished, his classmates applauded. "Pat yourself on the back," the teacher said.

He left the class with a smile. "I can do it," he said.

Youngsters who have difficulty can get tutoring, which is provided by local university students after school four days a week. With extra help and high expectations, some Spanish speakers can speak English fluently by second grade.

The state allows schools to reclassify students as fluent in English once their test scores reach the 36th percentile. For Ichinaga, that's too low. She prefers to wait until students score at the 50th percentile, which is considered average.

Experts say teachers should highlight Hispanic culture as a way of encouraging Spanish-speaking children academically, but that isn't a big part of the Bennett-Kew classrooms.

"It doesn't fit in with what we are doing," said second-grade teacher Naty Reyes.

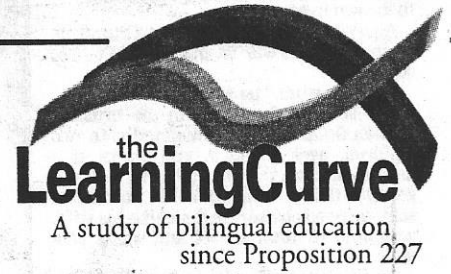
Instead, Ichinaga's focus is on academics — English, reading, writing and math. She was eager to apply when the state offered \$5,000 to schools if students met reading goals. She reads extensively, looking for better curricula, and she is willing to experiment with technology, like a software program to help kindergartners learn the alphabet.

Despite not being fluent in Spanish — Ichinaga relies on her office staff to translate when necessary — parents support her.

Trinidad Meza used to send her two children to a private school. She moved them to Bennett-Kew after getting references from other parents.

"I'm not at all interested in my children learning the curriculum in Spanish," she said.

She teaches them Spanish at home.



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.

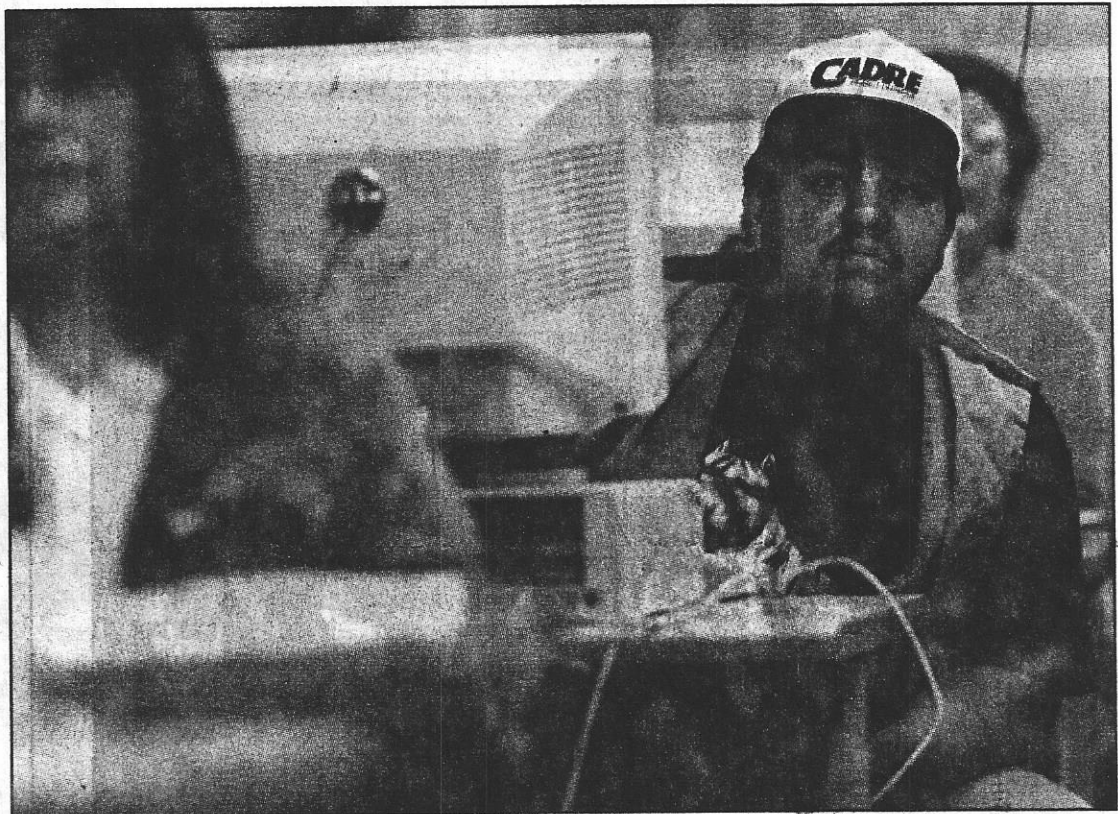
Ron Unz, the author of Proposition 227, had people like the Arredondos in mind when he decided that the proposition should include \$50 million per year for 10 years to start free English classes for adults who promise to tutor children.

"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 of-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

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.

ferred 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.

"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."

theSeries

■ **SUNDAY:** Santa Cruz County schools are struggling to adapt to Proposition 227, intended to force schools to switch to English-only instruction.

■ **MONDAY:** Schools in the Pajaro Valley still rely on bilingual

education because of an exception in the 1998 ballot measure.

■ **TUESDAY:** A Southern California school that never embraced bilingual education is a model of academic achievement.

■ **TODAY:** A little-known provision of Proposition 227 is helping parents, as well as children, learn English.

Learning

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Most of the adult classes are taught by district employees, but evening sessions at Green Acres Elementary School 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 Guanajuato. He was 15, but he didn't go to 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, also came here to work. He said he wants to write better and improve communication with his son, who is 16.

When children know two languages, they start "playing games" with their parents, he said. "You have to be bilingual, too."

Maria Guzman, 59, 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. Not only did a dozen parents improve their English, but just before Christmas they took home a free computer — an incentive offered to those who attended all 18 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 schools 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 as assertive," said Sesario Escoto, principal at Del Mar Elementary in Live Oak.

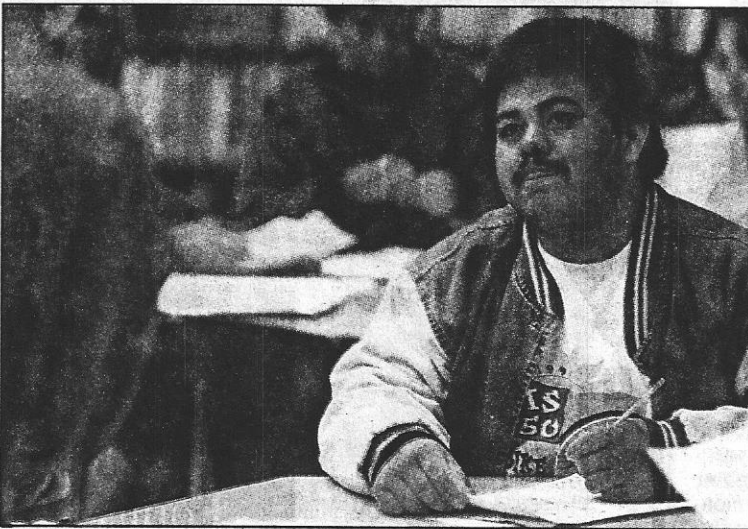
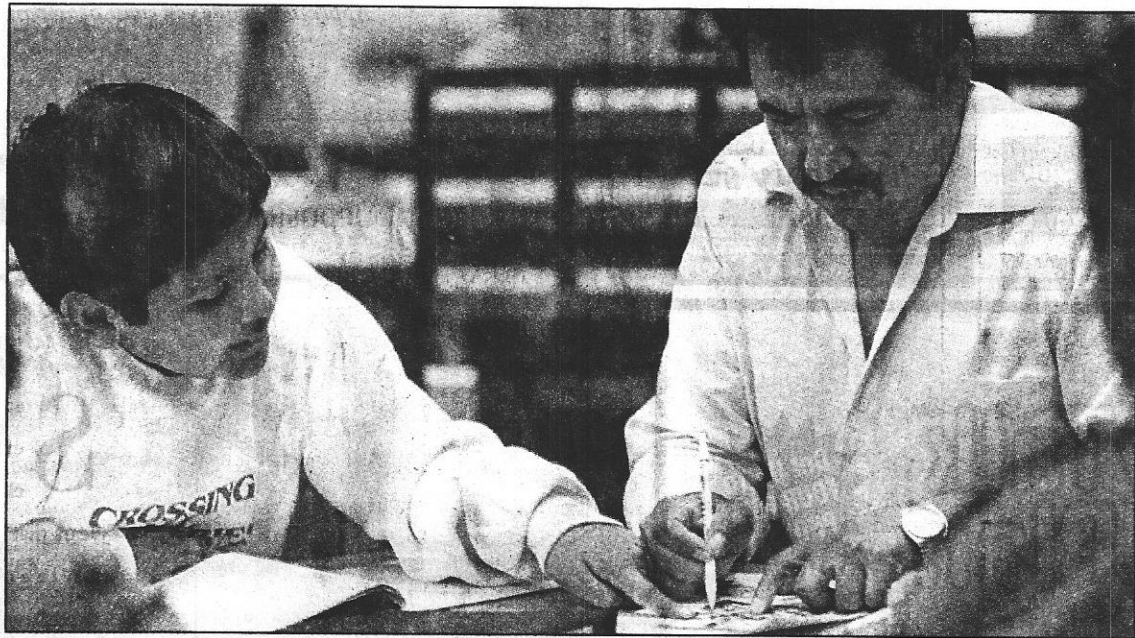
Escoto, who grew up in a neighborhood where high school graduation was a major accomplishment, said he sees more Latino parents helping their children with flash cards at home or setting aside time for reading.

But many of them don't expect as much as affluent parents who are college graduates.

Morgan's strategy for boosting Latino parent involvement includes offering a course on how to navigate the school bureaucracy. The district has hired the Parent 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-



Top: Green Acres Elementary School fourth-grader Esdras Zarazua helps his father during the adult English class at the school. **Above:** Alejandro Arredondo struggles to make the 'th' sound in an English word during a night class at Green Acres.

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 — essential to attract parents with preschoolers.

Initially, the state Education Department ruled out spending Proposition 227 money for child care, but backed down after getting complaints from local school administrators.

While Live Oak's classes began almost a year ago, other districts 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 people whose knowledge of English varied so much that the instructor found the job difficult.

In November, with \$81,000 from the initiative, the district hired a babysitter and rented space at the Masonic Hall next to Branciforte 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 Anne James had wanted to offer daytime classes, so children who accompanied their parents wouldn't come to school sleepy, 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 Soquel district, which got \$21,000, offered a six-week adult class in the fall at Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary School. More than 20 parents enrolled.

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

With \$669,000 from the initiative, the Pajaro Valley district opened a parent resource center at the new district office on Green Valley Road. The center includes a computer lab.

A new staffer, Francesca Hampton, is teaching a morning class on how parents can help their children succeed in school. Baby-sitting 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 person," said Claudia Grossi, the director of adult education.

While Unz contends the new program "seems to be working out very well," with "tens of thousands of parents learning English," 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 or whether they are actually learning English. Districts don't even have to report how the money was spent. Unz didn't require it.

"He didn't know there should be more controls," said Novak.

Legislators tried to remedy the situation by passing a bill requiring an audit and program 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 Unz program will live up to expectations.

"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 homework gets harder and it's in a language you don't understand."

When Proposition 227 went to a vote, Alejandro 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 opportunities.

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 doing yard work, has a new job at a bakery.

"I don't think I could have got that job before," he said. "In the bakery, you have to know a lot of English."