



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

McQuiddy Elementary School students wear uniforms similar to those that will soon be required for students attending Ann Soldo Elementary School in Watsonville.

# School dress code goes uniform

By **DONNA JONES**  
Sentinel staff writer

**WATSONVILLE** — Students at Ann Soldo Elementary School will be donning green and white uniforms when the new school year starts in July.

That puts the 576 students at Pajaro Valley Unified School District's newest school in sync with most of their peers at nearby schools. Uniforms are required at 12 of the 14 elementary schools and at all four of the middle schools in the Watsonville and Pajaro area.

Controversial elsewhere, regulation dress has been embraced in Watsonville schools for a variety of cultural and economic reasons, said Ann Soldo Principal Sharon Peterson.

"It takes care of any difference in economic levels, and is less expensive in the long run," Peterson said.

Many of the families with children at Soldo are from Mexico, where uniforms are common, and many parents think children are more respectful when they are wearing uniforms, she said.

"It's like professionals. If they go to work dressed up, the way they think of themselves and the way other people think of them is different than if they showed up in jeans," Peterson said.

Still, her experience at MacQuiddy Elementary and E.A. Hall Middle School makes her think wearing uniforms probably affects younger children less than older students.

School uniforms emerged as a hot topic statewide in 1994, as a way of boosting school performance, curbing gang violence and fostering self-esteem and school pride. By the time a state senator from Southern California introduced a bill to allow uniforms in public school in March of that year, Ohlone Elementary in Watsonville was already studying the idea. By 1995, students at Ohlone and Pajaro Middle School were wearing uniforms and five other Watsonville schools were exploring the issue.

In other areas of the county, however, uniforms have proved a less fashionable idea. Two consecutive proposals in 1997 and 1998 failed to win approval at Mission Hill Junior High — the only county school outside of the Pajaro Valley district to consider uniforms. Spanish-speaking parents came up with the concept at the junior high in the Santa Cruz City Schools and a majority of the staff rallied to the cause. But the proposal was opposed by some parents and students concerned about the loss of individual expression.

Then-Principal Janet Fogel set a high standard for passage: 80 percent of parents

had to vote, and 80 percent of those had to say yes. In 1998, about 66 percent of Mission Hill parents voted in favor of uniforms — 2 percent more than the recent majority that approved the policy at Ann Soldo — but it wasn't enough to force the junior high students into regulation garments.

Even within the Pajaro Valley district, uniforms have not been universally accepted. They are not worn at the district's three Aptos elementary schools or at Aptos Junior High. Nor are they required at Watsonville and Aptos high schools.

Aptos Junior High Principal Lisa Fraser said she didn't know what factors made for the variance in uniform policy between her school and the Watsonville middle schools, but she acknowledged the demographics differed at some of the schools. It's just never been an issue with parents at the Aptos school, she said. The school does have a dress code.

"The bottom line for us is if student attire got in the way of school safety or academic performance, we would look at that as an issue," Fraser said.

At Ann Soldo, notice of the new policy is being sent to parents this week, Peterson said. Parents who don't want their children to comply with the white-shirt, green-pants rule can contact the school office for a waiver.