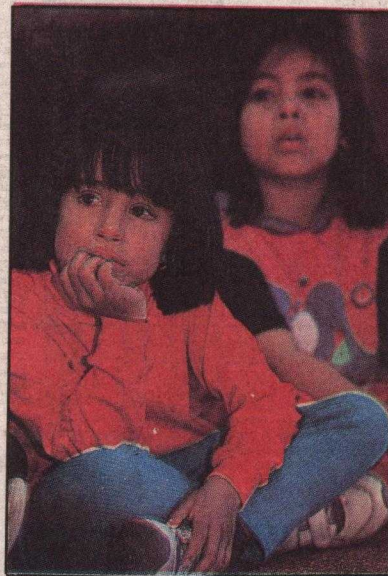


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Kindergartners at Alianza Elementary School in Watsonville are taught mostly in Spanish. Alianza's share of desegregation money is close to \$250,000, and the money is spent on teachers and aides.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



Which teaching method is best?

By MARTHA MENDOZA
Sentinel staff writer

RUBY HEPPE is adamant.

"I know this isn't popular with everyone, but I really feel that if you are living in America then you should learn English and become a part of this country," she says.

Ruby Vazquez is equally firm.

"Being a Chicana, I believe in the importance of keeping our language and our culture as we make our lives here," she says.

Both women are kindergarten teachers in

DESEGREGATION



SPECIAL REPORT

FAILING OUR CHILDREN

Second of a six-part series

Two schools, two approaches to learning

Pajaro Valley school district, but they approach their jobs very differently.

Heppe is a teacher at "English-only" Mar Vista in Aptos. She sings in English, she reads in English. Even when she disciplines 5-year-old Ignacio, who doesn't speak much English, Mrs. Heppe speaks English.

Ten miles away at Alianza Elementary School, Vazquez hasn't spoken an English word to her class this year. Alianza is an "immersion" school, and students there are plunged into the Spanish language from their first day of school.

The children pass each other in buses as the sun rises over the strawberry fields — 68 His-

panic students go north to Aptos, 40 white students go south to Watsonville.

These are the "magnet students" of Pajaro Valley, drawn to distant schools by promises of a better education, an extra opportunity.

For the Watsonville kids, the daily rides to Mar Vista bring them to a school where they will learn English quickly and fluently. For the Aptos kids, the journey south to Alianza gets them Spanish proficiency by the end of sixth grade.

Money is behind the promises: Mar Vista receives about \$200,000 a year in state desegrega-

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tion funds, and Alianza's share is closer to \$250,000. Both schools spend the money on teachers and aides.

Teachers from both schools want their students to graduate with high academic skills, a love for learning, and English literacy. They want their Spanish speakers to retain their native language, and they want English speakers to learn Spanish.

The school district has done no research to see whether either method is effective, although almost \$5.3 million has been spent at these two magnet schools since they opened 14 years ago.

Sentinel research shows that while neither school has pulled off a miracle, both programs have been somewhat successful:

- Graduates from Mar Vista and Alianza make up a larger percentage of college-bound seniors than their peers from other Pajaro Valley elementary schools;

- More Alianza and Mar Vista graduates take high school college preparatory courses than students who attended the other schools in the district;

- Students from both schools consistently score above district averages on standardized tests.

- Students and teachers from both programs are vehemently loyal to their schools.

"At Alianza, I didn't just learn to speak the language, I learned to love it," says Autumn Davis, a freshman at Boston College majoring in Spanish.

"Mar Vista is good for me. My mother and father, they work in the fields and don't speak English. They put me here because they want me to learn better," says 8-year-old Ricardo Rodriguez.

'Clifford' is honored in any language

The 4- and 5-year-olds in the classes of Ruby Heppe and Ruby Vazquez do a lot of the same things every day. They cut and paste, they giggle, they sit on the floor with their legs crossed, they sound out words and study letters, shapes and colors. Both classes even have red, plush "Clifford" dogs in places of honor.

The most obvious difference is that all of the books, all of the posters, even the alphabet charts in Ruby Vazquez's room are in Spanish, while Ruby Heppe's room (shared with an afternoon kindergarten class) is decorated entirely in English.

A less apparent, but perhaps more significant difference, is that Ruby Vazquez's students are never divided into groups based on the language they speak, while four Spanish-speaking students in Mrs. Heppe's class spend 45 minutes a

them) and even offers a musical version.

The native English speakers at Alianza are tougher to pick out, but at times they inadvertently slip English words into their Spanish sentences, especially when they are upset or really need help.

"Maestra, maestra! (Teacher, teacher!)" Those boys are chasing me," pants Eric during recess, briefing a teacher on the latest playground dispute. But he easily switches to Spanish when he is told to talk to the boys himself.

Eric and Ignacio are at the heart of a debate about bilingual education that has raged for decades in this country.

At Alianza, teachers say Spanish-speaking students need to spend most of their early years of school learning in their native language so they can keep pace in the curriculum, although the entire class has brief lessons every day in English (from a different teacher). By third or fourth grade, students make the transition to learning mostly in English.

"I'm not against English," says Ruby Vazquez. "I know children need English to succeed to the college level. I see Spanish as a bridge to learning English."

Alianza's "Two-Way Immersion" program is part of a growing trend, and one of 50 similar programs statewide, according to the California Department of Education.

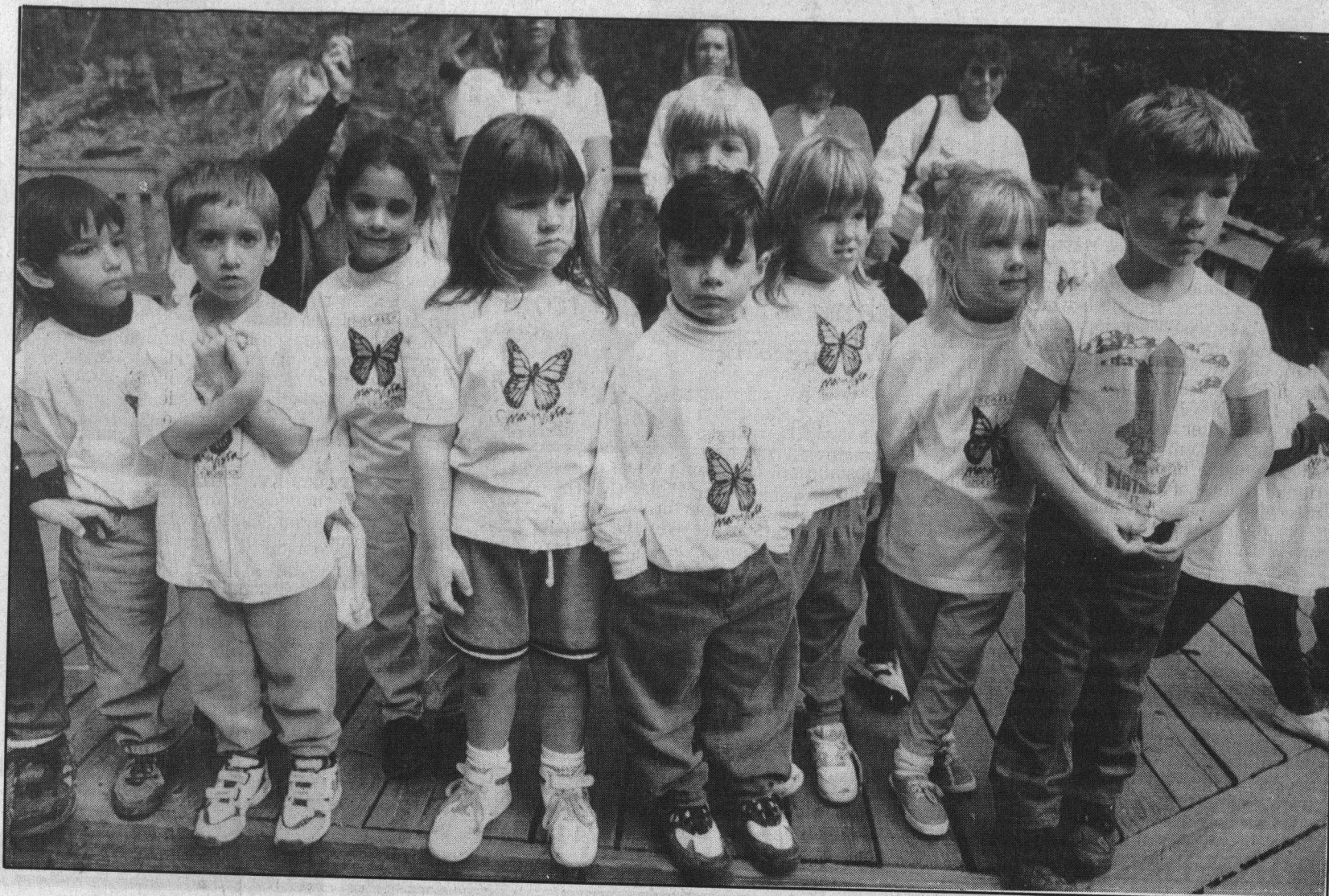
Philosophy that targets the younger children

The philosophy at Mar Vista is that young children are more capable of absorbing a second language than older ones, and less self-conscious about making mistakes. They will learn English more quickly, and more fluently, if that is what they hear all day, say teachers. Spanish speakers at Mar Vista spend between 45 minutes and one-and-a-half hours a day in the "Language Lab" learning language arts in Spanish and getting extra help in English. Mar Vista's English speakers have regular Spanish lessons.

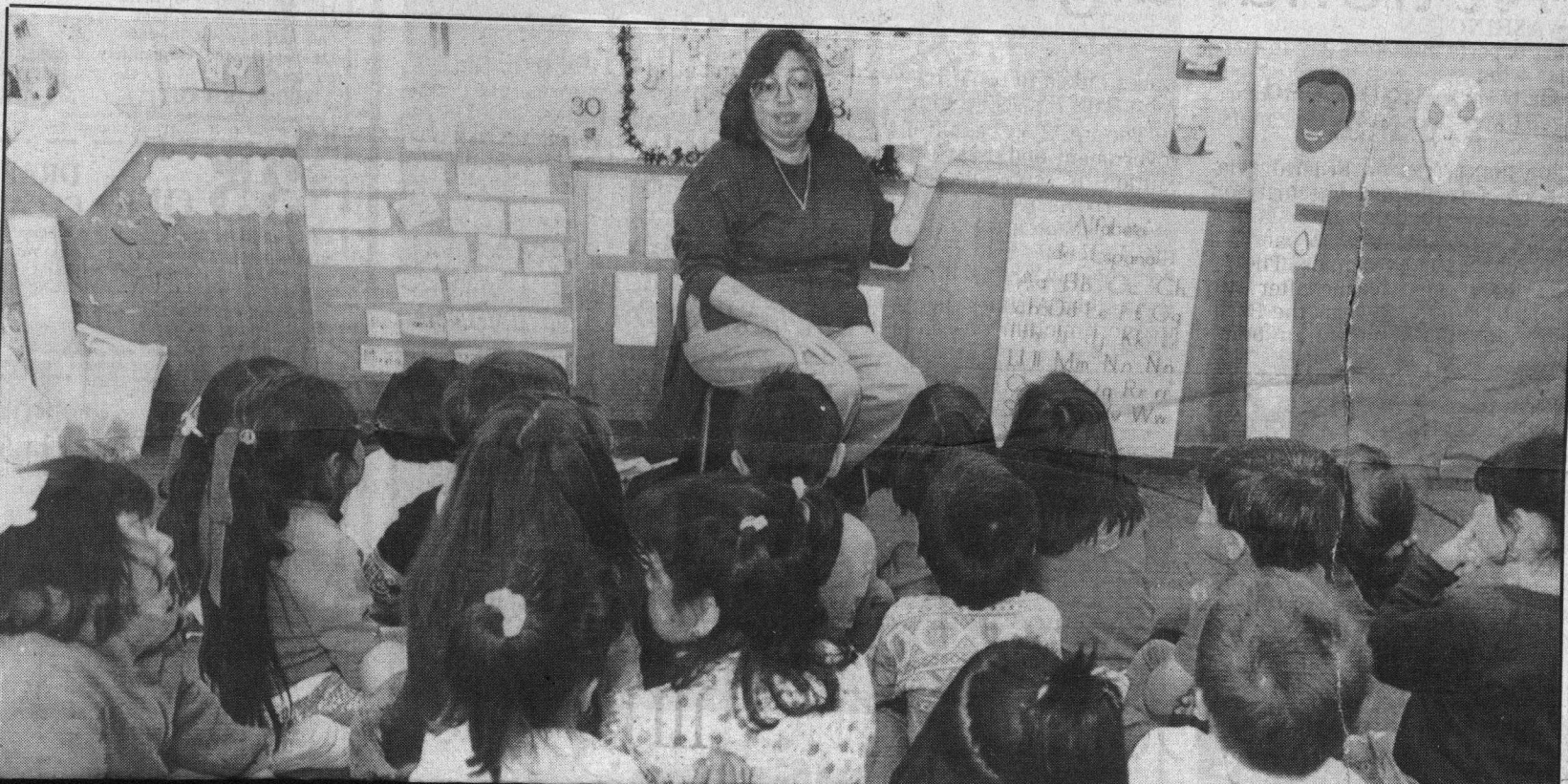
"I don't like to see these children to lose their heritage or their language, but that's why they get extra help every day outside of my class. In here, they are learning English faster, and better, than if we were just speaking Spanish," says Ruby Heppe.

Mar Vista and Alianza are at the crux of the school district's desegregation plan mandated by federal courts in the late 1970s, and finally initiated by the school district in 1981.

That spring, six recruiters visited 1,250 homes in Watsonville and Aptos, trying to convince parents to bus their children to the magnet schools to "reduce the educational



Children from Mar Vista Elementary in Aptos sport butterfly T-shirts during a field trip to Natural Bridges State Park. Some white students have been turned away to balance enrollment ethnically. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos



divided into groups based on the language they speak, while four Spanish-speaking students in Mrs. Heppe's class spend 45 minutes a day in the Language Lab.

This is an important distinction for Ruby Vazquez, who grew up in Watsonville and saw class and race barriers arise early in her life.

"Philosophically, I don't think it's right for kids to be pulled out. When I was growing up, the system separated us, told us we were different. We stayed in those separate groups through high school," she said.

But so far, Mrs. Heppe's Spanish-speakers — Ignacio, Adilene, Joshua and Jessica — are delighted to leave their classroom and make the daily journey across their school to the Language Lab.

Ignacio, a wiggly, bright-eyed kid, rarely talks to anyone but his Spanish speaking friends in Mrs. Heppe's room. When Mrs. Heppe asks him to recite the days of the week in English, he whispers into the floor, "umm, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, umm Saturday."

Ignacio speaks louder in the language lab

"Good try Ignacio, but you forgot Thursday and Friday again. You need to practice that some more at home," says Mrs. Heppe.

In the Language Lab, where he speaks Spanish, Ignacio is loud (a bit too loud at times for resource teacher Valerie Leal's taste), and he has a lot to say. He knows the days of the week in Spanish (all of

at 1,200 homes in Aptos, trying to convince parents to bus their children to the magnet schools to "reduce the educational disadvantages suffered by all students when minority group isolation occurs."

In 17 days, the recruiters signed up 116 Watsonville children to attend Mar Vista, and 63 Aptos children to attend Alianza. By the time school started, each school had 80 bused children and both campuses were "officially desegregated."

The plan got the federal courts off the back of the school district, but it also brought new problems that continue to plague a community divided by geography and race.

Leslie and Ken Rasmussen wanted their son to enter kindergarten at English-only Mar Vista, but were turned away last year because they live out of the area and their son is white.

"To us it's reverse discrimination," says Leslie Rasmussen. "If our son was Hispanic, they would have taken him at Mar Vista without a problem."

The Rasmussens decided to send their son to private school instead of their assigned public school — Freedom Elementary — where seven percent of the students are white, test scores ranked only in the 14th percentile nationally, and their son likely would be taught in a bilingual classroom.

Parents take risk in this program

"I just don't think he would thrive in that atmosphere, because the kids he'd be going to school with are the ones who are peeing on our fence and calling him names in Spanish," said Leslie Rasmussen.

White parents (including a school board member two years ago) also have transferred their children away from Alianza.

"Some people freak out whenever you talk about speaking Spanish," says Alianza teacher Judy Stobbe. "It's a big risk parents take to put their children in our program."

Overall, however, both schools have achieved a better racial balance.

During the magnet's first year, Mar Vista's Hispanic population



Teacher Pola Espinosa reads to children at Alianza Elementary in Watsonville. Interest in the magnet school, where teaching is in Spanish, has declined. Only 40 children were bused from Aptos this school year.

jumped from 9.5 percent to 27 percent, while Alianza's white population grew from 2.5 percent to 22 percent. Absenteeism was low, students were picking up the second languages, community liaisons were in close touch with parents and only three disgruntled families transferred back to their neighborhood schools.

Both schools have undergone major changes.

Eight years ago, when Valerie Leal was assigned as the language resource teacher at Mar Vista, she helped shift the program so the Spanish-speaking students learned to read and write in their native language first in small groups.

"I am a bilingual educator at heart, and I believe what we are doing here is one form of bilingual education that works," says Leal.

Five years ago at Alianza, parents, teachers and administrators took a look at sinking test scores and declining interest in their magnet and decided to change their methods. They dropped their "alternate day" bilingual education program that had the whole school speaking all Spanish or all English every other day. Instead, the school is phasing in a "Two-Way Immersion" program that increases the amount of Spanish used in the lower grade classrooms.

The changes have left both schools in a sort of bilingual education limbo.

Mar Vista is not truly "English-

only," because students are getting plenty of intensive Spanish lessons each day. And Alianza is not an authentic "Two-Way Immersion" program, because the school didn't start out with half Spanish and half English speakers.

The number of students bused to each school has declined. Mar Vista's neighborhood grew, leaving space for only 68 bused students. Alianza would like more "magnet students," but interest has declined. This year just 40 Aptos students were bused there.

While Mar Vista's Hispanic population has remained steady, Alianza's white population has dropped to nine percent.

The system is working, teachers at both schools, but their work isn't done.

"Is Mar Vista effectively desegregated? It's a yes and no kind of thing," says Augustine Bautista, a Watsonville resident who works as the school's community liaison. "A school is the kids and the people. Yes, there's certainly a tolerance for diversity here, but this school still reflects the outer world. There's still racial differences."

Alianza's Principal Michael Jones says it will take a few years to get results from the revamped immersion program.

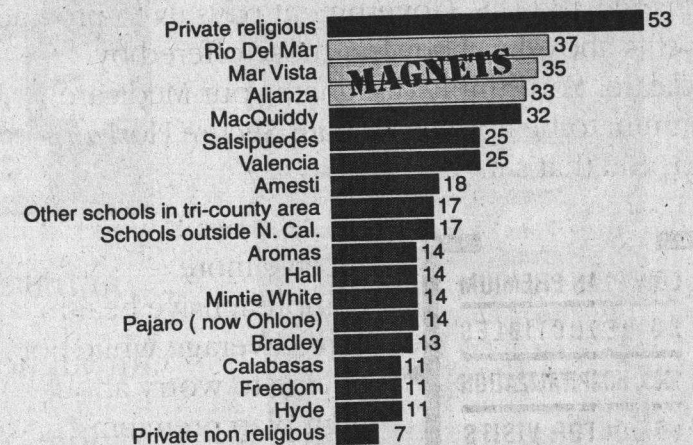
"But then, our test scores are going to go through the roof and everyone is going to say, 'Wow!' Otherwise, I'm going to start flipping hamburgers," he says.

A SIGN OF SUCCESS

High school students in the Pajaro Valley district are more likely to be in college preparatory classes if they attended magnet elementary schools.

The district began offering magnet programs 14 years ago, with Alianza, Mar Vista and then Rio del Mar the first to open. Not on this list: Ohlone and Starlight, magnets which were opened since 1990, and Linscott, a magnet that was closed for a while.

This chart shows where college prep students attended elementary school.



Source: Sentinel survey of Pajaro Valley high schools

Chris Carothers/Sen.

Parent survey

Are you aware of the desegregation program?

	Alianza	
	Yes	No
English	100%	0%
Spanish	50%	50%

	Mar Vista	
	Yes	No
English	84%	16%
Spanish	90%	10%

Source: Pajaro Valley district survey, 1990

Sentinel graphic

What the experts have to say on the debate

TWO LOCAL schools illustrate an ongoing debate among educators in this country: Should students who don't speak English be taught in their native languages?

At Alianza Elementary School, where most students arrive speaking only Spanish, administrators say "absolutely, yes." All students are taught almost entirely in Spanish for their first few years (except for brief daily lessons in English). The classes are transitioned into English over several years.

At Mar Vista Elementary, where only a small group of students don't speak English, administrators have a different philosophy. Spanish-speakers are taught in English most of the day,

and pulled out in small groups for reading and writing, initially in Spanish, and later in English.

Although the Pajaro Valley school district has not researched whether these programs are effective, the U.S. Department of Education has studied similar programs.

Between 1984 and 1988, federal researchers tracked three groups of elementary classes of Spanish speaking students:

Group A was taught all in English, with Spanish used only for clarification.

Group B was taught 20 to 30 percent of the time in Spanish (mostly in reading groups) for kindergarten through second grade, and then entirely in English. Mar Vista's program is

closest to this model.

Group C was taught at least 40 percent of the time in Spanish, from kindergarten through sixth grade. Alianza's program is closest to this model.

Academically, students in Group A and Group B stayed up with their English speaking peers for four years, but that after that, the students started to fall behind, researchers found.

The students in Group C were behind academically for their first few years. However, they caught up in their third year, and then pulled ahead of their peers as they continued through middle and high school.

Martha Mendoza