

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Children at Starlight Elementary in Watsonville concentrate at the computer. Computer work must be done in English because administrators contracted for software with a firm that doesn't sell Spanish software.

UCSC comes to the rescue


Children 1/18/95
After planning blunders, school gets fresh start

By MARTHA MENDOZA
Sentinel staff writer

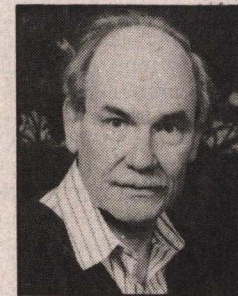
"YOU'RE SITTING right now in a school that was given a considerable amount of money but is not achieving the desired results," said Pajaro Valley school superintendent Anthony Avina.

Considerable indeed.

Every classroom at Starlight Elementary has a row of four computers, a printer, a television, a VCR, a laser disc player and large windows that open onto a grassy plaza. Students are a short walk from a well-equipped computer laboratory complete with individual programs and headsets.

DESEGREGATION

SPECIAL REPORT
FAILING OUR CHILDREN

Fourth of a six-part series



Tharp

The school district spends about \$3,800 a year to teach each Starlight student — about \$500 a year more than at other schools.

For that money, administrators had hoped to see the 4-year-old Watsonville school become an extraordinary computer-technology center, with high achieving students, great test scores and hundreds of white Aptos children wanting to travel there each day to study.

Instead, test scores remain below national

averages, white students have stayed away, and the school's reputation has dropped.

This year change is in the air.

The school has a new principal, new teachers, new students and a promising new partnership with top educational researchers from UC Santa Cruz. The focus on computers and technology is on the back burner. Instead, administrators plan to spend more than \$6 million at the school during the next four years researching and developing effective teaching methods.

Eventually, (and this is after they get their funding), administrators want the school to be a locus for training that will rotate interested teachers for "tours-of-duty."

"In full operation, (Starlight) will be a beehive of activity," says the agreement approved by the school district and UC Santa Cruz.

It's a promise parents at this school have heard before.

Starlight Elementary opened in Watsonville in 1990, replacing the 40-year-old

Please see STARLIGHT — A4

Starlight gets helping hand

Continued from Page A1

"Starlite" drive-in movie theater. It cost \$7.5 million to build and equip, about twice the budget of Ohlone Elementary, a similar school that opened one year later on the other side of town. Starlight administrators were further assisted by about \$180,000 extra a year in desegregation funds, spent on salaries for resource teachers and aides.

The technology alone put the school light-years ahead of most others in the country. According to a congressional report on the use of technology in schools, most students spend about 40 minutes a week working on computers. Starlight had the capacity to have students using computers more than four hours a week.

On opening day, then-principal Carlene Gundersgaard declared the school "on the cutting edge of education," and about a dozen students were on the waiting list.

The same year, IBM gave the school \$100,000 to allow students to take computers home to use with their parents.

In 1992, Starlight was one of 138 schools to share an \$11.6 million state grant for restructuring. Starlight's share amounted to \$50,000 a year. Parents were told teachers would visit them regularly at home, letter grades would be replaced by detailed student profiles, and kindergartners would draw self portraits every month to learn about their self-image.

So far this year, no students have taken a computer home. Grades are still being given, although some come attached to portfolios of student work. The self-portrait project is optional, and only a few teachers visit students at home.

Most of the \$50,000 went into teacher training and consultant fees, but teachers do not attend more hours of inservice programs than others in the district.

Most schools in the district send children home early one day a week to allow teachers time to plan and work together.

At Starlight, paid consultants are brought in during that time to help teachers with their collaboration.

"We don't have more time, but we have higher quality time," said Starlight principal Georgia Grijalva.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Starlight principal Georgia Grijalva, standing, consults with kindergarten teacher Debbe Chan. Grijalva, assigned to Starlight in September after being the district's assistant superintendent for elementary education, says teachers are optimistic about the school's partnership with UCSC, but parents remain skeptical.

about computers and technology. Tharp says they will be useful, but not a central part of his program. Grijalva, Starlight's new principal, says the school's emphasis has shifted.

"We are still a computer-technology magnet school, but our focus is changing. We have a lot of money invested in computers and software at this school, and we plan to use that to our advantage, but not as the central aspect of what we do," she said.

At Starlight, the short-term plans are not about computers, but about teachers. Within a few years, Tharp and Grijalva say, rookie teachers will visit Starlight to learn the most effective educational methods based on the latest research. They will spend a few years at the school and then be transferred to another school to disseminate the information throughout the district.

"Consider it a hothouse, or a nursery, for good teachers," said Tharp.

At Starlight, professional development has already begun.

First-grade teacher Noni Reis returned to the elementary school classroom this year after teaching for three years at UCSC. She is working with researcher Stephanie Dalton to set up a model classroom that uses a variety of teaching methods throughout the day and encourages children of diverse backgrounds to interact.

"It's all about social organization," said Dalton, whose visits with Reis end with a hug.

A second project has graduate students giving teachers almost immediate feedback on the effectiveness of their lessons. This includes videotaping classes, timing how long it takes for students to move from one activity to another, and counting how many boys or girls are being called upon.

In addition, UC Santa Cruz has placed five student teachers and six observers at Starlight, more than any other school. Those students work with more experienced teachers, and bring information about the newest teaching methods.

The newer teachers have a part-time teaching mentor on the campus, Irene McGinty, who advises, models and coaches the rookies.

"These new teachers bring some of the latest, progressive practices to the field, and share them with

and work together.
At Starlight, paid consultants are brought in during that time to help teachers with their collaboration.
"We don't have more time, but we have higher quality time," said Starlight principal Georgia Grijalva.

Superintendent Avina refused to discuss what went wrong at Starlight Elementary.

"Are we on or off the record?" he countered, when asked.

Sentinel: "On, Dr. Avina. We're always on."

Avina: "Then I'm not going to talk about it."

But answers are not hard to find.

The school was built in a sparsely populated neighborhood on the verge of major development. District planners figured they would need enough classrooms for 330 Hispanic neighborhood children, and 170 white children drawn from Aptos. They were wrong.

If they had checked permit requests at the county planning department, administrators would have realized the neighborhood was due for a population explosion.

Since 1990, apartments have popped up all over the place, and families with school-age children have filled them. The campus is now overcrowded with 700 students, almost all of whom live nearby. Even if they wanted to, it would be tough for Starlight administrators to squeeze in more than the 19 children who choose to ride the bus from Aptos.

In another significant error, administrators contracted with Jostens Learning Corporation for all the school's education software. Jostens does not sell Spanish software, so students at this bilingual school, 66 percent of whom speak limited English, must do almost all their computer work in English.

On a recent visit to the computer laboratory, a fourth-grade student was baffled by a math problem until his teacher came by and translated the question.

"He can do the math. He just can't read the directions," said the teacher.

During Starlight's first four years, all but five of the original teachers opted to leave the profession or go to a different school.

Last year, seven "long-term substitutes" were on staff, many of whom were teaching bilingual classes even though they weren't proficient in Spanish.

This year those seven teachers were replaced with full-time, bilingual credentialed teachers selected and approved by school administrators and UCSC staff.

Starlight principal Georgia Grijalva, standing, consults with kindergarten teacher Debbe Chan. Grijalva, assigned to Starlight in September after being the district's assistant superintendent for elementary education, says teachers are optimistic about the school's partnership with UCSC, but parents remain skeptical.

Starlight Elementary



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Opened: 1990
Location: 225 Hammer Lane, Watsonville
Magnet specialty: computers, technology
Teachers: 28
Enrollment: 690
Racial mix of students: 81% Hispanic, 15% white, 4% other.
Test scores: Last year, on fifth grade achievement tests, English-speaking students ranked 31% nationally and Spanish-speaking students ranked 38%.

The remaining Starlight staff was given the option to transfer to another school, or stay at the magnet school with a commitment to participate in the research into teaching methods.

As a result, all of the teachers at Starlight today are overwhelmingly optimistic.

"We all want to progress, we all want to collaborate," said Cathy Carmichel, a second-grade teacher, who has been at the school three years.

This fall, Pajaro Valley signed an agreement with UC Santa Cruz to become a professional development school. The university's fund-raising team is applying for a \$6 million foundation grant to fund the first five years of the project, and head researcher Roland

THE SERIES

"Desegregation: Failing our children" is an examination of efforts to integrate schools in the Pajaro Valley district, the largest in Santa Cruz County. It is the product of more than two months of research by education reporter Martha Mendoza under a fellowship from the Education Writers Association.

The Sentinel welcomes your comments at 207 Church St., Santa Cruz, Calif. 95060. Fax: 429-9620. Email: sentcity@cruzio.com

SUNDAY: Many students aren't achieving in Pajaro Valley schools despite millions in federal desegregation funds. Allegations of discrimination against Hispanic children are being investigated.

MONDAY: Two elementary schools — Alianza and Mar Vista — champion different philosophies for teaching children who speak Spanish, and experts disagree over which method is best.

TUESDAY: Hispanic pupils struggle to learn at Ohlone Elementary, a magnet school with great teachers and plenty of supplies that draws few white students.

TODAY: UC Santa Cruz hopes to rescue Starlight Elementary, a magnet school envisioned as a high-tech center before being hampered by poor planning and teacher turnover.

THURSDAY: Despite enrollment that is 50 percent white and 50 percent Hispanic, Aptos High is not fully integrated for the students who attend classes there.

FRIDAY: At a San Diego elementary school where enrollment is ethnically balanced, students earn respectable test scores, but desegregation remains a goal instead of reality.

Tharp, an education professor, said he "fully expects to get this money."

In the midst of the changes, no one is talking much

est teaching methods.
The newer teachers have a part-time teaching mentor on the campus, Irene McGinty, who advises, models and coaches the rookies.

"These new teachers bring some of the latest, progressive practices to the field, and share them with magnificent experienced teachers. It's a primo-optimal relationship," said McGinty.

Avina, the Pajaro Valley superintendent, and UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Karl Pister are strong backers of the project, and a proposed timeline includes plans to disseminate news of their success and accommodate visitors from "other universities, other countries and other nations" in just two years.

"I don't think people understand what a big deal this is," said Tharp. He's right.

In fact, most parents don't realize the school is in this partnership. Many of those who have heard about it are skeptical.

"Right now we're losing students," said Grijalva. "Parents aren't sure about the future of this school."

Valerie Madeley is keeping her daughter at Starlight, but understands the skepticism.

"I guess a lot of parents don't want their kids used as guinea pigs," said Madeley. "I was a little nervous too. I had heard about UC Santa Cruz, and wondered, 'Are they flakes or what?' But what I see coming into the classroom so far are teachers who are professional and caring in a non-threatening and positive way."

The doubts are frustrating to administrators.

"A parent should be jumping up and down to have a child in this environment. They should be fighting to get in here," said Tharp.

Teacher Cindy Rollins left Starlight when administrators decided to make the transition.

"I don't think that in this district bilingual education works," she said. "I don't see bilingual education as effective, and I saw the school working to improve something that I don't support in the first place."

But planners, teachers and researchers in the Starlight project have high hopes.

"Just understand that at this point most of this project exists as dreams and intentions," said Tharp. "Bearing that in mind, I am confident in saying that down the road, this will be an exemplary program that will draw attention from around the world."