

Quake sounds schoolhouse's death knell

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SUMMIT — School officials have known since January that Loma Prieta Elementary School was built right on top of an earthquake fault, so it was no surprise that the school was badly damaged by the Oct. 17 earthquake.

Fractures in the earth split classroom floor slabs and playground blacktop, support beams separated from their joints,

Loma Prieta School

water mains and gas lines suffered multiple breaks, a 100,000-gallon water tank was damaged and a portable classroom was shaken off its foundation.

School was out when the quake hit at 5:04 p.m., and nobody was hurt. But Loma Prieta Elementary, one of two schools in the Loma Prieta Joint Union Elementary School District, will not reopen.

The kindergarten building was not damaged, however, and will remain in operation.

Parents, teachers and a host of volunteers descended on the school Monday to begin moving furniture and classroom materials across Summit Road to the district's other school, C.T. English Middle School, where classes are scheduled to resume Thursday.

Area parents voted unanimously last week to keep their children "on the mountain" by making room at the middle school instead of busing them out of the district, district supervisor Kenneth

Simpkins said. The district serves approximately 600 students.

Elementary students will double up in classrooms, attending school from 7:30 a.m. to noon, or from noon to 4:30 p.m., but middle-school students will maintain their current all-day schedule. Double sessions could continue for two years or more, until the district builds a new elementary school.

Parents with questions about their children's schedules should call 353-1123.

Earthquake safety has been on the minds of district officials since January, when a geological survey found traces of earthquake faults running beneath school buildings.

The state washed its hands of liability when informed of the study's results, leaving school board members personally liable for any injuries that could have happened in an earthquake.

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"To get funding for a new school we had to officially condemn the buildings," Simpkins said. "But we had no choice but to continue operations there after we condemned it ... and accept personal liability."

Finding a safe new school site in the fault-ridden Summit area will be tough. The district's first choice for a new school, a tree farm adjoining the middle school, must undergo a geological survey before it can be approved by the state.

And while the modern buildings at C.T. English rode out the quake with minor damage, studies must now be done to see if the ground beneath the school is stable. If it's not, Loma Prieta could suddenly become a district without any schools. Geologists have been hired, and studies on the middle school will be done in December or January, Simpkins said.

Loss of its school buildings isn't the only threat now facing the Loma Prieta District. Many homes within district boundaries were destroyed by the quake, and other families have chosen to leave the area. Fewer students means less money to rebuild and run the 40-year-old district, Simpkins said.

The double-sessions arrangement will also mean less money for the

district.

"When you go to double sessions you can't qualify for full state funding," Simpkins said. "In fact, the state can penalize you going back five years retroactively. The Legislature will have to pass special legislation for us not to have a financial disaster."

Simpkins is waiting for the state Department of Education to review the district's problems before he asks area legislators to intervene on the district's behalf. The district is split between Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties.

While the Loma Prieta School District awaits word of its fate, there is plenty of work to do.

Twenty volunteers from the Saratoga PTA moved classroom furniture Monday, along with crews from the San Jose Unified School District, Boy Scout Troop 339, International Business Machines, Geo Wilson Construction and electricians from a local union.

Volunteers repaired earthquake damages and moved children's desks into new classrooms. Teachers taped name tags onto desks and shuffled through piles of Thanksgiving decorations.

"This will be fun," said one teacher brightly. "We'll all have to be more creative for awhile."