



'Parents tend to think that after they are 11 or 12, kids can take care of themselves.'

— Kim Shotwell

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— Janis Schechter

Who tends the kids?

By RICHARD EMANUEL
Sentinel staff writer

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY system in Dallas, Tex., recently proposed a policy that children under 7 must be accompanied by a teen-ager or adult, according to a New York Times article.

The article is part of a spate of stories in the national media about "latchkey kids," children left unsupervised after school until working parents get home.

Many parents are sending kids to libraries after school, a trend of growing concern to librarians nationwide, the article said.

In Dallas, the proposed policy would require library staff to call the parents of children unaccompanied in the library within 30 minutes of closing. If parents cannot be reached, the police would be called.

In Santa Cruz, Kim Shotwell, the police department's juvenile victim advocate, voices dire warnings about children left without supervision.

But although Santa Cruz County librarians report regular use of libraries by latchkey kids, they have few complaints about the practice locally. And city and school officials say there are plenty of supervised

activities open to children after school — at least in Santa Cruz.

MARY FRANICH is children's librarian at the Central Branch, Santa Cruz Library. "I think the latchkey problem is somewhat over-rated," she says. "I think in urban centers, where you have parents who are unable to meet child care costs, (problems) are more prone to happen. Or sometimes in rural areas, where there aren't as many things to do.

"While it is true that some kids spend a fair amount of time in the library, I wouldn't want people to think we are having a lot of problems," Franich says.

Janis Schechter, children's librarian at Branciforte Branch library, agrees. "Like almost every branch library, we have kids who come in on a regular basis," she says. "Often, they come in and do their homework. Some of them even help me with things in the children's room.

"I've worked at other libraries, and there is always a group of kids who are regulars," Schechter continues. "Usually, the only problem is that sometimes you're caught in a five o'clock closing with a kid whose parent hasn't shown up." But even that is rare

at Branciforte branch, she adds, which is open until 9 p.m. Monday-Thursday.

"I would say we see around 15 kids very, very regularly," Schechter says. "Some of them are here on certain days, some of them are here every day."

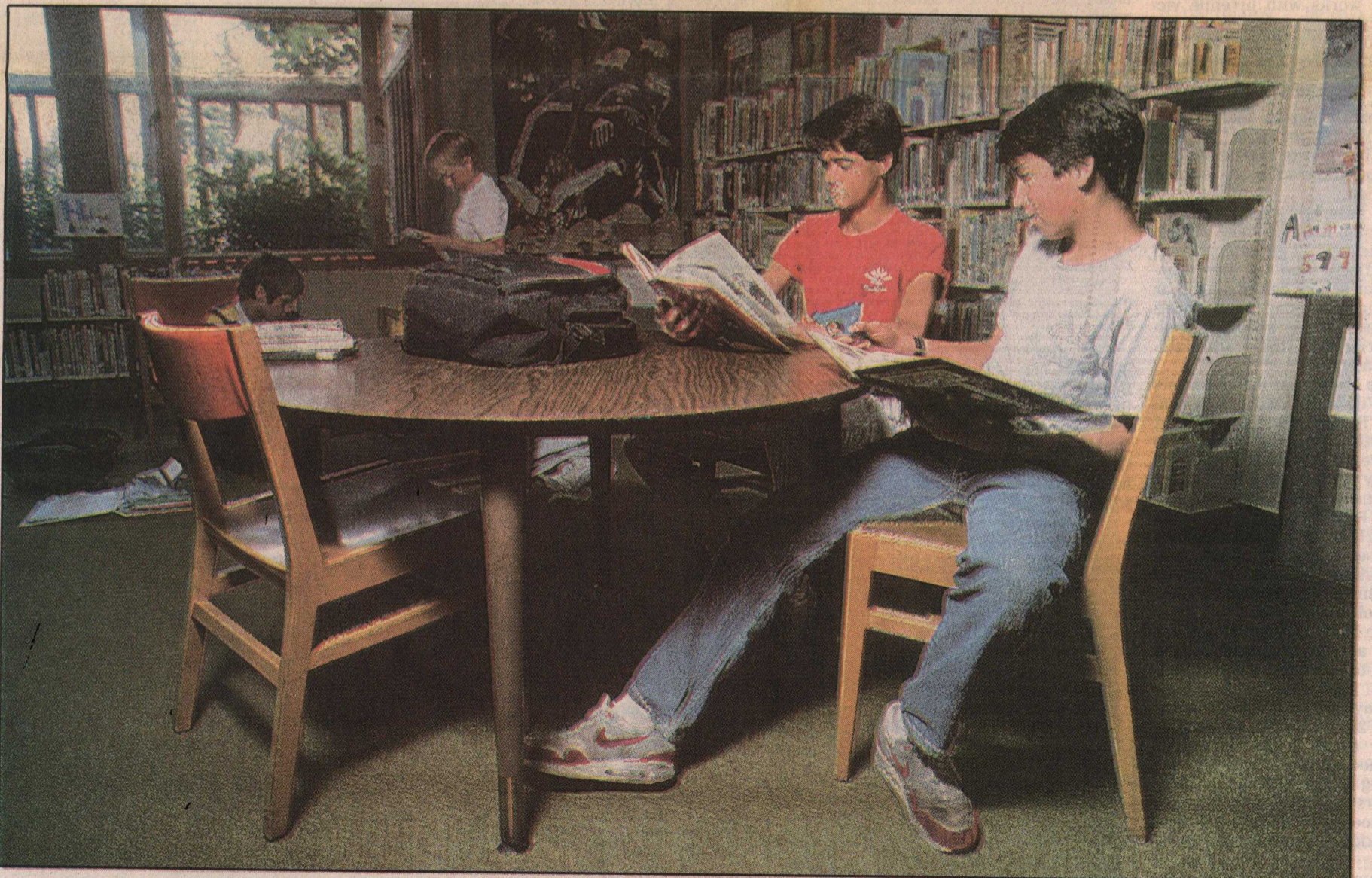
One of Schechter's regulars is Calut Lakos, 14, who sits hunched over an open book at a round table in a corner of Branciforte Branch Library. It is Tuesday afternoon.

Schechter leads the way across the brightly lit room decorated with children's art, and makes introductions. Lakos is a seventh-grader at Branciforte Junior High School. He is waiting for a ride home, and expects to be joined soon by his brother, David, a Harbor High School student.

"I come here pretty often after school," Calut Lakos says. "If I have a lot of homework, I do it here. Otherwise, I like to read. I get homework in math, social studies and 'Heroes and Villains,'" an English class, he explains. "I like it here because you can do research and stuff, or you can read."

Please see **KIDS** — E2

Photos by Dan Coyro



Regulars at Branciforte Library, David and Calut Lakos do their homework or read until it's time to go home.