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## School excels after dropping bilingual education

**This article is the third in a series about bilingual education.**

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INGLEWOOD - For 25 years , Bennett-Kew Elementary School Principal Nancy Ichinaga has done it her way. Ichinaga rejected bilingual education long before California voters did.

As long as she's been at Bennett-Kew Elementary, Spanish-speaking students have been taught in English. But that's not the only thing she's done differently.

To Ichinaga, good teaching means using a phonics-based reading program instead of the literature-based programs popular in Santa Cruz County. It means having teachers stand up and deliver lessons instead of having students work on their own. It means kindergartners who aren't ready for first grade get an extra year of instruction.

"It's nothing spectacular -- just common sense," Ichinaga said.

Her methods defy conventional wisdom yet produce success for Spanish-speaking students. Traditionally these students perform poorly in school, but Bennett-Kew's test scores rival those in affluent communities like Scotts Valley and Rio del Mar.

Though Inglewood is a relatively poor, ethnically mixed community, Bennett-Kew's first-graders scored in the 80th percentile in reading and math on the state's standardized tests last spring. That means they did better than 80 percent of the students tested nationwide.

When the state issued its first Academic Performance Index last month, Bennett-Kew earned a 10 out of 10 -- the highest possible score -- when compared to other schools with similar demographics.

Notably, the students have done well even though a large number of teachers at Bennett-Kew lack full teaching credentials.

Although Ichinaga's methods have come under attack by the state Education Department, she also has been attracting positive attention in this era of school accountability.

The Inglewood district superintendent was so impressed by the results at Bennett Kew and nearby Kelso, which has similar demographics and similar curriculum, that he insisted other schools adopt the same phonics-based reading program.

Last year, Inglewood joined a project by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to pay for reading coaches for 27 school districts using the reading program pioneered by Bennett-Kew. Some Inglewood teachers resisted the change, but reading scores improved districtwide last spring.

The results at Bennett-Kew could offer a valuable lesson for schools struggling to find new ways of teaching students since the passage of Proposition 227 restricted bilingual education.

What makes Ichinaga's success so remarkable is that Bennett-Kew students don't come from wealthy families. About half the students have parents who speak Spanish. The other half are African American. Only a handful are white.

The school is about six miles from the Los Angeles airport. Parts of the working class neighborhood aren't safe at night.

Some students go to school at 7:40 a.m. to eat a free breakfast. Four out of five qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Many educators say test scores are more a reflection of family income than of teaching quality. Yet by second grade, Bennett-Kew students can write compositions on how they spent their summer vacation with very few spelling or grammatical errors. In an essay posted on the classroom wall, Erick Jimenez, a second-grader, boasts of reading 10 books while in Mexico over the summer.

Asked what he likes about school, first-grader Ernesto Aguilar has a ready answer.

"Working," he said.

Parent Carolyn Moseley, whose son is a fifth-grader, called Ichinaga "the best administrator in the United States" because "she's all about believing kids can learn."

Ichinaga, who is almost 70, doesn't speak Spanish but knows the challenge her Spanish-speaking students face.

As a youngster in Hawaii, she grew up speaking Japanese. She learned English once she started school, and it didn't take three to five years, the amount of time experts in the state Education Department say it should take.

"It's not a long process," said Ichinaga, citing new studies by researchers at the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia. They found that newly developed phonics programs helped 6 year-olds make dramatic gains in skills that beginning readers need.

A petite grandmother, Ichinaga doesn't appear overbearing. It's not unusual to find her wearing a denim jumper and flat-heeled shoes.

The one-time school psychologist began developing her own education philosophy while teaching at an all-black junior high school in Oakland. Her students didn't learn like they were supposed to. The theories she had heard in college didn't seem to apply.

Finally, when she got angry about her students' behavior and dragged them to the principal's office, she got their attention.

Many educators bemoan the lack of parent involvement, but Ichinaga doesn't worry about it. Instead, she concentrates on building a strong work ethic at school to counter whatever difficulties a child faces at home.

"School is serious," Ichinaga said. "You don't come here to play. You come here to learn."

At Bennett-Kew, well-behaved students can earn play money to buy toys from the school's "treasure box."

It's rare when students are sent to the principal's office for misbehavior. When two children were fighting, Ichinaga made them sit and hold each other's hand.

"They used to laugh at it, but it works," said Norma Brizuela, who supervises the play yard.

Bennett-Kew wasn't always known for academic achievement. In 1974, reading test scores were dismal, the 3rd percentile.

"When I first came here, nobody could read. Either they were retarded or teachers weren't teaching them," Ichinaga said with typical bluntness.

She looked for a better way.

Teachers agreed to adopt the Sullivan system, which emphasizes phonics, the relationship between letters and sounds. After just four years, third-grade test scores jumped to the 68th percentile.

Ichinaga wasn't satisfied. The system worked, but it was boring. Ichinaga wanted children to learn about classic literature, too. She found an anthology published by a small company called Open Court.

When she discovered the company had a program that combined phonics, vocabulary and reading comprehension, she put it to a test.

She asked one of her least experienced teachers to try it with students who were falling behind. In a year, those students were reading so well that all of the teachers wanted to use the program.

In 1987, when the state Education Department endorsed a different approach called “whole language,” Ichinaga stuck to phonics.

“We got away with it because our test scores were good,” she said. “The state people don’t have a clue. They’re bureaucrats. They’re not in the trenches.”

Five years later, Ichinaga’s blunt talk got her in hot water.

She told the Los Angeles Times, which did a front-page story on Bennett-Kew’s high test scores, that she didn’t do bilingual education. The Open Court series doesn’t come in Spanish, just English.

The state Education Department investigated. Ichinaga spent all summer writing a document to defend her curriculum, and she won a waiver to keep it.

Six Bennett-Kew teachers have enrolled their own children at the school this year. One, kindergarten teacher Adriana Perez, said Bennett-Kew’s experience shows English immersion works.

“It depends on how it’s done,” she said. “This school has done a good job with it and children can succeed.”

Still, skeptics question Bennett-Kew’s success. Jeff McQuillan, a professor of education at Arizona State University, complained that the school is trotted out as a poster child for opponents of bilingual education.

“We have lots of research which has, in fact, looked systematically at schools and predictors of success,” McQuillan said. “None of that research suggests heavy phonics, lack of bilingual education, the absence of HeadStart or ending social promotion are keys to raising achievement.”

Such criticism doesn’t faze Ron Unz, the author of Proposition 227.

“The fact that they are teaching kids English is very controversial,” he said. “When a school actually works and the test scores are good, it casts a negative light on other schools.”

Ichinaga has her own definition of teacher quality.

About 25 percent of the teachers at Bennett-Kew lack a university credential. Instead, they have an “emergency permit,” which allows them to teach temporarily. Most education experts view such teachers as unqualified.

Ichinaga disagrees. She isn’t impressed by university credential programs.

“Eighty percent of the professors haven’t taught in inner-city schools,” she said. “How can they teach what they don’t know?”

She would rather interview a candidate recommended by a teacher on staff and provide on-the-job training herself.

“The first thing she looks for is intelligence,” said Assistant Principal Lorraine Fong.

At some schools, a poor teacher might be ignored. Not at Bennett-Kew.

“If kids aren’t learning, we go in and see why, and try to fix it,” Ichinaga said.

One teacher left after Ichinaga found her first-graders weren’t keeping up.

While most education experts say special methods are needed to teach Spanish speaking children to read in English, Bennett-Kew teachers use the same textbooks and same curriculum for all the students.

In some ways, the classrooms seem old-fashioned. The children wear uniforms -- white pants and navy blue pants, skirts or shorts. The teacher leads every lesson. When children want to speak, they must raise their hands. If they talk out of turn, they are admonished.

Teachers demand students perform. Poverty or poor English skills are no excuse.

“You need to listen,” teacher Adriana Perez said when a few of her kindergartners got restless during a word game. “You’re going to need your ears and your brain.”

After seven minutes of instruction, she awarded several children stickers for their efforts, then moved on to the next lesson.

Kindergartners are expected to learn all the letters of the alphabet along with colors, shapes, and numbers. If they don’t, they aren’t promoted to first grade. Instead, they are assigned to a class called “junior first,” an all-day program designed to shore up their basic skills. About 18 percent of the first graders are in this category.

At other schools, this might be viewed as repeating a grade, a practice most education experts contend harms children’s self-esteem. Bennett-Kew teachers see it as a way to give children the extra time they need.

“It’s better to be on top and older than always be behind and young,” said first-grade teacher Marisa Russo. “Most parents agree that’s true.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m so tough on these babies,” said Russo, who presses on anyway. “If they don’t learn to read by first grade, it’s really difficult.”

Every few weeks, children take a test to see how much they have learned, a small scale version of the fill-in-the-bubble standardized exams.

Even these details don’t escape the principal’s attention. She reviews every test to see if students are making the grade. She also demands weekly lesson plans.

“I want to know what’s going on,” Ichinaga said. “Sometimes I don’t know what’s going on and I can’t stand it.”

Starting in first grade, Spanish-speaking children are assigned to small-group lessons with a language specialist to improve their grammar and pronunciation and build their vocabulary and confidence. Sessions are scheduled during recess and lunch so students won’t miss out on classroom instruction.

Teacher Carol Harmatz requires every student to participate. When she told the second-graders she would tape each one reciting a poem from memory, Fernando Muro wasn’t enthusiastic.

“I hate tape-recording,” said Fernando, who didn’t speak much English when he started school. “People will laugh at us.”

Harmatz tried to soothe his fears.

“You can do it with a partner,” she said.

Two days later, when Fernando’s turn came, he walked to the tape recorder by himself. After he finished, his classmates applauded. “Pat yourself on the back,” the teacher said.

He left the class with a smile.

“I can do it,” he said.

Youngsters who have difficulty can get tutoring, which is provided by local university students after school four days a week. With extra help and high expectations, some Spanish speakers can speak English fluently by second grade.

The state allows schools to reclassify students as fluent in English once their test scores reach the 36th percentile. For Ichinaga, that’s too low. She prefers to wait until students score at the 50th percentile, which is considered average.

Experts say teachers should highlight Hispanic culture as a way of encouraging Spanish-speaking children academically, but that isn’t a big part of the Bennett-Kew classrooms.

“It doesn’t fit in with what we are doing,” said second-grade teacher Naty Reyes.

Instead, Ichinaga’s focus is on academics -- English, reading, writing and math. She was eager to apply when the state offered \$5,000 to schools if students met reading goals. She reads extensively, looking for better curricula, and she is willing to experiment with technology, like a software program to help kindergartners learn the alphabet.

The principal isn’t fluent in Spanish -- she relies on her office staff to translate when necessary -- yet parents support her.

Trinidad Meza used to send her two children to a private school. She moved them to Bennett-Kew after getting references from other parents.

“I’m not at all interested in my children learning the curriculum in Spanish,” she said.

She teaches them Spanish at home.

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