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well that when they reached junior high school their teachers kept asking: "What private school did you come from?"

At Bennett-Kew, where the staff gives out college savings bonds each year to the brightest graduating sixth-graders, two-thirds of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Third-grade reading scores, though, are higher than at 75% of all elementary schools, rich or poor.

Christine McAfee did not even mind when her 7-year-old son had to repeat the first grade.

"If this was anywhere else, he would have just been passed along," McAfee said. "I have friends and their kids' homework is not nearly as advanced as the homework my kids bring home."

Sandra Schieldge, a Bennett-Kew kindergarten teacher, recalled how indignant Ichinaga was when she arrived at the school 17 years ago and saw the low test scores.

"I'm not running a school for dishwashers," Schieldge said, mimicking Ichinaga talking to the teachers. "[These kids] will go to college."

Thompson and Ichinaga attribute their success to decisions they have made about what is important to teach—phonics-based reading—and what is not—bilingual education.

But the credit, many educators say, must go to Thompson and Ichinaga.

Despite distinct differences in style and background, the two women personify what many educators say is the most important factor in a high-achieving school—a dynamic principal.

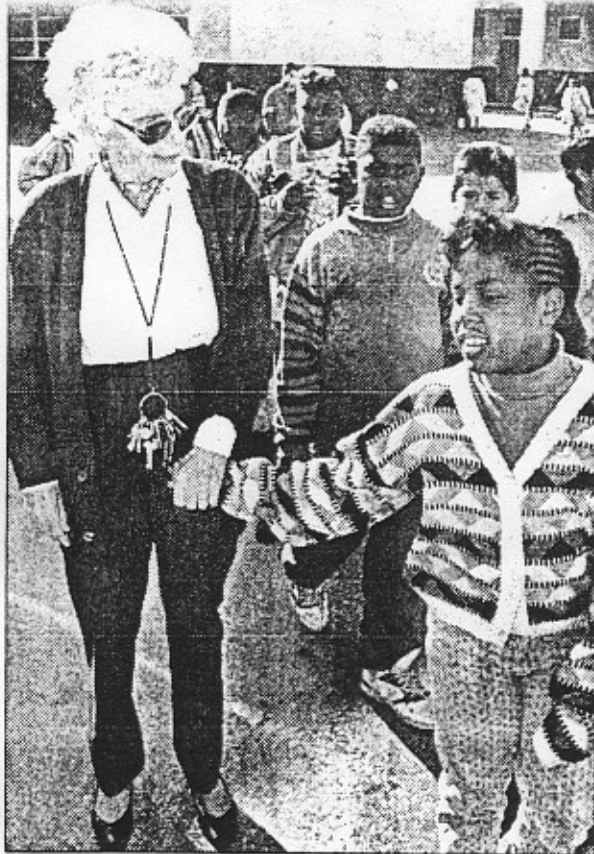
Ichinaga is so involved with her school that she "knows the name of every child and probably their birth weight," said Ellen Cox, a teacher.

Thompson, a former counselor and learning disabilities specialist, tests every child who comes to Kelso to determine the pupil's academic level.

"She works harder than the teachers," said one student, Mary O'Donnell. "She's my idol."

Thompson came to Kelso 17 years ago. Because of a court desegregation order, it was in the midst of adding the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grades to the school. But it had no sixth-grade reading books.

"They sent me the kids but no books," Thompson said. "It took me two, three, four years to get that reading program going."



Two principals: Kelso's Marjorie Thompson, left, and Bennett-Kew's

Despite her obvious delight in the children, Thompson insists that school is not supposed to be fun. Academics is the focus. This is not a school that has a lot of parties and candy sales, parents said.

Kelso and Bennett-Kew shine under various academic lights, said William Padia, director of the state education department's program evaluation and research division.

"Not only are these schools getting high scores," he said, "but both . . . are improving faster than the state [average.] That's very impressive."

State test scores have been rising an average of 8.5 points a year, Padia said. At Kelso and Bennett-Kew, they have risen about 11.5 points a year.

"When you walk into those schools, you know that student achievement is the focus," said Ruth Johnson, a Cal State Los Angeles education professor who worked on the Los Angeles Unified study. Only one inner-city school in Los Angeles was found that matched the successes in Inglewood.

Thompson and Ichinaga put their strongest teachers and the few classroom aides they have at primary-grade levels, emphasizing the importance of early academic success.

Neither school spends its supple-

mental federal money on extracurricular activities or remedial classes. Instead, they strengthen basic curriculum at the kindergarten and first-grade levels.

Ichinaga created special classes for children who have had a year of kindergarten but are not ready for first grade. It gives children "the gift of time to learn," she said.

Thompson's school is year-round, so she created classes between terms for children who need extra help with basic skills or English.

There is no bilingual education at either school, in part, Thompson and Ichinaga said, because parents do not want it. That was fine with the two principals because they believe the approach does not work.

"Our goal is not to teach them Spanish," Ichinaga said. "Our goal is to make them English literate."

The two schools teach English as a second language, which provides bilingual instructors but has children learning English the moment they enter school.

Thompson and Ichinaga also reject the state's new "whole language" approach to reading, which stresses comprehension and writing skills over a child's mastery of such mechanical exercises as spell-