



Nancy Ichinaga

Bennett-Kew
Elementary School
11710 Cherry Avenue
Inglewood, CA 90303
310.680.5400

When Nancy Ichinaga became principal of Andrew Bennett Elementary in 1974, 95 percent of the children in her school were illiterate. In only four years she raised the school-wide reading performance from the 3rd to the 50th percentile in the state of California. After that, achievement kept on climbing, and for 20 years her school has been one of the highest performers in all of Los Angeles County. A mastery of reading in kindergarten is one of the keys to her success.

“As elementary school teachers,” Ichinaga says, “our primary mission is to make children literate.” Ichinaga has stuck to the principles she and her staff agreed upon in 1974. They determined that they needed a good reading program that had a systematic decoding component. In addition, they needed a teaching method that would make all children accountable and responsible learners beginning in the earliest years.

Beginning in kindergarten, all children in her school are taught to read and write English and are promoted according to clearly defined standards of achievement per grade level. Even kindergartners are held back if they don’t meet the promotion requirement. “One of our most successful interventions has been to require kindergartners to know all the letter sounds and to be able to blend three letters to read words,” Ichinaga explains. The neediest kindergartners are given an extra year before 1st grade to guarantee from the beginning that promotion is tied to achievement. “These children generally become successful 1st graders the following year,” Ichinaga notes, “thereby preventing any cycle of school failure from beginning.”

The school is now bringing additional firepower to kindergarten in the form of the Waterford Early Reading Program, a multi-media sup-

Grades: K-5
Students: 836
% Low-income: 78
Median Percentile in Reading: 62
Median Percentile in Math: 74¹⁷

Notes:

17. Stanford-9 Achievement Test, Spring 1999. Provided by the California Department of Education, Standardized Testing and Reporting Program. See <http://star.cde.ca.gov>.

plementary literacy program that claims to make up for 3,000 hours of pre-reading experiences that children need to become successful readers. In its first trial year, the program seems to have advanced four out of six children who otherwise might have needed the extra year of kindergarten.

In 1986 Ichinaga organized her parents in support of her methods when she fought and prevailed against a state ruling that required whole-language reading instruction in all California schools. The State Curriculum Commission rejected reading programs like hers that had a systematic phonics component, thus forbidding her use of state funds to purchase these text books. Six weeks after her parents papered the commission with protest letters, her texts were placed on the approval list.

Not even the building of the Century Freeway, which in 1992 forced Bennett to merge with the James Kew School, has stalled her school's achievement. Although Bennett-Kew now draws many of its students from a part of urban Inglewood fraught with drugs, violence, and crime, Ichinaga is no less committed to her students' success.

"We believe every child can learn," she says. "You've already lost if you begin making excuses, so our school culture is different. Here it's simple: If you have a complaint, give me a solution."

Bilingual education has also been a point of contention. Although 50 percent of her school is Hispanic and a full 30 percent have limited English proficiency, none is segregated to a bilingual program. Her school is allowed to do this because of an "achievement-based excuse" that Ichinaga gained from the State Department of Education. Yet, this waiver did not come easily.

In 1993 a state compliance team learned that Ichinaga's school was in violation of the state's bilingual mandates and threatened to withdraw the school's Title I funding. After three years of filing for exemptions, Ichinaga finally received a waiver based on her school's high test scores and the English fluency of her students. Without interruption, Tongan, Thai, and Spanish language students have been taught exclusively in English at Bennett-Kew and accelerated based on their individual abilities. California's recently passed Proposition 227 has lifted the bilingual constraint allowing the practice at Bennett-Kew to be the norm throughout the state.

For years Bennett-Kew students have also been district leaders in math. All students learn math concepts that are typically well above their grade level. This year the 3rd graders averaged in the 84th percentile on the Stanford-9.¹⁸ All math instruction rigorously follows a monthly schedule that is enforced through regular unit tests. The results

of these tests allow teachers to regroup and re-teach the students based on their individual mastery of the concepts.

Ichinaga believes that grade-level team teaching is one of the keys to success. In this way the teachers work together to improve each other's skills and master teachers are close at hand to refine a younger teacher's implementation of the curriculum. Referring to her explicit phonics and math curricula, Ichinaga says, "We want experts in Open Court, experts in Saxon math. We talk about the details of implementation all the time."

When a specific grade level is not working cohesively, Ichinaga personally works with the team and gives them extra time to put their program back on track. "Out of this forum, teacher leaders naturally arise," she notes. Already she has sent three of her teachers off to principalships in other schools and believes another three or four future principals are currently among her staff. Professional satisfaction is another clear benefit of her methods. Sixteen teachers now on staff either have children in the school or did in the past. Ichinaga even sent two of her grandchildren to the school. Two teachers and four aides are alumni. The average teacher tenure at Bennett-Kew is sixteen years.

In addition to the regular curriculum, in grades 2 through 5 a gifted and talented program offers certain students enrichment activities including: research projects, science presentations, art, poetry, music, dance, and leadership training. Ichinaga says, "We'd gladly put our top 25 percent against any in the country." But that's not the point. These elite students are successful because her mission is to secure the success of the entire school. "We believe that all students at every level can be successful in a common, comprehensive, academically oriented curriculum. We believe this irrespective of primary language or ethnic background."

And she puts her money where her mouth is. After the 1998 Stanford-9 results showed a falling off in 4th-grade reading, Ichinaga directed most of her discretionary funds into that class and personally pulled fifteen students for specialized instruction. In one year the 4th grade class average in both reading and math rose 14 percentile points.¹⁹ "We believe all children can learn. And they do."

Notes:

18. Stanford-9 Achievement Test, Spring 1999. Provided by the California Department of Education, Standardized Testing and Reporting Program.
19. Stanford-9 Achievement Test, Spring 1999. These gains show a year over year improvement for the *grade level*; they do not reflect the gains achieved by a single set of students in a year's time.