

Charlie's challenge

Ravenswood superintendent is 'right on target'

By Mary T. Fortney
Times Tribune staff

Charlie Mae Knight, after a year as superintendent of the Ravenswood City School District, believes she is "right on target" with her schedule for improving district schools.

Her office in district headquarters reflects the success of her first goal — to improve the environment in the East Palo Alto and east Menlo Park district.

The tattered 14-year-old red carpet on the floor of the superintendent's office in the administration building on Euclid Avenue has been replaced with new blue carpeting. The walls are paneled. Comfortable sofas make it a pleasant place to conduct business.

The district board room also has been painted and paneled. A school carpenter is building a new dais where trustees will preside at board meetings. It will replace a clutter of desks.

Knight wanted to upgrade headquarters to give visible evidence that the district was functioning efficiently.

The same type of improvements have been carried out at the schools. A joint project with Raychem Corp., Menlo Park, turned Garden Oaks School into a beautifully renovated, landscaped school. Costano School was cleaned up in a recent work project. A Packard Foundation grant was used to improve the troubled Ravenswood Middle School, paying for fencing and sports facilities.

"The reason we pushed so hard was that we had to show people we could deliver," she

said. "We had to restore confidence in the district and the board."

The move succeeded. Enrollment has increased from 1,990 in October 1985 to 3,320 this month. Many parents who had been sending their children to private schools have enrolled them in Ravenswood schools.

The improvements are just physical evidence of deep-reaching changes that have made the Ravenswood school district a whirlwind of educational activity that has caught the interest of educators throughout the state.

When the Ravenswood board hired Knight on Oct. 5, 1985, they asked, "When would you like to come to work?"

She replied, "Monday morning."

She's been on the job since, usually working from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. to get everything done.

Knight, 54, previously was superintendent at the Lynwood Unified School District for five years. Before that she was associate state superintendent of public schools under Wilson Riles and for 20 years she was a teacher, counselor and administrator at the Monterey Unified School District.

When she arrived at Ravenswood, the district was in chaos. She was the first permanent superintendent in the district since August 1983, and the 10th superintendent in 10 years.

"Being a superintendent in East Palo Alto is significantly different than in other places," Knight said. "Problems in my previous jobs were school dropouts, poor attendance, mundane things. In East Palo Alto, the

superintendent has unique problems."

One problem — the habit of residents to dump refuse on public land — keeps Knight busy every Monday morning. She goes around to the schools with a truck and helps to collect all the trash piled around the dumpsters on school grounds.

"There are sofas, washing machines, refrigerators lined up," she said "When a fence was erected around Ravenswood school, the junk was lined up against the fence all along Bay Road."

The city of East Palo Alto also is fighting a battle against such dumping, but Knight believes nothing will change unless the community cooperates.

Knight also has been kept busy during the past year tightening up operations of the schools.

The district had been spending \$10,000 a month because there was no plumber on the staff. An outside plumber would be called for minor jobs such as fixing a stopped-up sink. That's been changed and maintenance men are expected to do minor repairs.

Knight also cut off the \$100-a-month payments made to 20 employees who were supposed to respond and investigate when called by the security company serving the district.

"Half of them had lost their beepers and the beepers of the other half were broken," she said.

Now Knight and two assistants carry beepers and are on call 24 hours a day to respond to problems reported by the security

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arm. "Last weekend we only had six calls," she said. "There's been a significant decrease. I think the message is getting out."

Knight stressed a "whole attitudinal change" was needed in the district to convince staff they were expected to work.

"Some workers had two full-time jobs and rested on the Ravenswood job so they could be fresh for their second job," Knight said. "One said to me, 'If you work me too hard, I'll be too tired for my other job.'"

Knight acknowledges she isn't loved by some employees, who represent the new pressures for performance.

Knight is determined that students in the district have the same number of minutes of instruction as those in surrounding districts.

When she arrived at Ravenswood, the district had 57 minimum days a year, much more than any other district. Classes regularly were let out at 1 p.m. every Wednesday.

"After talking to the teachers, that's been reduced to 17 this year," she said. "The minimum day on Wednesdays has been eliminated."



Times Tribune staff photo by Joe Melena

Charlie Mae Knight begins her second year as superintendent of the Ravenswood City School District with an agenda just as full as her first year on the job.

Despite the changes, the district has managed to develop a friendly relation with the teachers union and most of the teachers.

The board last week approved a contract with the Ravenswood Teachers Association, giving teachers a 9.69 percent salary increase for 1986-87, and a 1.7 percent payment retroactive to 1985-86 for the longer school day instituted in the district.

"This is the first time in 20 years teachers reached a contract with the district during the first weeks of the school year," Knight said.

She attributes part of the success with teachers to an open door policy. Teachers who have gripes or problems can talk to her at any time.

Knight begins her second year as superintendent with an equally full agenda.

She wants to refine the Marva Collins complex, a new educational philosophy introduced this year at Willow Oaks School, which comprises two schools, Menlo School for grades 4 to 6, and Willow school for the lower grades.

She said Menlo school, with the most seasoned teachers, is running well, but there are some things to work out at Willow school, which is staffed by less experienced teachers.

She's proud of the Collins complex, where a new reading series stressing phonics is in use. Students there are reading classic literature, much to the surprise of a Menlo

Park librarian who called the school to ask why youngsters were taking out books by Shakespeare and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Improving the situation at Ravenswood Middle School also is high on the list. The school was troubled last year with two outbreaks of violence between students.

Since then, the potential for problems has been minimized by keeping sixth-grade students at the elementary schools. This reduced the enrollment at the middle school and made it easier to control the students there, Knight said.

Also, part of the \$200,000 grant from the Packard Foundation was used to erect a fence around the school and to build sports facilities. The second phase of work scheduled under the grant will be construction of a soccer field and benches where youngsters can sit and eat their lunches.

"We're working on the instructional program at the middle school," Knight said. "All the children get 20 minutes a day on a computer. We've introduced fine arts and modern dance and there are 30 typewriters so the youngsters can learn to type."

Knight's previous positions required a lot of lobbying and fund raising, but when she came to Ravenswood, the board was reluctant to seek foundation grants.

"The perspective was that grants had been given before, but it was hard to see that anything happened," Knight said. "The board was very sensitive about taking money and not being able to show results."

Knight is gratified that when Dolly Sacks, program officer from the Packard Foundation, visits the middle school, she will be able to show her where the money went.

But the district still has needs. At the moment, Knight is looking for a way to raise money to re-roof the schools.

It's all part of the job as superintendent at Ravenswood.

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