

# Fighting for a better playground

East Palo Alto woman  
leads upgrading project

By Thomas G. Keane  
Times Tribune staff

Forget what goes on inside the classroom for a minute. Myrtle Walker believes the students at Ravenswood Middle School in East Palo Alto need a healthier playground environment.

Walker is the president of the middle school's parents club, the founder and head of the East Palo Alto Education Foundation. The foundation is a non-profit group dedicated to helping East Palo Alto children get a better education.

Walkers and others who teamed up with her decided the foundation's first project would be to improve the shoddy grounds at the middle school.

With the help of Dolly Sacks of the Packard Foundation and Pat Keller of Menlo Park, the school district's architect, Walker estimated \$953,000 will buy, among other things, a new softball field with bleachers, a fence around the school, benches in the yard, lockers with an anti-vandalism cage, and a bike rack (students are prohibited from riding their bikes because there is no rack). The whole blacktop area will be resurfaced, too.

"The middle school students don't have the outdoor facilities. They've had no where to release their energy," Walker said, alluding to a long-standing discipline problem at the middle school.

She said the drainage ditch around the school has been smashed by garbage trucks, leaving huge puddles on the school grounds in the winter. The fields are "filled with gopher holes" and the fence around the grounds is broken down, she said.

"During the last 20 years, all the facilities have been allowed to deteriorate," she said.

Vera Clark, principal at the middle school, said she's all in favor of the idea. "I think the environment has an indirect effect on learning," she said. "It could solve some of the problems we have at the school ... improve some students' self-esteem and their attitude about school."

Two years ago, the parents club gave the district board of trustees a list of improvements needed for the school grounds. District officials sent back the proposal, saying the money wasn't available.

Walker believes that upgrading the grounds will improve the atmosphere in the classroom, and perhaps the academic performance of the students.

"I believe our kids need the very best facilities — just like every other district around here," she said.

The Ravenswood City School District, while suffering one of the lowest standardized test score averages on the Peninsula, is also one of the poorest.

A group of parents, led by Walker, decided to turn to the private sector for help. Two years ago, the middle school parents club had three members. Now, largely due to the creation of the foundation, the club boasts 26 members.

"Most people told me it couldn't be done," Walker said. "I said, 'Don't tell me that, I know it can be done.'"

"A million dollars is nothing today," she said, "Not for what we're asking for our children."