

**C**harlie Mae Knight is determined. Determined to get rid of the drug dealers who hang out in front of her office, determined to instill a sense of pride and ownership in the teachers of the Ravenswood City School District and determined to make a success of the East Palo Alto district that has been called a disaster dozens of times.

As the new superintendent of the Ravenswood School District in East Palo Alto, Knight is the tenth in a line of administrators that has come and gone over the last decade. But she has every intention of staying.

"There is no reason to continue the nightmares about this district," Knight said, sitting behind her expansive wood desk in a newly remodeled office, its walls covered with plaques, diplomas and certificates of appreciation.

"This is the only local district that feeds all its children for free. This is the only district that provides free busing. Now we're gearing up our accelerated classes. We have a gifted student program. We're developing new curriculum . . . We just have to do something about our marketing."

Last week, the Ravenswood School Board approved a tentative settlement in the decade-old Tinsley desegregation lawsuit that could have far-reaching effects on the district's improvement. An important part of the settlement involves the study of Ravenswood and state-funded programs to upgrade education within the elementary and middle schools.

"This is going to be a quality institution with a climate of safety. We're improving the environment of our schools. This is not another district destined to become a ghetto," she said emphatically.

The Ravenswood district consists of four elementary schools and one middle school. Ravenswood High School closed in 1976. There are just over 3,000 students in the district today, and according to Knight, about 700 of them were kept back last year because they were deemed unprepared to move up to the next grade level.

Those accustomed to Palo Alto and Menlo Park schools are shocked when they visit Ravenswood. Cosmetically, the campuses are a wreck.

Classroom desks are the old uncomfortable wooden variety from the 1950s. Attendance and principals' offices are sparsely furnished with uninviting straight-backed chairs and old torn carpets.

Giant potholes and asphalt cracks dot most of the parking lots. Dead grass and overgrown bushes surround buildings that resemble deteriorating inner city schools. During recent rainstorms classroom roofs leaked so badly that the district asked for emergency state funding to make repairs.

But amid the depressing physical surroundings, there is a new sense of change and hope. "For the first time in years I'm hearing people (teachers) say maybe they'll stay another year," said Jackie Smith, president of the Ravenswood Teachers Association.

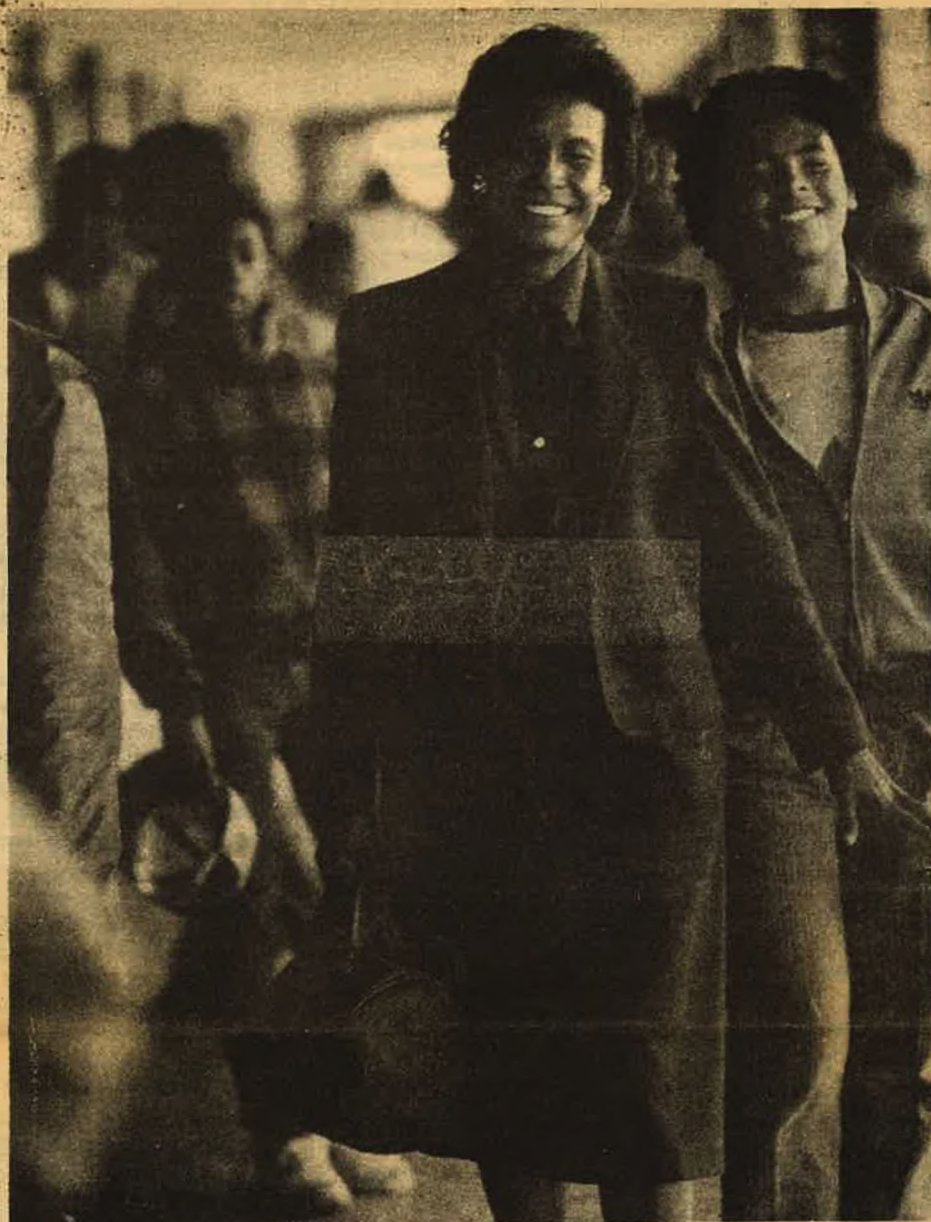
"Teachers in Ravenswood want to do a good job. There's just been such a lack of support, of supplies, books. It's made the teachers so frustrated they'd given up trying. It's been a struggle. We didn't have a leader. I'm not saying that Dr. Knight is pleasing to everyone, but she is assertive and she is direct."

Charlie Mae Knight grew up in Georgia, where she attended Albany State College and then went on to be a teacher. Two years later she married and moved to California where she and her husband settled in Carmel. Knight has four children, the youngest of whom is now 16 years old.

When a job offer came from Sacramento, Knight joined Wilson Riles, State Superintendent of Schools, as associate superintendent of instruction. Then she went on to become superintendent of the Linwood School District in Los Angeles.

When Knight left Linwood to come to Ravenswood in 1985, there was some controversy over her departure from Los Angeles. "I had a four-year contract," said Knight. "I was attempting to do rather bold things and we mutually agreed that I would leave at the end of the contract. Linwood was a district like Ravenswood, with a large minority community. While I was there we had a 22-day teacher strike. We had the same kind of major learning problems we have here."

"I decided since we weren't making it anyway, I'd go. The community was very upset when I left. They knew what I had been trying to do," Knight said.



School Superintendent Dr. Charlie Mae Knight has made herself a familiar face at each of the schools in the Ravenswood district.

Margaret Moulton

## Hope in the halls

**New superintendent Charlie Mae Knight has a dramatic vision of how the Ravenswood schools can become first-rate.**

When she arrived in the Bay Area, Knight and her husband bought a condominium in East Palo Alto. On Oct. 7, 1985, Knight began her new position as the leader of a school district in trouble. "It's been very interesting so far," she said with a smile.

Since her arrival, she has met with excitement and relief as well as uncertainty and criticism.

"Some people say I'm moving too fast. Some say, 'She doesn't know enough about the community to move this fast.' Some of the teachers say, 'You're saying we're incompetent,' and I say no, I'm just telling you you're ineffective and we need to do something about it."

"I believe in the work ethic," said R. B. Jones, a longtime member of the Ravenswood School Board. "Some people won't be able to adjust to her adjustments. Some will say this is a new day and I'm going to get my act together. Others—when the train goes by they just won't have a ticket."

For years, the district has had problems with employees not working the number of hours they were paid for and not "taking real responsibility for their jobs," Knight said.

Teachers at Ravenswood are the lowest paid of any district on the Midpeninsula. Supplies have been hard to come by, and a problem as simple as having adequate pencils and ditto paper has sometimes held up an entire class period.

Knight has made it clear that she will not tolerate laziness or "whining and gossiping." She has also made it clear that she has an open door policy and will listen to any district employee who has a problem or a suggestion.

At first, principals didn't like the idea that teachers could go directly to the superintendent with a complaint. But

Knight decided she would call the principal at the teacher's school to discuss the situation and hear both sides. Now employees are adjusting to the idea.

"In urban areas," observed Knight, "there is a tendency for teachers to distrust the administration . . . to feel they won't be fair. Well, I'm not here to do violence. There are things that happened before I came that I didn't have any control over. But I'm going to see to it that there will be change."

The changes began almost as soon as Knight arrived. First, Knight established an accelerated program for gifted students, and a Basic Educational Skills (BES) series of classes for children with special needs.

When teachers learned that some of their best students would be put into gifted classes, they were upset. Other instructors complained that they didn't want to teach the BES classes with all the slowest students.

"They told me that if I took all the brightest kids out of their classes there wouldn't be any stimulation," explained Knight. "I said that's what we pay teachers

to do—it's not up to the students to stimulate each other."

On March 1, the BES classes began as planned. Now the students who would have previously been placed in special education classes will go into the BES class for a short time to upgrade necessary skills. Then they will be put back into their regular classes.

Dealing with the resistance to change from teachers and administrators as well as district employees from custodians to bus drivers has kept Knight extremely busy. One recent afternoon she scheduled a meeting with teachers at the middle school so that they could come and ask questions about all her new plans. "They're coming to beat up on the superintendent," she laughed.

Knight has also launched an effort to see that the district is reimbursed by the state for all the free lunches it serves. Parents of children participating in the lunch program must sign a simple form before the district can be reimbursed, but there has never been any effort to go into the community and get the needed signatures.

Unexcused absences have cost the district \$92,000 a year, because the district is only paid by the state for each student who attends school or has an excused absence.

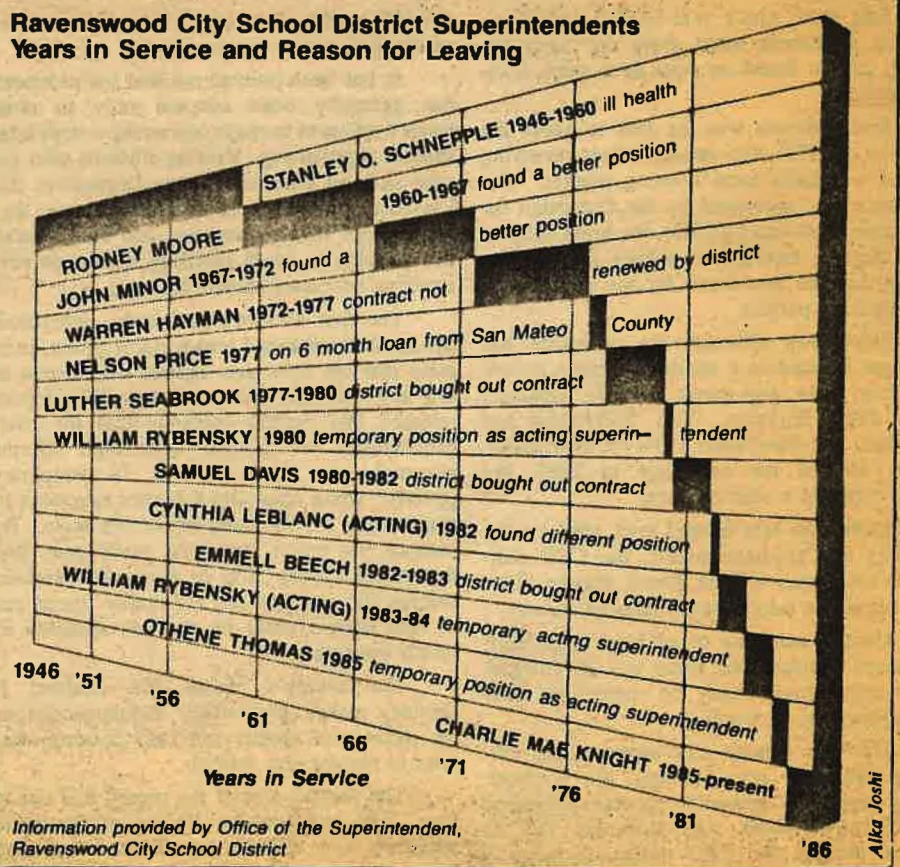
"It requires someone to contact parents and find out why their child was absent," said Knight. Now the community aide is going to spend regular time handling absences so that the district can regain some of the funds.

"Our schools are in terrible shape," said Knight. "I want to give them all facelifts . . . I believe in the work ethic and I expect everyone to work a full day if that's what they're getting paid for. I want to get them to buy into the district as workplace they're going to stay, not just the place they pick up their paycheck."

Ravenswood purchased 30 new typewriters this year and reinstated the typing program as a requirement for all eighth graders at the middle school. The old program had been stopped after the typewriters broke down or were stolen.

"These new ones are the same kind of typewriters they use at Sequoia High School," said Vera Clark, principal at Ravenswood Middle School, proudly.

The first night the typewriters arrived there wasn't time to bolt them to the furniture so that they couldn't be stolen. The teacher offered to spend the night in the room to prevent vandalism, according to Clark. "It's that kind of devotion and enthusiasm we're starting to see again in the district," she said.



cover

Alka Joshi