

# Palo Alto shuts classroom doors, except to

By Kathy Holub  
Staff Writer

Helen Cowan, who lives in East Palo Alto, wasn't going to let a mere boundary prevent her daughter from attending prestigious Palo Alto High School two years ago.

So she used a fake address.

It worked like a charm — at least for a while. Her daughter Teresa made it through ninth grade and half of the tenth before she and 241 others were nabbed in a major Palo Alto Unified School District crackdown against "sneak-ins."

Janice Carr of Los Altos took the legal route last year. She got an interdistrict transfer and enrolled her seventh-grader, David, in a Palo Alto middle school.

This year, though, the district has said David and 28 other transfer students can't come back.

For hundreds of people, the new policy of refusing admission to students whose

'For every one of these kids, it may be in their best interest (to come to Palo Alto). But we can't afford it.'

— Mary Bacon, school official

parents don't live in the Palo Alto district has come as a rude shock. Like no other district in the county, Palo Alto, with its dazzling reputation, soaring test scores, lavish honors curriculum and unbeatable college-acceptance record, has drawn students from outside the district like filings to a magnet.

Officials of the wealthy district that includes Stanford University never considered the boundary-jumping much of a problem. But last year's enrollment soared suspiciously above projections, and the district had to add staff at a cost of \$180,000 to handle the overflow.

So officials slammed the door shut. "We

can't afford it," said Mary Bacon, the school official in charge of the new policies.

The cries of "Unfair!" have been deafening, she said.

Cowan, for one, is furious. She freely admits having lied to get Teresa into Palo Alto High. But once she was caught, she applied for a legal transfer. Her home district — Sequoia, in southern San Mateo County — wouldn't let Teresa go. So since the second semester of the past school year, the teen-ager has attended Menlo-Atherton High.

"I had two doctors' letters saying it would be an emotional trauma for Teresa

to change schools. But to the board of trustees, the main issue was the money. They didn't care how she would feel," Cowan said.

"That made me mad. It's my tax money, and if I'm paying my taxes I should be able to send my child to any school I want to. I was ready to take the case to the Supreme Court if I could have afforded it," she said.

Teresa Cowan, 16, is distraught. "Everything Menlo-Atherton taught me, Paly had already taught me in the ninth grade," she said scornfully. "I really hate to go back."

LaDoris Cordell, a Santa Clara County Municipal Court judge who lives in Moun-

tain View, says she is "just ticked off" at the new policy. Her 6-year-old daughter, Cheran, attended kindergarten and first grade in Palo Alto on legal transfers. But Palo Alto refused to renew the transfer this year.

"The child was tested out as mentally gifted. She was reading at the seventh-grade level in the first grade," Cordell said. Since Palo Alto's program for gifted children is more extensive than the Whisman district's, she argues, her child belongs in Palo Alto.

"The education code says a transfer should be granted if it's in the best interests of the child. I feel the district did not consider the best interests of the child — it considered the best interests of the district," she said.

It's an argument Bacon has heard dozens of times.

"That's a very good argument," she con-

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