

Tinsley kids to be studied

*Palo Alto district to examine success
of voluntary transfer students*

by Elizabeth Darling

This fall, the Palo Alto school district will do its first in-depth study looking at how the 422 East Palo Alto students who attend Palo Alto schools as part of the Tinsley voluntary transfer program have fared so far.

The three eldest students will be entering their junior year in high school, the youngest three will be in the Young Fives program. The rest are distributed among the 11 elementary schools and two middle schools.

Under the program, siblings are assigned to the same school, so some schools have as many as 37, while others have only 11 students. The district does, however, make an effort to balance the numbers across schools.

The voluntary transfer program began in 1987, a year after a court settlement involving Peninsula school districts from Palo Alto to Belmont. The settlement came 10 years after a lawsuit was filed by 34 East Palo Alto parents, including Margaret Tinsley, who sought to ensure that schoolchildren in East Palo Alto could have the option of transferring into the surrounding predominantly white school districts. The parents feared that their children might miss out on educational opportunities if forced to attend schools in the impoverished Ravenswood school district.

In general, statistics and other

measures show that these students perform like students in Palo Alto and contribute to their schools just as other students do. For example, this year's Jordan Middle School student body president was a voluntary transfer program student.

But these students are still struggling to do well on standardized tests and to achieve as well as their Palo Alto classmates.

"Overall we feel very positive, and the families indicate that they feel positive," said Mary Bacon, a district consultant who oversees the voluntary transfer program. "How are the students doing? We've found that to be a very difficult question to answer. Our '95-'96 task is to identify what the definition of working is."

For example, comparatively low test scores among students of color in the district are "somewhat inconsistent with how these children are performing in the classroom," she said. Also, a disproportionately high number of the transfer students are enrolled in special education programs: 24 percent, as opposed to about 12 percent of resident students.

Bacon noted that the overrepresentation of students of color and children of poverty in special education programs is a "national phenomenon which is not unique to Palo Alto schools, although it is an issue which we intend to address."

"I think part of the problem,"

Bacon said, "is that in the early years, special education was the only resource we had. Today, now that we have begun to allocate money for special needs, my concern is how the money is being spent (at each school)."

These issues, she said, "raise concern about the messages which these children receive about their performance, and the degree to which our district is able to provide culturally relevant learning experiences for this population."

Palo Alto Unified, as well as the other Peninsula districts voluntary transfer students attend, are mandated by the court to treat these students exactly the same as their home students. They are not allowed to publicly release the names of students in the program. However, internally, Palo Alto, as well as other districts, has been keeping close tabs on these children and their families, working to make their educational experiences successful.

Bacon, along with her colleague, Terry Schnitz, will spend the next year looking at ways that the school district can serve these students even better. But she warned that any study of how these children are doing has to be done by looking at all children of color, not just Tinsley children.

"This population should not be under a microscope," Bacon said. "There needs to be as much change in the delivery system of the district as in the children," Bacon said.

"Compared to what your expectations were eight years ago, how are we doing?" school board member Julie Jerome asked Bacon during a presentation on the program last week.

"My expectation would have been that this school district would have made the difference," Bacon said. "We should see the same pattern of performance in these kids as

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we do kids who live in Palo Alto. I also believe that is an unrealistic expectation," she said candidly, given the major transition these children have had to go through, being bused from their neighborhoods to a different city, and living in what Bacon calls "a bicultural world."

Of the 422 voluntary transfer students in Palo Alto schools, 209 are African-American, 167 are Hispanic, and 44 students have other ethnic origins.

At the same time, "this program has worked extremely well in light of other desegregation programs throughout the country," she said.

Looking at the numbers, it is clear that "the overwhelming majority" of parents and students are satisfied with their schools and their education, Bacon said.

She noted that in general, children in the Tinsley program "do fine" in kindergarten. "It's when they start to move up in the system that they have problems. When we see them at the end of second grade and they're still not doing well, it's not the child. It's something else."

"For these children this district

is a pretty difficult challenge," she said. But even so, the attrition rate in kindergarten through eighth grade is extremely low, she said. Out of a total of 572 students, only 23 percent (132 students) have left the program since their initial enrollment. Of these, 83 percent (108 students) have either moved out of the area or into Palo Alto.

In high school, only one student out of 27 so far has chosen to transfer back to the Sequoia Union High School District, the home district for East Palo Alto high school students.

This spring, the school district stopped busing voluntary transfer students who are in high school to Gunn and Palo Alto High. Instead, they issue Samtrans bus passes for Palo Alto High School students, which take them to the CalTrain station.

Beginning in the fall, Paly will be designated as the high school of attendance for all VTP students, Bacon said, because Gunn is too far to travel. If students desire a transfer to Gunn, they must assume their own home-to-school transportation, although Samtrans bus passes will be available if they want them. ■