

Berkeley Schools Face Major Changes

Bonds pave the way
to overhaul facilities
— and academics

By Nanette Asimov
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A nervous excitement lives in the Berkeley public schools these days.

Teachers glance at water-stained ceilings and crumbling playgrounds and smile. New roofs, fresh tar and sturdy walls are all coming soon because voters approved \$158 million in bond money this June so that the small urban district of 16 schools could overhaul and even rebuild its aged and earthquake-damaged structures.

That is the excitement. The nervousness comes from the realization that before the schools can be reconstructed, Berkeley must also rebuild its entire academic program for 7,800 children so the new physical structures will match the modern educational needs of 21st century students.

"Form follows function," said Monica Thyberg, a district manager. "And we have to know the function. We need to know how many students are going to be in the schools and what grades they're going to be in before proceeding."

The district has discovered that education is tied in surprising ways to the shape of bricks and mortar.

Because future classrooms will include computers and telecommunications equipment, the district will need to modify walls and furniture to accommodate them. Team teaching could become a breeze in Berkeley if new classrooms are equipped with sliding walls between them.

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BY VINCE MAGGIORA/THE CHRONICLE

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such as mathematics, the arts or year-round education.

But the most significant changes are being driven by the district's tentative plans to alter dramatically its busing program, once a desegregation model for the nation.

In recent years, the system — like dozens of other busing programs nationwide — has been widely criticized as having failed to raise the achievement levels of black children while alienating white middle-class families.

Berkeley children are required to attend two separate elementary schools, moving to the second school after grade 3, to comply with the district's complex busing program. Frustrated parents and educators complain that the program is based on demographics that no longer exist, as white enrollment has steadily declined in the past 25 years.

As a result, administrators say their windfall of infrastructure fi-

ancing may offer an opportunity to tailor transportation needs around academics, rather than the other way around, and make busing more palatable to parents at the same time.

This may mean changing the entire grade structure of the schools, Thyberg said. In addition, educators hope to address changing student needs by building in extra space at some schools for social services, such as welfare and health care.

"The bond money is a catalyst for change inside the classroom," said Nancy Spaethe, Berkeley's associate superintendent for instruction. "We are wide open to re-searching everything."

To that end, teams of teachers, parents and staff members have been meeting weekly at each Berkeley school to decide by January which changes they would like to see, from academics to extracurricular activities to busing.

At one recent session at Washington Primary School, a dozen volunteers sat on hard plastic chairs in the high-ceilinged cafeteria looking worried as they debated the meaning of a new seismic report suggesting that their stately 40-year-old school might be torn down and rebuilt using the bond money. They wondered aloud: Should we protest? Who wants sliding walls to replace classic architecture? Where would kids study during construction?

At the same time, with millions of dollars, why not create a wish list? Could a new building house a much-needed preschool?

Across the street at Berkeley High School, 18-year-old Lupe Alcalá surveyed his fortresslike school and was unequivocal about what he wanted.

"This is ugly," he said, musing on the graffiti-covered walls and

BERKELEY: Page A27 Col. 1

BERKELEY

From Page A21

the cafeteria that had been destroyed in the 1989 quake. "I think a change is needed."

In the school's worst classroom, puddles of water stagnate on the floor. A stale smell permeates the air. There are no windows.

Feelings of wealth have been virtually unknown in the district in recent years. In the late 1970s, the state cut way back on its annual payments to Berkeley schools because of measures to equalize spending for all California students. Seven years ago the district went bankrupt.

A change is coming, although it will unfold slowly during the next 10 years as the \$158 million is distributed.

While the dilapidated schools still scrimp for basic educational needs — such as sufficient books and teachers — the new bond money will allow each school to repair broken toilets and leaky roofs, improve lockers or, in a few cases, rebuild entire schools. As one administrator put it, "The last innovation here was when they unbolted the desks from the floors."

The high school and adult programs will absorb nearly \$55 million, and \$100 million will go to the middle and elementary schools.

"It's exciting," said Superintendent LaVoneia Steele. "This is an opportunity that comes very rarely in the lifetime of a school dis-

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