

d Campuses



MIKE SERGIEFF / For The Times

Nancy Ichinaga with their students.

ing and punctuation.

Instead, they stress a phonetic approach to reading—how to sound out words—first.

But they are not rigid when it comes to curriculum. Cox, for example, is allowed to use children's literature instead of textbooks for her third-graders.

Both principals emphasize reading, calling it the key to every other future academic success.

Low-income children, Thompson said, are "weak in vocabulary and in reading comprehension when they come to us. So, that's where we focus."

"I teach first grade," said Kelso's Shelly Chaplin. "I have to teach them to read there and if they don't learn that, they're going to have trouble all their lives. Push, push, push. We push the kids, but we make it fun to learn."

On a recent morning, Chaplin and her students were doing a lesson on middle sounds, vowels that appear in the middle of words: *snail, night, mole*. After sounding

the letters out loud as a group, the youngsters would figure out a word's identity and write it in their notebooks.

"They kind of think this is a game but it's work," Chaplin said.

Thompson's school is so focused that during the first two hours of every day all 700 children do the same thing—read and write.

"You have to do that in prime time," Thompson said, explaining that children are most alert then.

Excellence is so important at every level, Thompson's teachers said, that for two years they went without a permanent janitor until she found the perfect person, someone who keeps the campus spotless.

The daughter of a school teacher and a school superintendent, Thompson graduated from the University of Chicago when its students did not declare majors. She went on to earn teaching, school psychology and special education credentials in Arizona and California.

At 64, she is gray-haired and no-nonsense, a woman of intellect and quiet warmth who cares about results, not recognition.

"I'm not the splash type. . . . I don't do PR," she said when asked why her success has not been more widely touted.

Ichinaga, 61, was born on a Hawaiian sugar plantation to Japanese laborers. She is a slight, energetic woman, passionate and outspoken.

"So many people in education have so many things in mind, they don't know how to focus and they don't prioritize," she said.

After graduating from the University of Hawaii with a degree in secondary education, she taught school and later earned a master's degree in education psychology at UCLA before becoming a school psychologist.

"I was not a good teacher, too bossy," she said, stooping to pick up a stray orange peel on an otherwise immaculate campus.

"I was a miserable teacher for the first five years. I thought kids learned by doing."

Now she knows better, she said. A self-described behavioral thinker, she said there are certain tasks children must learn in order to make their way successfully in the world.

"We teach our kids how to read from day one, in kindergarten, because we think teaching the kids to become literate is our primary

objective," she said.

Willa Snorton, director of special projects for the Inglewood district, calls both principals "very focused, almost workaholic. They believe that children can learn, that they can excel."

What is more, Snorton said, they hire teachers who think as they do.

Lynnette Souder, a third-grade Kelso teacher who has worked for both Ichinaga and Thompson, said: "They know a good teacher when they see one."

"They're really sound in how to reach the children," Souder said. "They're willing to get rid of less effective teachers and they're willing to get in there and help the teachers who are not doing a good job."

Last year, Chaplin and two other Kelso teachers took jobs at Los Angeles schools because they could earn \$5,000 more a year. They are back at Kelso now, they said, because they missed Thompson's leadership. Teacher Jennifer Heath said what she remembers most about her Los Angeles principal is the reprimand she got for not using the requisite, district-approved colors on her bulletin board.

Roger L. Rasmussen, director of the Los Angeles Unified department that conducted the school study, said some common traits at Kelso and Bennett-Kew can be duplicated elsewhere.

Thompson and Ichinaga each consider themselves the "principal" teacher at their schools. They closely monitor teacher and student performance, and they encourage teachers to watch and learn from one another, rather than leave their classrooms to attend district-sponsored workshops.

Both principals are also devoted to making it possible for teachers to put all of their energy into teaching. In Thompson's office, children walk back and forth through her work area from a classroom behind her office. The only other access to the classroom is through the teachers' work room, and she does not want them disturbed.

Cal State's Johnson said that the most important thing principals such as Thompson and Ichinaga do is set high expectations for teachers and students.

"There is a belief system in those schools about the capacity of the kids to learn," she said.