

# School offers students real-life lessons

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BERKELEY — Berkeley youngsters will head back to school Wednesday, but 168 of them will experience a first day like no other.

They represent the inaugural class of the City of Franklin micro-society, one of Berkeley's four new magnet schools. By the end of the year, they'll be running their own little society, electing leaders, passing laws, selling goods, paying taxes, owning businesses and earning paychecks.

## Everyday problems

The idea, said principal Barbara Penny-James, is to help kids see that the lessons they learn in school aren't plots by mean adults to torture young minds. They will use those lessons to solve everyday problems they'll encounter in the real world.

And most of all, those lessons can be fun.

"The old paradigm is not working for all kids," Penny-James said. "We have to try something different to get them interested in school, to help them see what's important. So many miss that connection. This is a different model to inspire them to come to school and do their best."

The Franklin School was closed in 1984, and has been used for the past few years as a revolving temporary campus for other Berkeley schools that were being systematically rebuilt or remodeled with Berkeley school bond funding.

Cragmont Elementary students inhabited the building last term,

and their furniture was moved out only this weekend, headed for a brand new campus in the Berkeley hills. Thousand Oaks Middle School students will continue to share the building on Virginia Street this year.

Franklin got minimal sprucing up by the district this summer. New classroom floors and lighting were installed. Last week, artist and art teacher Annette LaRue was busy designing and painting the first floor hallway to look like a row of shops on a main street.

There's a government building with its strong Grecian columns, a coffee shop with shuttered windows, perhaps a produce or ice cream store with a blue and white awning over one classroom door.

Penny-James, who spent the past 24 years as principal of LeConte Elementary, was rushing around last week trying to get everything in order before a Friday open house.

She worries that the flower garden needs watering, hopes the parents won't look at the upstairs hallway and focus on its unfinished and unpainted look.

"The older students upstairs will learn about architecture, and they'll design their own hallway facade," she explained.

As tired as she is, her enthusiasm bubbles through. She loved LeConte, but she was drawn to Franklin and the opportunity to make a difference for all kids.

"The idea just made so much sense to me, to get kids interested in school," she said.

Penny-James and many other Americans first heard about a

micro-society school years ago when Roger Mudd did a short piece for CBS national news about a school in Massachusetts. The school was developed from a micro-society model dreamed up by educator George Richmond in Brooklyn in 1968.

In an interview earlier at Berkeley this year, he described to reporters how he was driven to reach his students — 33 maniacs, he called them — none of whom wanted to be in school, much less learn to read, write or memorize multiplication tables.

## Novel approach

Richmond decided to let them set up their own society, with laws and money and businesses, to help them understand why they needed to read or write or add and subtract.

The idea was a hit. When one budding entrepreneur started selling supplies at exorbitant prices to the other kids, the class passed laws against it.

The student who excelled at math ended up being the banker. When some students didn't pay their loans, he hired another student to collect the debts.

"The other students lined up to see the banker in a straight line," Richmond recalled. "That was something I could never get them to do. I had created a new revolution of brain over brawn."

Because Franklin's program is new, most of the initial decisions about how the governmental struc-

Please see **Franklin**, LOCAL-3

## Franklin: Tepid response from teachers

Continued from LOCAL-1

ture will be set up were made over the summer by Penny-James, curriculum adviser Lourdes Lejano and the new teachers.

Students will spend the bulk of their day on regular lessons, which, whenever possible, will relate to a business or government theme. The last hour they'll spend on their jobs and running their society.

The first weeks of schools will focus on citizenship and community building. Penny-James hopes to get Attorney General Bill Lockyer to visit the school to administer the oath of good citizenship.

Next, to prepare for City of Franklin elections, the students will register to vote. The League of Women Voters will handle that part of it, and even bring in voting booths to the school.

"They'll have to learn how to vote intelligently for those people who will make good decisions for them," Penny-James said. "It's not a popularity contest."

The school is enlisting mentors from government and business to help coach the students or provide equipment and supplies. Local judges have signed on. So have elected officials and business people. But, they need more.

The students will also take field trips to stores and courthouses.

As excited as Penny-James is about the program, she struck out when it came to enlisting

her Berkeley colleagues. They didn't apply, and she counts no district transfers among the school's new teachers. Some told her, "I'll come over after you have it all set up."

Most of Franklin's new teachers have experience in the classroom as well as with other jobs. One was a TV producer, another a painting contractor and yet another an economist.

"I have an outstanding staff of people," Penny-James said. "They are multitalented, not just as teachers, but with worldly experience."

Parents were reluctant as well. Penny-James said the kindergarten orientation was packed, but she was brand new and she hadn't yet hired her staff.

The potential parents liked the idea of a micro-society magnet school, but the school campus was a mess, with Thousand Oaks still there and Cragmont moving out.

"When they walked through the school, the parents were discouraged," she said.

The district had hoped to have 220 students; 168 signed up. Still, Penny-James is convinced they'll have to turn students away next year, like they're doing at Columbus Science and Technology magnet school in South Berkeley this fall.

"I know it will work," Penny-James said. "I could see the whole thing before me, the hallway and the Main Street."