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Open Programs Opening Minds

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

Patches is a pleasant, mild-mannered calico cat who lives in Audre McGranahan's second and third grade classroom at the Mission Avenue School in Carmichael.

Her favorite nap spot is high atop the cabinetry. Sometimes she walks the ceiling rafters, faintly rattling the tag around her neck that says "Room 4."

When the din of small children gets too much for her, she takes her naps behind the drapes in the office of Mission's principal for 27 years, Joe McNett.

Progeny of Guinevere — the nearby Creekside School cat which gave birth in the attic of the family who took her home for the summer — Patches is central to the unusual curriculum of McGranahan's bright and busy classroom.

The students' weekly newsletter is called "Patches' Paw Prints."

When Patches herself gave birth, the event prompted a class unit on animal reproduction. There was fierce competition for her kittens.

When Patches was scheduled for a permanent birth control operation, the students went along for a guided tour of veterinary medicine.

The March 30 issue of "Patches' Paw Prints," a product of the Lizard Reading Group, tells about how "Dinosaurs are Dead; The Seashore's Ahead." Which is to say that Room 4 has finished its extensive study of dinosaurs and is taking a close look at sea life — before a long-awaited camping trip to Point Reyes with teacher and families next month.

Just as they immersed themselves in the study of dinosaurs, McGranahan's students will learn about sea life. Significantly, it is their choice.

The so-called "back to basics" movement has received a lot of press. "Fundamentals schools" and "basic schools" are common to the jargon of contemporary education. Neatly dressed and well-mannered children, minding their elders and learning their R's, populate the world of basics. Discipline rules.

All of which makes Pat Dorman and parents like her a little edgy. About the only thing she and the back-to-basics folks agree on is that parents are important to the schools. And in them.

Ten years ago, when her daughter Kimberly, now 15, was in kinder-



Bee Photo

PATCHES
... a study in calico

garten at Mission Avenue, Pat Dorman — a former San Juan Unified School District elementary teacher herself — quietly helped organize a band of parents who were dissatisfied with the brand of education their elementary-age children were receiving in the district.

"Parents were allowed to come into their children's classrooms for no more than 15 minutes," she recalls, "and then they were to sit quietly. Parents were treated as if they didn't belong to their kids. That was a really alien experience for me. I believe kids learn more if their parents are part of the learning experience.

"I know there are many parents who don't agree with that, who don't want their kids to talk out, speak their minds — parents who think field trips aren't necessary. When I first came here 10 years ago, field

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trip' was a bad word. Now, field trips are an integral part of the curriculum, as is parent participation."

With "six or seven" other parents, Dorman helped form the Alternative School Committee in the San Juan district in 1972. The parents went before the board with a suggestion for parent participation and the "open structured classrooms" that now abound at Mission Avenue School.

Lacking any broad-based support, the committee's suggestions were rejected by the Board of Education as too costly.

But the parents kept trying. By 1974, the small group had grown to 300 families. Again, the committee approached the board. Again, its suggestion was rejected as too costly.

Jack Cottongim, the district's administrator for elementary education, said the program has not proven to be too costly, probably because of the "high level of parent commitment."

Kymerly was in the fourth grade and Pat Dorman had been fighting for alternatives to traditional classroom education for five years when a modest proposal was implemented on a trial basis at Mission Avenue and Orangevale schools in 1976. By 1978, the success of the program — and its popularity with many parents — prompted the district to expand it at both schools.

"I think half of these kids would be in private schools if this option weren't available," Dorman said. "I know parents who have taken their kids out of private schools because of this program."

Subject to the "open enrollment" policies of the San Juan district, parents outside the Mission Avenue or Orangevale School attendance areas can elect to send their children there, space permitting. The two are the only elementary schools in the district which offer the program, although LeGettie School in Fair Oaks has a small program within its own attendance area.

Cottogim cautions parents that the open program is not for all students. "It requires a child who is self-motivated," he said.

Many teachers and parents were — and are — skeptical of the program, saddled as it is with all of the free-wheeling stereotypes of chaotic, undisciplined "open" classrooms.

A teacher in San Juan schools since 1966, McGranahan was one of the first teachers to use the open classroom at Mission Avenue, which is now almost entirely committed to the concept.

"I wasn't convinced it was going to work, and many parents had reservations," she recalls. "I didn't know much about open programs when I was asked to teach in one. We all grew together, and we were very excited by what we saw."

"People misconstrue open programs. They think we don't teach basic skills. We do, but in a different way."

With the help and direction of their



JOE MCNETT
... principal shares office



AUDRE MCGRANAHAN
... "I wasn't convinced"

rooms choose the general topics they want to study. Teachers, according to the district framework, are "facilitators" who design their curriculum — using basic textbooks, as well as a wide range of outside material — around topics that interest students.

"This probably puts more responsibility for the curriculum on the shoulders of the teacher, but by doing this we also expect more from the students," McGranahan said. "It's much more enriching for me as a teacher. I have a lot of freedom in this program, yet it is very child-centered."

As she talks, the 7- and 8- and 9-year-olds in her class come up with questions. She moves to their level, touches a shoulder or the top of a head, grasps a small hand, always speaking in a patient, even voice.

The questions, now about the sea-

sea anemone? Teacher, see my hermit crab!

Teacher interest and parent participation are keys to the success of the open classrooms. Small group sessions are held in each classroom, with parent volunteers — from Spanish teachers to doctors to engineers — offering all variety of expertise. Parents who work participate as they can, often correcting papers or supervising field trips.

One group of students may be rehearsing a play in one corner — or outdoors if the weather is good — while another reads and still another does math problems.

Ben Rose, 7, is a first-grader doing third-grade math, so he comes each day to McGranahan's classroom for the math. He is working on millions, and says with a broad smile that his carefully written 999,999 is one short.

Craig Nelson, 9, is doing a report on hermit crabs, which he will describe at length to all who will listen: "They crawl on you and when their enemies come they crawl in their shell and when they get too big they look around to get another home," Craig declares. "They eat plants — seaweed, maybe."

Craig also says he much prefers McGranahan's classroom to a previous one where the teacher was mean. "She would hit us with a ruler," he said. "It hurt."

Parents often mention their disaffection for stern — or hysterical — discipline as reason for moving their kids to Mission Avenue. One mother, who asked that her name not be used, said she took her sons out of another school "because they were about to go into the class of a teacher who stood on the desk and yelled at the kids."

Principal McNett, who in 27 years has seen all kinds of times at Mission Avenue, says discipline is a lot better since the school converted to open classrooms. "I rarely see a child for a discipline problem," he said. "The parents are so involved in the program that it's just not necessary."

Chris Dorman, who is 12 and in the sixth grade at Mission Avenue, grew up with the open concept. His mother is Pat, now editor of a monthly Capitol newsletter on children's issues and an active legislative advocate in behalf of children.

In Chris' combination fifth-sixth grade class, taught by Nancy Sinnwell, the students have chosen to study the Middle Ages — complete with medieval literature, plays and castles made of cardboard and newsprint. In spelling and writing, they are learning calligraphy.

"If you're not interested, you won't learn," says Chris, studious and dark-eyed and nearly as tall as his mother, who sometimes wishes he weren't so serious all the time.

"Learning," says Chris, "should be fun."

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Bee photos by Harlin Smith

Patches works in garden with, from left, Michelle Barbaro, Jonathan Mill and Timothy Wolfe.