

On Both Sides of the Equation

By Jacqueline Widmar Stewart

At the Stanford New School in East Palo Alto where Nicki Smith serves as principal, she regularly visits each classroom and reads to the students. At the end of the session she leaves the book she has just read for their classroom library. The books were purchased with a grant from the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation or EPAK, the nonprofit corporation that Nicki helped to found in 1993.

Nicki was employed as a reading specialist in the Ravenswood District when she helped found EPAK. “I love kids,” Nicki explains. “After teaching for a while, I went on to become a principal so that I could support the learning and success of all the children in a school.” Now that she heads up her own school, she relies heavily on her past experience as both teacher and administrator.

Nicki became principal of Stanford University’s new charter elementary school in the Ravenswood School District seven months before it opened in August of 2006. At that time no site had been chosen for the school; there were no students or staff. From staff to kids, fixtures to furniture, she pulled together the elements to create a learning environment for the first-time classes.

Now in twelve classrooms new teachers work with seasoned teachers and coaches for training that is grounded in reality. Three of the classes meet in borrowed classrooms at McNair; nine others are in portables. Stanford School of Education’s STEP program - Stanford Teacher Education Program - provides a number of teachers for the school, both as teaching staff and student teachers.

For help with materials, Nicki knew right where to look. “EPAK is an awesome organization which makes possible opportunities for kids they wouldn’t otherwise have. It funds many teacher projects and activities in the Ravenswood district and funded the library in the permanent McNair Middle School building behind us. For our charter EPAK has been amazing, as it provided support for us even as we began. They gave us \$10,000 to supply our book room with many books at different levels, in support of our reading and literacy program. That gift made a huge difference in the quality of our program, because when you first start out you don’t have anything.

How has Nicki prepared to step into such a challenging role? Three graduate degrees and vast on-the-ground experience serve her well. After completing a Master of Arts degree at Harvard, Nicki taught in a Massachusetts elementary school and then returned to Harvard for a doctorate in Reading and Human Development. In Madison, Wisconsin, while in a university level teaching position, she ran for and won a post on Madison’s school board.

Nicki first taught in the Ravenswood School District in 1987, working as a reading specialist at Costano and then at Brentwood. In 1991 she taught first grade at Willow Oaks with a class of 29 children. Only seven spoke English and she didn’t speak Spanish. “We did a lot of singing in those days.” While at Brentwood, she began working on a

Master of Arts degree in Stanford University's Prospective Principal Program, a prerequisite for becoming a principal in California. Just as she finished the program in 1993, her husband Mike was called into service as President Clinton's Under Secretary of Education. For the following seven years in Washington, Nicki worked as school principal in Arlington, Virginia.

As she explains, "For me, the bottom line is always the kids. My job is to make sure they receive the best education we can give them. And for that, the most important person is the teacher. Supporting teachers and giving them what they need to do the job well makes a huge difference in terms of how teachers feel and their work with their children. EPAK creates a nice local support feeling as it also makes a difference. Teachers sense that there are people in EPA and surrounding communities who care and want to help. EPAK board members come to the schools and personally greet the staff and deliver the checks. There's a good community feeling as EPAK holds small fundraisers in local places that involve teachers and communities. "

Structured to respect teachers' time and expertise, EPAK's grant applications encourage collaborative efforts. Teachers share books, field trips and projects made possible by EPAK grants; the impact of one teacher's grant spreads beyond the teacher and single class. "When I was on the EPAK board and the giving side, I believed we were doing a good thing. Now as an administrator with children on the receiving side, I see the benefits daily. I know what a difference these grants can make. Having been on both sides, now theory and practice are one."