

New schools welcome students

County opens two new campuses for more than 500 students

By ROBERT SALONGA
The Salinas Californian

When children file into Monterey County classrooms this fall, two schools will welcome their first students ever.

The new Jack Francioni Elementary School in Soledad and Marina High School in Marina will open their campuses to a combined 500 students. Both schools have been long sought by their communities.

The \$10.2 million Francioni school, which held grand opening ceremonies Aug. 5, has an inaugural enrollment of 376 students from kindergarten through sixth grade, though administrators are quick to point out the school can hold more than 500.

"We're trying to stay ahead of the curve," said Deneen Newman, director of curriculum and instruction for the Soledad Unified School District. "As new houses get built, the school becomes larger."

Such foresight will likely prove valuable for both the school and district, with U.S. Census figures indicating a population surge in Soledad from 7,146 residents to 27,210 since 1990.

Nearly 80 percent of that growth has occurred in the past five years.

"Instead of being highly impacted, we have what we need to grow," Newman said.

Teachers will develop a magnet theme — or specialized area of study exclusive to the school — under the leadership of Principal Jeanne Hernandez-Tutop. The school's gold and green colors will highlight campus events, where students will be known as the Lions.

Go Mariners!

About 40 miles northeast, the former grounds of Central Coast Continuation High School will be reborn as Marina High School, welcoming a freshman and sophomore enrollment of about 150 students.



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Marina High School freshmen head to second period class Monday morning at the newly-opened local high school.

DETAILS

■ **JACK FRANCONI ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:** 779 Orchard Lane, Soledad. 678-6340. Grades K-6.

■ **MARINA HIGH SCHOOL:** 2995 Rendova Road, Marina. 583-2060. Grades 9-12.

The Monterey Peninsula Unified School District spent about \$1.5 million to retrofit and renovate the Fort Ord campus this summer to prepare for its Aug. 7 opening.

The Marina High Mariners will sport blue and gold, colors chosen to mirror those of

the University of California system and highlight the new school's emphasis on college preparatory classes.

As is customary with most new high schools, the school will expand by successive grade levels for the next two years.

Inaugural Principal Don Livermore, a 36-year veteran of the district, said the school will have between 500 and 600 students by the time Marina High accommodates 12th-graders.

Community members have clamored for a high school in Marina for decades.

It came close to getting its

wish in the early 1990s, but then Fort Ord closed in 1994, resulting in a population decline that made the area less viable for a high school.

The community has invested heavily in fundraising and volunteering for the school since its approval by the MPUSD trustees in February, Livermore said.

College partnerships sought

Enrollment in the school is voluntary, with priority given to students living in Marina. Before the school's opening, most public school students in the area attended Seaside High School.

Livermore said enrollment quickly exceeded initial projections of 100 students. Diversity is a key feature of the new group.

"Every ethnicity you can imagine is here," said Livermore, the school's lone administrator, overseeing about a dozen faculty and staff members.

At some point in the near future, he said, he wants the school to apply for international baccalaureate status, which would allow it to offer high-level courses eligible for college credit, similar to advanced placement classes.

He also hopes to establish

academic partnerships with California State University, Monterey Bay, and Santa Clara University.

Meanwhile, construction will continue past opening day on projects including the new school's science wing. School leaders also continue to wrestle with details such as how, exactly, the Mariner mascot will look.

"There's a lot of excitement that we get to start something brand new," Livermore said. "There's no set anything."

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Future of exit exam in question

Judges have until Oct. 23 to decide if it should stay a requirement

By ROBERT SALONGA
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Although this year's graduating class had to pass the California High School Exit Exam before collecting a diploma, the future of the controversial test is uncertain.

The two-part test in English and math is in limbo now that a January lawsuit has made it to the state Court of Appeal, which heard arguments on the validity of the exam in late July.

Judges have until Oct. 23 to decide whether it should remain a requirement for a California high school diploma.

About 40,000 seniors in the Class of 2006 statewide have yet to pass the exam and weren't allowed to graduate. The state Department of Education hasn't yet determined how many students in the Class of 2007 must still pass the test, which is administered beginning in 10th grade.

The confusion from the litigation — which resulted in the exam's suspension and later reinstatement — has made many students across the state uncertain how seriously to take the exam.

"They shouldn't be changing their minds all the time," said Victoria Santos, 17, an

BACKGROUND

The state Court of Appeal is the third court to hear arguments about the validity of the California High School Exit Exam as a graduation requirement. An Alameda County Superior Court judge first ruled May 12 to suspend the exam, allowing students who didn't pass to graduate. The state Department of Education immediately appealed to the state Supreme Court, where two weeks later, the exam was reinstated and the case sent to the appeals court.

incoming senior at Gonzales High School.

Lawsuit: Test unfair

School administrators in Monterey County told students all year the test is a make-or-buy requirement for graduation.

But Valenzuela v. O'Connell — filed against the state on behalf of 10 students who say the test does not fairly accommodate English learners and students in low-income districts — has muddied that message.

Clarity is nowhere in sight, said Goodwin Liu, an assistant law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and an expert in education policy.

Liu said whichever party prevails in the Court of Appeal, the other side will likely take it to the California Supreme Court or pursue some other legal avenue. "It means there could be legal uncertainty that persists through the next school year," Liu said.

That uncertainty began May 12, when Judge Robert Freedman of the Alameda County Superior Court suspended the exam as a graduation requirement.

Until the state can offer equitable preparation to all students for the test, Freedman wrote, it should not prevent anyone from receiving a diploma for failing to achieve its standards.

'Not a slam-dunk'

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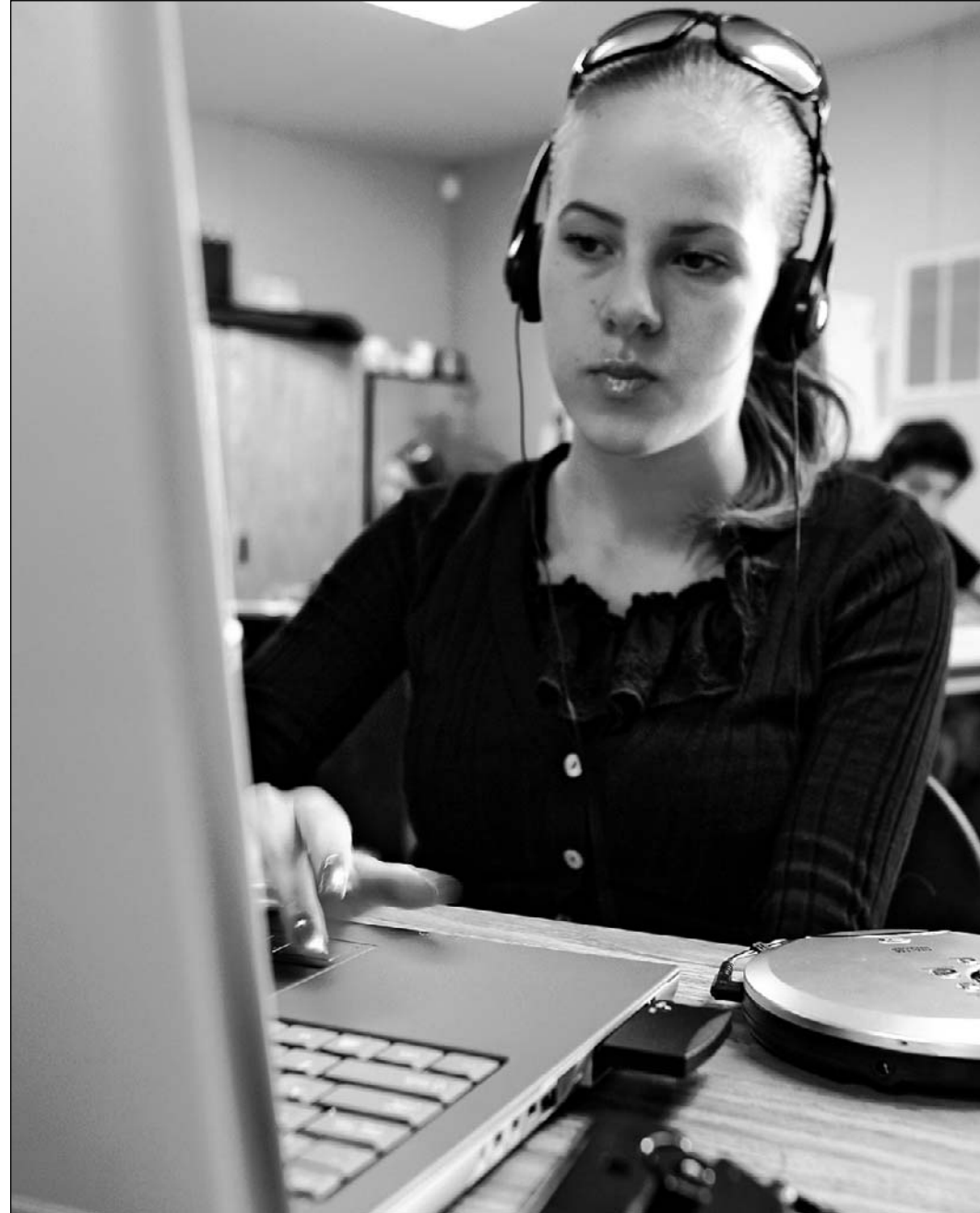
Liu warned that the state Supreme Court's action in May does not predict how it may act if the case returns to it.

"All they were saying is that the legal issue is sufficiently messy," he said. "It's not a slam-dunk for either side."

Meanwhile, teachers prepare students on the presumption that the test — which requires mastery of eighth-grade math and tenth-grade English skills — will remain in play.

Many Salinas-area schools offer remediation courses for students who have yet to pass the exam. Students typically have six attempts at the exam between their sophomore and senior years.

Agustina Garcia, the exit exam administrator for Gonzales High School, said the eight members of the Class



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Lizz Martin, 18, of Chualar Canyon, along with others, works on a computer as she studies for the High School Exit Exam at Gonzales High School in July.