

## **Supplying opportunity Program provides pencils, paper and more to Pajaro Valley pupils**

by Katherine Morris

About 6,300 students in Santa Cruz County qualified for homeless assistance programs last year. Roughly 14,955—or 40 percent – of all students in the county were eligible for the free or reduced lunch service.

When money is tight, even the most basic school supplies like pens and pencils are impossible for some families to buy.

For the last 15 years, the Write-Start Backpack Project has been trying to make sure all students start off the school year with the supplies they need.

The program provides brand-new backpacks filled to the brim with school supplies for homeless and low-income students.

"The main thing is that we want all students to feel the same—feel good—when they start school," said Karen Lemon, community resource coordinator for the Students in Transition program at the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, which sponsors the project. "If a family is struggling financially, it often interferes with the education of a child. That's what we're trying to minimize here."

Since its inception in 1989, the project has grown leaps and bounds.

"Our first year, we gave out about 50 backpacks and since then, we've given more than 7,050," Lemon said.

That success depends entirely on donations from local businesses and community members. This week, Lemon kicked off a school supply collection drive.

"Our first priority are students who fall under the category of homeless," Lemon said. "That could be those who are living in cards, motels or hotels, in shelters or in substandard, overcrowded living conditions because of economic hardship. We also provide backpacks to low-income students through places like the Salvation Army, the Lark Center, Healthy Families, migrant families programs or to the individual school sites themselves."

The Students in Transition program is currently seeking:

- New backpacks in dark, solid colors (no red or royal blue)—medium to large sizes.
- School supplies such as two-inch ring binders, binder paper, colored pencils, spiral notebooks, pencils, pens, rulers, 16-pack crayons, calculators, etc.
- Reference books like paperback dictionaries.
- Gift certificates for shoes or clothing (the project does not accept used clothing donations).
- Santa Cruz Metro bus passes.
- Monetary donations.

"The backpacks don't have to be Jansport or some other designer brand—as long as they've got sturdy zippers we'd love to have them," Lemon said.

In addition to money and supplies, Lemon said she's also in need of volunteers to help stuff backpacks with supplies for distribution over the next couple weeks.

"In years past, we've had tremendous support from the community with this project," Lemon said. "Last year, we had a woman who brought in five huge carts of

