

S.F. Schools Are Better Than Reported — Go See

By *Sandra Halladey*

I AM GRATEFUL that our 4½-year-old daughter cannot read *The Chronicle* — yet. If she could and if she had followed reports on San Francisco public schools, what on earth would she think about where we are sending her to school next year?

Yes, we are sending her to a public school — and not one of the highly sought after alternative ones — just a regular public school that we can walk to.

We are thankful that at Alvarado Elementary School in the Castro district she will learn from a committed and skilled group of teachers who are under the leadership of a visionary and bold principal. There she will be exposed to a well-rounded curriculum while enrolled in a full-day kindergarten rich with literacy and arts programs. She will go to a school in her own neighborhood and have friends from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities.

Of course, if our daughter could read she might be concerned as to why her parents are sending her to one of our city's "beleaguered" public schools, which some of our elected officials claim are under reckless management.

Frankly, if I based my decision solely on reports, I too would be worried about my daughter's future. Instead, I visited the schools and got my information first-hand.

What I saw was impressive: a place where all children are made to feel at home, and most importantly, where they are engaged in and enjoy learning.

I have been meeting with other parents who are at the same crossroads — trying to decide whether to send their children to public or private schools. I met parents from Cole Valley who are extremely happy with Grattan Elementary School, which posted the highest increase in math and second-highest increase in reading test scores last year of any elementary school in the district. These parents had looked at as many as 20 schools, public and private, and chose Grattan.

Other parents I met chose Fairmount Elementary School, tucked away near San Jose Avenue and 30th Street. They praised the leadership of its principal who came from the popular alternative school, Buena Vista. Many families vying for one of the few openings at Buena Vista's Spanish immersion program probably don't even know that Fairmount also has a well-regarded Spanish program.

In Bernal Heights, I met a parent of a 3-year-old who is so excited about her neighborhood school, Paul Revere Elementary School, that she is already organizing meetings to encourage her neighbors to get behind the school. Even Mayor Willie Brown was so impressed when he attended an event there on March 17 that

he commented, "Is this really a public school?" (He must have expected the worst.) Paul Revere, considered a leader in the school reform movement in the Bay Area, places a strong emphasis on reading and has a state-of-the-art library.

While suburban and private schools locally and nationally regularly contend with hate crimes and violence on their campuses, such incidents are rare in San Francisco schools. Why? Because our young people learn about tolerance and respect for diversity from an early age.

What other urban school district can claim math and reading scores above the national average for the third year in a row? Students in San Francisco public schools had class-size reduction before the rest of the state.

As a parent of two soon-to-be students in the San Francisco Unified School District, I say we need to shift our focus back to the classroom and away from reports on the district superintendent and the politics of education. We need to stop scaring people away from the public schools and, instead, support efforts to improve them.

Visit our city's public schools. You'll be glad you did.

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