

SF/AME

SAN FRANCISCO ADVOCATES FOR MULTILINGUAL EXCELLENCE ADVOCATING, PROMOTING, AND SUPPORTING MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION AT SFUSD

SF/AME Executive Board

August 1, 2008

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Parent
Spanish Immersion Program

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Dear Superintendent Garcia and the SFUSD Board of Education,

Due to the immediacy of this issue, we, the Board of SF/AME, are writing to you without having vetted our letter before all of our members. Thus, we take full responsibility for its content.

We feel the enrollment issues currently facing the district, in regard to Flynn and Alvarado, are an infuriating comment on the district's archaic enrollment process, and lack of transparency and involvement with the parent community. Immersion schools (Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Korean) have chronically been unbalanced with respect to the 50/50 ratio the district itself deems appropriate. The Educational Placement Center has repeatedly made mistakes over the years, contributing to this problem. When their mistake was first discovered in March, instead of involving all stakeholders directly, the district first appeared to pressure the immersion program schools to simply swallow the situation, as they have done for years and years in the past. This year, however, things unfolded differently. For the first time, Spanish-speaking families who had applied for immersion, united and said "we're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore," forcing the district to change their placement after assignment letters had gone out. So how did the district try to correct this huge error? They held closed session meetings without speaking to the affected families, to PPS (a highly respected parent advocacy group highly involved in SFUSD), or to SF/AME (a language and immersion advocacy group). Finally, in the end, none of the stakeholders involved were offered the opportunity to give input into the decision-making process. And at the eleventh hour (late July), English-speaking children with official acceptance letters from the district were bumped from the schools they'd requested with little preparation time, and much subsequent distress.

Outlined below, to the best of our understanding, are the next steps followed by the district as well as our reaction to them:

1) On Tuesday, July 29, a meeting was held with the Superintendent, the 23 English-speaking families who were affected, numerous Spanish-speaking families whose children were affected by the original error, and parents whose children remained on immersion waitlists. Also in attendance were representatives from PPS and SF/AME. District representatives said they have had direct contact with all but 4 families out of the 23 directly affected, have left phone messages for the rest, and sent letters. The purpose of this meeting from the district's perspective seemed to be to present the community with the only options they see as worthy. Conversely, parents and community groups believed that this meeting should have been a forum to be able to offer input and share what they feel is important to their families. The meeting was often contentious and upsetting for many in attendance. District representatives

began by presenting the option of Daniel Webster as a new immersion program in a kind of “sell job,” frustrating families who were rejecting this as an immediate solution, and advocacy groups who were protesting the entire process of decision-making. Superintendent Garcia finally stepped in and began answering actual questions and responding to concerns, but from our perspective, this was clearly too little too late. At this juncture, despite efforts on the part of SF/AME to play a role in mediating the conflict and addressing issues in a way that may be more palatable to the families concerned, it appears that the district remains determined to follow the course they outlined at this meeting.

- 2) Options for the 23 English-speaking families are: 1- Take a spot in a brand new Spanish Immersion program at Daniel Webster with no planning year, 2- Take any currently open spots at their school’s General Ed program, or at another school (all immersion programs are full), or 3- Get waitlisted elsewhere, and displace previously waitlisted families. The option of choosing to have their children be the first group of incoming immersion students at Daniel Webster is greatly unsettling. They realize that Webster only has 3 weeks available for planning, instead of a whole year as originally intended. The directive to the 23 families is to submit a list of 10 schools by Wednesday, August 6, and then they will be contacted by Friday, August 8, informing them of the school to which their child is assigned. It is our opinion that if *all* affected parents and parent groups such as SF/AME and PPS has been included earlier on, we could have helped the district come up with other options (just one possible example being to equally distribute the 23 English-speaking children among *all* immersion schools with added support at each site). Our main complaint is the lack of inclusion of parents and community members in this problem-solving process. If they had been included, they may still not be completely satisfied with the final solution chosen, but at least they might have been more forgiving.
- 3) Spanish-speaking families who requested immersion at Flynn or Alvarado as their first choice, but were assigned to General Ed (at any school), are being contacted to see if they are willing to transfer, at this late date, to the program they had originally requested. EPC has not contacted all of them yet. At this time, it appears there are no plans to contact Spanish-speaking families whose children were placed in bilingual programs. By August 8, the district will know if they are able to go forward with opening Daniel Webster’s Spanish Immersion class this year. It is dependent upon if there are enough applicants from the group of 23 parents. After that, families of Spanish-speaking children currently slated to enter Kindergarten in Webster’s bilingual program, will be informed that the program their child has enrolled in will now be immersion. If they do not like this placement, these families will then be put into a similar situation to the 23 families, and be forced either to have their child in a program they did not choose, or change to a different program providing there is space available. To say this has a snowball effect, is putting it mildly.

The SF/AME Board’s opinion is that the district should have immediately contacted the 23 Spanish-speaking families that were turned away from Flynn and Alvarado, to verify if they were still interested in those spots. Furthermore, for the district to knowingly exclude Spanish-speaking families who had requested immersion but were placed in bilingual programs, does not allow Spanish-speaking parents the same options as the English-speaking parents. The district could also have considered trading students placed in other immersion programs, such as Marshall, that have the opposite problem of being over-enrolled with Spanish-speakers. That could have improved the ratio at those schools, *and* those schools may have been more attractive options to the 23 English-speaking families, since the programs are more established and may be geographically closer than Potrero Hill.

By unexpectedly shifting Webster’s incoming Kindergarteners from bilingual to immersion, EPC and the district demonstrate a shocking obliviousness to the wants and needs of those Spanish-speaking families. With no time to educate and counsel those families, the district is bound to run into some resistance and anger.

Also, we've heard from many Spanish-speaking parents over the years, that some counselors at EPC have told them that their children do not belong in immersion programs. If the district doesn't consistently offer these Spanish-speaking children equitable options (denied immersion because they were counseled away from them), the likelihood of subsequent lawsuits will guarantee Tony Smith a job in Social Justice for quite some time.

- 4) Finally, of the 23 affected families, numerous parents at the meeting Tuesday night stated their uneasiness with being given waitlist priority, and taking those spots away from children previously on the list. That situation would adversely affect a whole additional group of families. While parents have been in contact with EPC and the Superintendent, it is as yet unclear whether wait pool draws and placements are being extended, given this huge last-minute shuffling. Many folks waitlisted for Buena Vista, Flynn, or other schools, may not even know about the new immersion class being opened at Webster. If spots are still open at Webster after "The Flynnarado 23" get placed, it would be tragic not to fill the class with willing and eager students. Possibly, the district may also have trouble reaching and placing all the Spanish-dominant children before the 10-day count, as these families have been misdirected and missed by the system in past years. While late waitlist placements may cause additional work or perceived inconvenience in welcoming a new child to class in late September, October, or even January, the opportunity for 6 years of (K-5) immersion education is simply TOO wonderful to short-change a child for these reasons.

Sadly, the way the district has responded to this crisis at all levels, has created the impression that they know what's best for families without any input. After having spent many hours personally serving on committees, writing recommendations, and hearing over and over again how our input is valued and welcomed, we are left once again feeling excluded and wondering: is the desire for participation and transparency only lip service? Needless to say, we are concerned that the district has opened itself up to serious action from the families involved (and perhaps the folks hoping for spots on the waitlist as well), with significant grounds for a lawsuit. We all know that no one can afford this, as valuable resources and energy will be taken away from the primary goals of improving the education provided to all our children — goals that we and the teachers at the schools have all adhered to. Unfortunately, from this point forward, absent a serious and concerted effort from the very top, to call for a discussion and to gather input from all involved, we cannot prevent this from happening. Without swift action, the district will use up all good faith that the public has developed, good faith that we have worked terribly hard to foster.

As we have said earlier, a meeting of all involved should be held as soon as possible. We expect a response from you regarding when and where a meeting will take place. Please contact us by e-mail at maria.e.aldaz@ceridain.com, slphays@gmail.com and tammy.radmer@gmail.com, and (should you choose) to our community at large by posting to the SF/AME list serve at: SF_AME@yahoogroups.com. If we do not hear from you soon, we will consider notifying the Press of this situation.

Respectfully,

Maria Eugenia Aldaz, Chair
Sally Payson Hays, Co-Secretary
Tammy Radmer, Co-Secretary
SF/AME