

Remarks of Kim Fondren 12/4/2014

My name is Kim Fondren. My son Owen and my daughter Alice attend Mount Vernon Community School. I have one child in the dual language program and one in the English language program. I am here today to talk about proposals to make MVCS a Dual Language only program.

There are attractive aspects to this proposal. Being multi-lingual has been shown to have benefits for children cognitively. Moreover, MVCS has a high English Language Learner population almost all of them are Spanish speakers. I would like to think having the school all one program would make things better for everyone. But I have concerns. I have doubts.

I am privileged to parent a child on the Autism Spectrum. He has been at Mount Vernon since he was 3 because he was in the early intervention program when it was there. So I've had a long time to see the school. In the 5 and ½ years I've been there, I've seen the school cycle through 4 principals. The current one has been there the longest and works harder than any I've seen. I want to support his vision for the school but I have concerns about inclusion, and I have concerns about community.

MVCS enjoys a great deal of support from the surrounding business community. We need it. Despite the affluence of many households in the immediate vicinity of the school, 60% of children there get free or reduced lunch. We have an active PTA, many of the most active are parents in the local Del Ray Community. We need them as the school has transitioned because of test scores, and more recently because of more and more classes being dual language only. I've noticed that fewer of my neighbors (I live a block from the school) send their school-age children to MVCS. They go to Barrett. They go to Maury. I wonder how much longer we'll have a strong PTA or a lot of business community support. I notice that a number of Del Ray families who are bi-lingual but not Spanish households have left or transitioned to the English Language Program. They did not get sufficient support for their needs.

As to inclusiveness, if a dual-language school has a talented and gifted program where the Gifted and Talented teachers don't speak Spanish, it sends a very decided message about who can be gifted, about who can be talented. Ironically, or maybe not so ironically, my son with a learning disability is in a more truly inclusive environment than my daughter. More African-American children are in his classrooms than in the Spanish language classrooms. He has about the same number of Spanish speaking students.

Mr. Balas has explained that he is trying to stop the "two schools" phenomenon at MVCS. I agree with his goal. Indeed, I heartily applaud it. But he is counting wrong. There are several schools. English Speaking students with learning or behavioral disabilities are told subtly in 10,000 ways they "can't" learn in Dual Language. The program certainly has not been set up to help them do so. I was told that Owen could not learn Spanish. I am left with the question of where that leaves the English Language Learner with the same disability. Often the only people with them and skills to advocate for those students are English speaking parents of students with IEPs. Not that we start out doing that. We start out advocating for our own children and end up helping them by accident. Still, accidental help is better than no help at all. I can be convinced that a completely Dual Language program can be made to work. I

just haven't been. Parents need to be told what changes to instruction will be undertaken fully and with supporting data. Disabled children's needs should be fully integrated into the school and into the instruction model. Gifted programs should be fully integrated into the larger school life. A dual language school should have dual language specialized teachers and dual language enrichment teachers.

The goal should be one school with strong community ties, and an inclusive student body. If dual language can be shown to do that implemented exclusively, then fine. But until my questions are addressed, I won't be convinced.