

'No Child Left Behind' Comes to Oakland - Classroom Teacher Interview

By Ken Epstein
www.oaklandrising.com
Feb. 15, 2005

Elizabeth Henry had not really expected a fair hearing from the state administrator at the recent Board of Education Meeting where Dr. Randolph Ward announced which schools were going to be closed and reopened as charters next year.

But Henry, a fourth-grade teacher at Whittier Elementary School, was not prepared for the ferocity of Dr. Ward's attack on her and other teachers for being greedy and unconcerned about educating students.

"It was a hate-filled speech," she said. "After I and others spoke, he said our words cemented his determination to close our schools – that we don't care about the students, only our paychecks.

"Where does he live; does he spend any time in these schools; does he know any of the teachers?" she asked. "He's making \$250,000 a year, and he tells me I'm here for a paycheck."

Ward told the teachers, she said, that he was giving the schools to some group called Education for Change, but refused to give any information about the what it is. "He says all he cares about is research and test scores, but he can't produce any research or test scores to say this plan is good for kids," she said.

According to the district, eight of the 13 schools slated for "reconstitution" will be given to Education for Change, about which little is known except that it is a "semi-independent" organization created by the district and run by Kevin Woolridge, who is an OUSD Executive Director in charge of elementary schools and a member of Dr. Ward's Executive Cabinet.

The administration's justification for closing Whittier and other schools rests almost exclusively on their low test scores. The administration says that all the failing schools are in "Year Four of Program Improvement" and under the federal No Child Left Behind Act must be closed or reorganized in year five.

But how can the schools be in year four of NCLB, Henry asked, when the law has been functioning that long? "When we ask the administration what they mean by year

four, they do not answer; when we ask them what they plan to do with our school, they do not answer; when parents ask the same questions, they do not answer.”

Whittier’s scores have made steady progress year after year, and last year reached the state’s annual goal for the Academic Performing Index, Henry said. But like most schools in California and particularly those with large numbers of English Learners, the school is failing to meet federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards.

Many teachers had started the year energized and optimistic but are now extremely demoralized.“ Henry said. “In the last few weeks, since all this stuff has happened, teachers are stressed, and it’s affecting the kids’ behavior.”

Henry totally disagreed with Ward’s negative assessment of Oakland teachers. “Most are doing a dedicated, incredible job with a lack of materials and lack of support from the district,” she said. You never get any one telling you are doing a good job; all we hear is negative, but we’re still here working 10 to 12 hours a day.”

Though accused of being concerned only about jobs and money, most teachers care about students, the community and public education, she said. “Of course, union rights are important – contracts and union rights create stable schools. But I’ve never met anyone who’s got into teaching for the money.”

Union rights may be especially important in a district, such as Oakland, where teachers fear retaliation if they speak out, or even use their best judgment to tailor curriculum to student needs, Henry said. “People are fearful of not having a job if they do things for kids; they have to sneak to do journal writing with the kids or sneak to read books other than Open Court (the required reading program).

“I was written up by the Open Court (observers) for doing community circle with my students - starting my class for 10 minutes every day with community circle.”

Henry has been in the district for seven years, working the whole time at Whittier School in East Oakland. Born and raised in San Francisco, she attended public schools and decided to follow in the footsteps of her mother, who was a public school teacher. After graduating from UC Santa Cruz, she entered a district internship program, earning her credential while she taught. She currently lives in Oakland.

When she first came to Whittier, she said, about 70 percent of the teachers were new and uncredentialed; the turnover rate was high. “For seven years, we’ve been building stability. Now, 90 percent of our teachers have credentials and have built relationships with the community,” she said.

“We have people who wanted to spend their teaching careers at the school, and now they are ready to leave Oakland and never come back.

“Ward is ripping it all apart,” she said. “All the most dedicated are going to leave, and we’ll be back to teachers’ with no connection to the community, back to a revolving door.”

Ward seems determined to replace tenured teachers with Teach for America interns, many of whom come from suburban and rural areas and do not have the slightest idea how to function in an urban environment, Henry said. They sign a two-year commitment, come to Oakland, are totally shocked, and by the time they figure how to teach, they leave.

“They aren’t bad people,” she said. “But Ward says these people are better than the people who are committed to the schools.”

Though Ward’s plans are tied to statewide and national efforts to undermine public education, Henry said, she is hopeful that people in Oakland can turn the tide.

“If resistance is going to happen anywhere, it will happen in Oakland,” she said. “Oakland is a community of resisters – people are watching what we do.

“We have an opportunity to stand up for public education.”

For more Oakland, California news, go to WWW.OAKLANDRISING.COM