

## Draft Comments for June 25, 2012

Good evening President Dice and members of the Board of Trustees,

My name is Brian Carver. I'm the parent of a child at Anna Yates Elementary. I'm here to speak tonight about an open letter to this Board drafted by a group of about a dozen concerned parents, residents, and other District stakeholders that was sent by regular mail to every address in Emeryville. I say, "about a dozen" because since we sent the letter during the last week of May, one signatory, Marcia Parham, has asked us to remove her name from the letter, and she has indicated to me that she never wished to sign. The organizers of the letter were told Ms. Parham wished to sign by the then-Anna Yates PTO President Lei Bass. We still do not fully understand what happened here, as there was extensive and repeated email communication about the letter sent to Ms. Parham prior to its mailing, and she only objected weeks later after the mailing was sent. But since the letter's mailing we have collected the names of others who wished to add their names and the number of signatories has now reached 73. I've prepared copies of the list of signatories for the Board. Some who signed the online copy of the letter also provided comments, which I encourage you to read online.

Drafting a letter regarding a complex issue that so many people could agree to sign is not easy, but that letter represents the consensus opinion of a large number of people and so it is worth taking a moment to make clear both what the letter says and does not say. The primary request in the letter is that we call on the Board of Trustees to adopt a new vision for our District that leaves the Elementary students in place at Anna Yates.

The letter does not object to the community-facing services that ECCL envisions and even specifically states that the District might still expend funds for a public library, recreation facilities, and space for other community services. The letter does not take a position on *where* those community facilities might be located. The emphasis is instead on keeping the educational functions of an elementary school at the Anna Yates site.

When it comes to that unifying point, of saving Anna Yates and preserving it as an elementary school, all the signatories are in agreement.

There are, however, varied reasons why different people think the elementary students should remain at the Anna Yates site, and I'd like to highlight several of these. From this point on, I am not necessarily speaking on behalf of all the signatories, because they each may have their own reasons for wanting to retain the elementary students at Anna Yates. Also, if in what follows I refer to "this Board" I recognize that we have a brand new Board member and so I will be referring to the majority of this Board that has been here longer.

Now I'll highlight some of the reasons people believe we should preserve Anna Yates as an elementary school. First, some are persuaded in part by an argument from history. As the letter mentions, there has been a school located on 41st Street at the current Anna Yates site since 1886, ten years before Emeryville even incorporated as a City. There are good reasons to place a school at that site. It is located in a neighborhood. It is near two main arterial streets, San Pablo and Adeline, but it is not *on* a main street. This provides a nice balance of convenience and seclusion. Some would contrast this with the Secondary School site on San Pablo, which by being on a major state highway presents greater safety concerns.

Others would argue that the recent multi-million dollar upgrades that the Anna Yates site received have done much to make it an inviting and attractive school. It has a small scale that is welcoming to new families. The smaller size is especially reassuring to parents of new kindergarteners. They get the sense that they could get to know everyone, that they would themselves be known by name by the staff, and that their child would be safe there. Some residents also simply believe it to be a waste of funds to have spent so much on upgrading the site so recently to consider not continuing to use it as a District school.

Others point out that both the Anna Yates and the Ralph Hawley sites have maintenance and upgrade needs of their own. Measure J's \$95 million in construction bonds maxes out Emeryville's bonding capacity and Emeryville's taxpayers will be paying these bonds off for the next 40 years. In a much shorter time frame than that, we should expect the Anna Yates and Ralph Hawley sites to need major maintenance and repairs. These are public properties and the Board is supposed to act as trustees of these properties on the public's behalf. If instead, this Board spends all of Emeryville's resources on a single site, it condemns us to watch our other two properties degrade until there will be no reasonable choice other than selling the properties off and the public will have lost two enormously valuable public spaces.

Others make a pragmatic argument, that even if everyone wanted to build the ECCL as envisioned by this Board, there is simply no fiscally sound means of doing it anymore. Last July we learned that Emeryville's assessed valuation declined by 6.62%, significantly decreasing the District's ability to issue the approved Measure J bonds. Just recently we learned that the State Department of Finance determined that Emeryville's Redevelopment Agency could not contribute the \$22 million that the ECCL project has always expected to have. These realities have shifted us from an envisioned \$120 million dollar project, to having near-term available funds of something closer to \$48.5 million. Yet, even in the face of these overwhelming blows, this project seems to march on, with just some tinkering around the edges, and no realistic assessment of the stark reality we now face. In the near term, there simply is only enough money for a high school and that is what is most needed, so that's what should be built and the elementary students should remain at Anna Yates.

The last argument for preserving Anna Yates I'd like to highlight tonight is the one that I believe is most important. I believe that every member of this Board wants what is best for the students in this District. I, and all the signatories of the open letter, also want what is best for the students in this District. We do not have different goals. We only have a disagreement about how best to achieve those goals.

I had a member of the Board tell me that this Board “is driven by the data.” That this Board wants what is best for the students and is going to pursue the path towards excellence, based on what the best “data” tells you is the way toward that goal. This was an extremely useful comment, as I think it allowed me to pinpoint a key reason why we have a disagreement about how to achieve what's best for this District's students: In this case, the data is not determinative.

I've listened closely to all the presentations in which any educational research was presented to suggest that a K-12 configuration could contribute to greater student achievement and I've read any such articles included in District or City/School agenda packets. At best, one research study was presented that supported the conclusion that transitions are a difficult time and that some students experience achievement drops after a transition. The data does not show that there are not many different solutions to that transitional dip, or whether its effect is anything more than temporary.

More importantly, there also exists contradictory data. Just one week ago, the New York Times presented a debate in which it addressed the issue of grade configuration. They asked a middle school teacher, two superintendents, an education non-profit director, and a professor of applied psychology about grade configuration and they got five different answers. If there were any consensus among these five, however, it was that grade configuration itself is not what matters for student achievement.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform has a policy statement, and I have copies for the Board, in which it covers the history of grade configuration efforts over the years and they explain, “Current research on grade configuration, however, is not definitive.” Instead they say, “what is most important for the education of young adolescent learners is what takes place inside each middle-grades school, not grade configuration per se.” We should not be surprised that it is *teachers* that teach students, not buildings.

A large 2010 study in California by EdSource and researchers at Stanford reached the same conclusion: “This study did not find a consistent or strong association between student outcomes on standards-based tests and school grade configuration or organizational models of teachers and instruction.”

Research is what I do, and so if the Board liked, I could spend another 45 minutes (at another time) running this point into the ground with citations to a dozen other research studies, but the point would be the same: the research simply does not show that any particular grade configuration, K-12 or otherwise, is, by itself, more likely to produce significant improvements in student achievement. Other factors are simply more important.

So, because I have gotten the impression that this Board believes that there is some unique benefit for student achievement to the K-12 configuration that distinguishes it from all other grade configurations, I want to make it as clear as possible, that the available educational research simply does not support such a claim. If any member of this Board was operating under this misapprehension, then what I am asking of you is that you free yourselves from that and open your minds to the full range of possibilities. If you do that, then several of the other arguments that I highlighted strongly suggest good reasons for keeping the elementary students at the Anna Yates site.

We would prefer that this not be the last opportunity to discuss these issues, but also feel the need to respond in advance to some misunderstandings of our motivations. First, we are not motivated by fear. While some have raised understandable safety concerns about a K-12 configuration on busy San Pablo Ave., I know that I, for one, would not even rate that among my top three concerns.

The only thing I am afraid of is the District making an irreversible mistake or series of mistakes. If, for whatever reason, parents dislike and do not choose a K-12 school for their children, then our already-small District that desperately needs *more* students to be financially stable, could enter into a vicious cycle of not having enough money to operate an excellent school, losing families as a result, and then receiving even less operational money based on the shrinking size of the District, starting the cycle again until we can no longer operate any schools. Additionally, stating in public documents that would be distributed at a state level that our District may soon have “surplus properties,” as our City Attorney recently thought prudent to do, is a sure-fire way to attract charter school operators who the District would have little discretion to turn down, and then such a school would use our own excellent facilities to siphon off our students, also creating the vicious cycle of lost state-funding just described. This Board should do everything in its power to guard against these possibilities, and the best way to do that is to keep the elementary students at Anna Yates.

The signatories of our open letter also are not necessarily opponents of Measure J. Many voted for the Measure and believe we should be building better facilities for our District and our community. Disagreement about the details of how Measure J money is spent was supposed to be anticipated by language in that Measure guaranteeing community engagement. Instead of true engagement, however,

many of us feel like we've instead been offered an advertising and public relations campaign for an already-decided upon course of action.

Some have accused us of raising this concern too late or that we should have been participating in this process more or sooner. For myself, and many of the signatories, this is just factually inaccurate. We've participated in numerous ways over several years and simply feel like these particular issues have never been adequately addressed.

Finally, one could object that it's simply too late in the planning process to change course or that it would be too expensive to do so. This objection would show a real ignorance of the recent months in this project where funding issues seem to cause the project to shift gears every few months. We've made bigger adjustments than this in the past and can do so again. Due to the class reunion occurring later this year, we aren't scheduled to begin demolition for many months, leaving plenty of time to seriously consider alternative approaches. Indeed, it might be possible to retain almost all of the existing design plans, and simply erase the new building intended to house the elementary students.

There are many more things we would like to say on this topic, but in short, We want what is best for all Emery Unified students. We believe keeping the elementary students at the Anna Yates site is the best way to achieve that. So, we propose that the Board adopt a policy to prefer that the Anna Yates site continue as an elementary school.

The resolution presented to you tonight assumes a negative answer to this request and seeks to create a task force on the future use of the Anna Yates site. You certainly should elicit community, parent, teacher, and staff input on such future plans, but it would not be productive to commission such a task force with the conclusion already written for them. A better task force would take seriously our proposal and treat it as a genuine option for consideration.

Thank you for your time. I'm glad to answer any questions.