



Oakland parents successfully push for school repairs

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By Amanda Montague

Mold, garbage, lack of soap,” Oakland parent Julie Harris says these were reasons “many parents reported that their children—mine included!—wouldn’t use bathrooms,” at Oakland’s Claremont School. “Parents were concerned primarily about filth, deferred maintenance. But there were also horror stories—a parent cleaning up an unused classroom found urine on a desk,” adds Harris, who was 2008 PTA President.

“A lot of things at the school didn’t work properly,” says Ron Kriss, whose son attends Claremont. “A floor hadn’t been mopped for eight months. It was affecting how children felt about going there.”

With support from the Education Equity Project (EEP), parents put pressure on the school district to get needed repairs at the school. Parents came together to:

Help out: When Kriss volunteered at the school, he says, “I’d spend 10 hours taking care of problems, tightening a screw, stopping a leak. I got tired of fixing things the district should be taking care of.”

Complain to the district: “The parent community complained to the district numerous times through phone calls and emails, about bathroom conditions and our shortage of custodians,” says Harris.

Draw on outside support: In April 2008, EEP’s Marc Tafolla Young contacted Harris as part of the organization’s outreach about the Williams complaint process. This process provides a way for parents and teachers to make sure districts enforce minimum standards for school facilities, teachers, and instructional materials. “I asked [Tafolla Young] to speak at a PTA meeting,” says Harris. “A 15-minute presentation turned in to an hour-long one because parents wanted to know all about it.”

Document problems: Parents did a walk-through of the school and took pictures of problems, along with Tafolla Young and Lynn Combs, a pro-bono attorney. Harris emailed teachers to find out about problems in their classrooms and “followed up in person after school if I didn’t hear back,” she adds.

Follow up: Parents filed Williams complaints with the district—and kept up the pressure. They met with district officials and school board members. “The district was interested in doing [the repairs] right,” says Kriss. “It didn’t end up being adversarial.”

But, Harris adds, “the school district said the work was finished when only about 60% was completed so we had to appeal.” Combs filed an appeal with the state, which requested evidence from the school that the work was complete. District officials did not respond to requests for comment.

“The parents really pushed it, they did all the work,” adds Oakland School Board Member Jody London.

Success!

The district has “done a good job repairing things,” says Kriss. “[Now] we’re not wasting volunteer resources. Instead of hanging a pencil sharpener, I can help a student learn math.”

For more info: Education Equity Project, a joint project between the Lawyers’ Committee on Civil Rights and the ACLU of Southern California, 415-543-9444, www.lccr.com/eep.shtml

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