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(author)

Charter School Backs Out Of Schoolhouse Fight

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□ **Santa Barbara Schools**—By backing off from its bid to occupy a Lower Eastside schoolhouse, the newly forming Santa Barbara Charter School this week made a lot of toddlers' families very happy. The schoolhouse, known as the Parma School, became the focus of a brief but racially tinged and acrimonious scuffle between two groups of parents. Owned by the Santa Barbara School District, which is funded to serve children in kindergarten through sixth grade, Parma School houses one of the city's three state-funded child-care centers, for low-income children between the ages of two-and-a-half and five. The Santa Barbara Charter School parents sought to use the site to start a small public elementary school, under terms of recent state legislation that encourages innovation.

Nearly all the parents from the Child Care Center are Latino; nearly all the Charter School parents are Anglo. And three weeks ago, when both groups showed up en masse at a meeting of the Santa Barbara School and High School Board, each side laying claim to the coveted schoolhouse, Charter School parents said they left with their ears ringing with words like "racist" and "bigot"—reportedly muttered by a few of the Latino parents while Anglo parents or board members were speaking. A few Charter School parents said they no longer wanted to locate the school in that neighborhood for fear their children would be "knifed."

This week, just before the board was scheduled to vote on who would get the schoolhouse, Charter School spokesperson Helen Pasternak announced that the animosity the schoolhouse had caused was "decidedly not worth the pain." She formally withdrew her school's request for the Parma site and instead substituted a request for a four-classroom "quad" at Goleta Valley Junior High School. Within seconds, the board unanimously approved the request.

Charter School parents had originally requested Goleta Valley Junior High, precisely because Parma was already occupied. But they had been talked into seeking Parma by board members urging them to diversify their student body by locating on the Lower Eastside. The Charter School took the board

members' reassurances and strong advice, then found themselves faced with a crowd of placard-bearing parents. They also found that some of the board members who were most adamant about the diversity issue had changed their minds, without warning, and were taking the Child Care Center parents' side.

Charter School didn't back off immediately. Many had grown fond of the Parma site and were willing to stand and fight; but in the end, they decided to negotiate. During the two weeks between the showdown and the forfeit announcement, the Charter School negotiating committee made sure they didn't walk away empty-handed. They got reassurances from each board member individually, as well as from district staff, that there would be no more objections to their locating at Goleta Valley Junior High and especially no more implications from board members that they were a "white flight" or racist school. They also got assurances that the district would build child-sized bathrooms at the Goleta Valley Junior High quadrangle.

For their part, parents from the Child Care Center were wary that the Charter School would try again next year to move into Parma School, or that board members would find some other reason to move them. Asked if there was a general sentiment that the Charter School parents had shown racism in requesting the site, child-care center teacher Ferroll Dickensen said, "Not at all. It wasn't racially motivated. It was just a site thing. The Charter School parents are concerned about their kids, just as these parents are. Maybe some good has come out of this demonstration because I think the word gets around that Latinos aren't as concerned about their children as other races."

Teacher Gloria Lopez said board members apparently hadn't anticipated resistance when they urged the schoolhouse upon the Charter School, without a dissenting voice among them. "Historically, they pick up and move us at a whim for the needs of K-12 [kindergarten through 12th grade]." Usually, there is no great resistance, but part of what makes Parma different is the charm of the schoolhouse itself. "Next time," said one parent, "they'll know they have a fight." (MS)