

ay, March 25, 2002

School closure opposed by Latino parents

CABRILLO HOME TO 'DUAL-LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM'

By **ALEX FRIEDRICH**
afriedrich@montereyherald.com

It was supposed to be a dry discussion of how to best house students. But it has churned up old talk of racial and cultural division.

When the Monterey Peninsula Unified school board voted last week to include Seaside's small, mostly Latino Cabrillo Elementary School in its list of four facilities to close, it upset its rapidly growing Latino constituency. It also prompted words normally reserved for 1960s Southern schools: segregation, discrimination, battle.

Tonight, trustees will consider a fifth closure to further reduce an estimated \$8 million deficit. But it's possible that they'll review their original choices.

The outcome will determine the fate of MPUSD's experiment in integrating a Spanish-speaking Latino population into the English-speaking world.

"It'll affect us all in this community," said 29-year-old Cabrillo parent Matilde Santos.

Cabrillo has been an anomaly in MPUSD ever since the run-down, 1940s-era facility on La Salle Avenue was reopened four years ago.

Its purpose was to house a new dual-language immersion program. The concept was intriguing: English-speaking

children would take classes in Spanish — ungraded — and Spanish-speaking kids would do the same in English. Upon graduation, every child would be bilingual.

It never quite worked out like that. Gradually, be it by design or just the shifting population, Cabrillo lost its English element.

These days, 94 percent of Cabrillo's 317 children are Latino. Most spend an hour a day learning English but take the rest of their courses in Spanish.

The idea is to let children, especially immigrants, build strong reading and writing skills in their native language before they try to tackle a foreign one. The amount of English instruction increases as they become more proficient. After a few years, they're ready to transition into an all-English program, usually in middle school.

A community unto itself

It's the emphasis on building Spanish skills over a long period that helps set Cabrillo apart, said Cabrillo Principal Jose Garcia. At other MPUSD schools, bilingual programs focus more on getting students quickly into English courses, said Kathryn Knauf, MPUSD's coordinator of

Inside

MPUSD not only district with budget woes **B1**

A primer on bilingual education in California **below**

Cabrillo

From page A1

categorical programs.

Another thing is its Spanish-language support programs for parents. It has helped make the school a hub of Seaside's Latino community.

The school sits in a working-class La Salle Avenue neighborhood whose modest houses and apartment complexes accommodate many of the Peninsula's cooks, housekeepers and hotel workers.

While they toil, Cabrillo plays a number of roles for their kids — teacher, nanny, counselor, cook.

When they return, the school's parent center turns to them with classes in English, better parenting and nutrition.

For immigrants arriving from Latin America, Cabrillo has become a gateway to the Peninsula, district officials say. Newcomers find the all-Spanish enclave comforting. Almost all of the school's teachers, staff and leadership — including Principal Garcia — speak Spanish or are Latino themselves.

For such people, the school quickly becomes a part of their family. Parents might bring home-cooked food to teachers during the day and invite them

to dinner at night. Instructors regularly visit the homes of their students to tutor them or chat with their parents.

It's something that has rarely happened at other schools where Cabrillo teacher Mercedes Awity has worked.

At most schools, "things were different," she said. "Teachers were teachers. Parents were parents. The school was the school."

Isolation vs. closeness

Much of the Cabrillo closeness is because its students live so close to the school, say parents and teachers such as Awity. More than 90 percent of the students live within a mile, and teachers say most of those live within a few blocks.

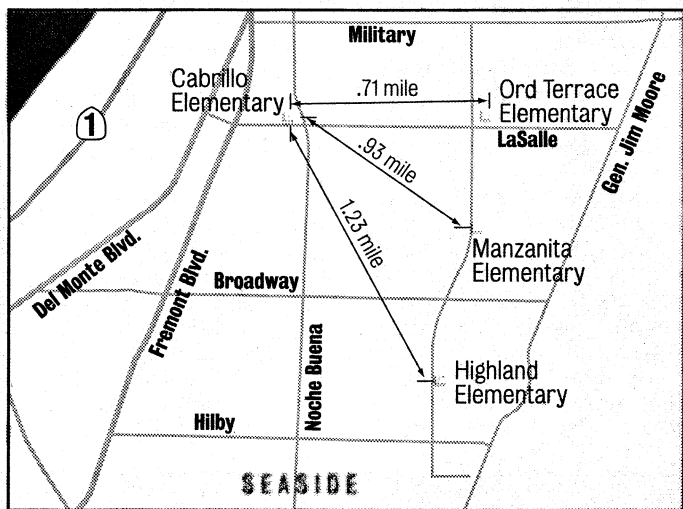
Two parents of students who live close by are Jaime and Olivia Rodriguez. Like many of their Cabrillo neighbors, they have often inflexible work schedules and no car.

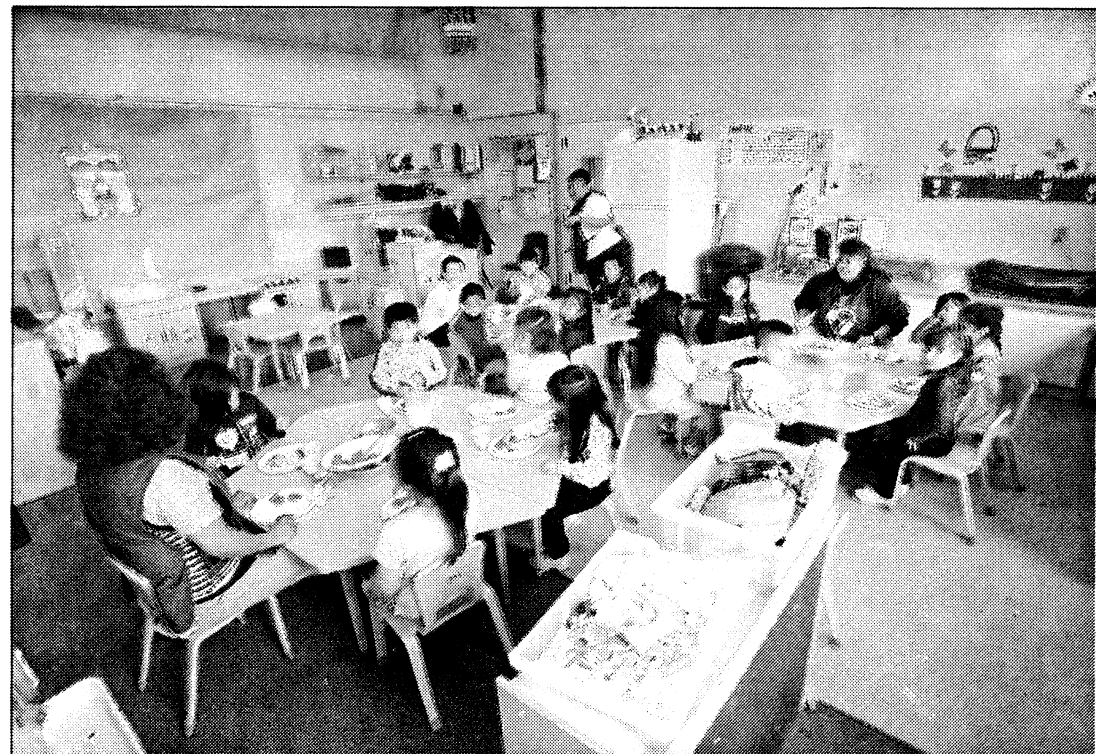
Olivia, 30, takes an hour to travel by bus and on foot to her housekeeping job at Hotel Pacific in Monterey. The trip for 32-year-old Jaime, who cooks at RG Burgers on Alvarado Street, isn't much shorter.

But from their cramped apartment on Playa Avenue, they can easily walk their three children a block to Cabrillo for preschool programs or classes.

A walk or a hike?

If MPUSD trustees close Cabrillo Elementary School, the trek for some of its students could be a stretch. One Cabrillo instructor says crossing busy Broadway Avenue on the way to Highland School could be risky for children — and the walk to Manzanita School a hassle for parents at night.





VERN FISHER/The Herald

Juan Cabrillo Elementary School in Seaside is on the list for MPUSD school closures. The Head Start program that caters to preschool-aged kids is in danger of closing.

That's all nice, MPUSD trustees say. But that doesn't change the fact that Cabrillo is one of MPUSD's smallest schools. It has only 317 students and a capacity of only 380, and so has higher per-student overhead costs. That spells doom in days of declining enrollment and dwindling revenue.

Size is what put the school in the board's cross hairs months ago. When Cabrillo parents and Latino leaders heard their school was in jeopardy, they carried signs and banners to crowded board meetings.

At that point, the decision became more than just an economic one. In a prepared statement to the board, Cabrillo parent Ludi Magno called the targeting of Cabrillo "discrimination."

"The fact that Juan Cabrillo is a school for Latinos does not mean we are insignificant," she told the board in Spanish. "You won't defeat us so easily. We'll do battle with the board of education."

Trustee Shanda LeBoeuf, who is black, was taken aback.

"To have parents bring (discrimination) up really offends me," she said. "It's not about us versus them."

Latinos claim Cabrillo is a special academic and cultural

center whose importance far outweighs its financial liability.

LeBoeuf has her doubts. She questioned the wisdom of bilingual education in an all-Spanish environment — an isolation she saw bordering on segregation.

"You can't live life in a bubble," she said. "I have to look at the big picture: What's the best way to educate our children?"

At the moment, it's unclear. The jury is still out on bilingual education; the results of numerous national studies are contradictory. Whether Cabrillo's special atmosphere has actually promoted educational success locally in its four years is also unclear.

The one test showing how many students are becoming proficient in English is in its first year, so it doesn't indicate progress. Cabrillo parents have also opted out of taking the English-language Stanford-9 achievement exam, the state's big annual standardized test.

That leaves the SABE achievement test in Spanish, whose 2001 results show solid gains for Cabrillo, district officials say. Its performance appears as good if not better than that of schools such as Del Rey Woods, Highland and Ord Terrace.

Preparation a factor

But that's Spanish. LeBoeuf is concerned about the children's ability to handle English when they move on to middle school.

"I get phone calls from middle-school teachers," she said. "They're telling me the (Cabrillo) children are not coming prepared."

It's tough to judge the accuracy of such anecdotal evidence, Knauf said. A fifth-grader graduating from Cabrillo after entering only the year before might perform worse than a child who went to the school all six years.

Regardless of academic performance, trustee Carlos Noriega said Latinos have every right to choose their school, especially if it's in the neighborhood.

But Presidio of Monterey board representative Ron Graddy disagreed. In an address to the board last week, he recalled an all-black high school in his Florida hometown in the 1960s. When it was closed to integrate the students into all-white schools, black parents were up in arms.

"These people didn't want it closed," said Graddy. "I think it was the same thing — a sense of community. I think that's important, but segregation — even

voluntary segregation — is wrong."

In the end, trustees insist, they looked at the bottom line when they voted. LeBoeuf, along with trustees Regena Lauterbach, Marjorie Troutman and Resa Foss, chose to close Cabrillo — against the votes of Dan Villa, Carlos Noriega and Rob Eggers.

Troutman has tried to calm parents by saying Cabrillo's services are available at other schools. Whether that's true is unclear. When children transfer to other schools, they'll take with them much of the per-pupil federal subsidies that made Cabrillo's services possible.

District officials don't deny that such money will probably be diluted over three schools. And they stop short of guaranteeing that mini-Cabrillos will pop up at other schools in the neighborhood.

But even Noriega said he "wouldn't lose any sleep" thinking they won't get the bilingual education they need.

Despite such assurances, activists such as Bill Melendez from the League of United Latin American Citizens are looking into an injunction against the closure. As a last resort, some parents want to start a Cabrillo-style charter school — though MPUSD special programs chief Bob Riefe said they're too late for this coming school year.

In the meantime, parents such as the Rodriguezes are nervous. They're not sure what they'd do with their children if Cabrillo closes. MPUSD generally buses students only if their school is farther than a mile from home.

The next-closest school, Ord Terrace, is almost three quarters of a mile away. Manzanita Elementary is more than nine-tenths of a mile away. And Highland Elementary is almost a mile and a quarter away.

Walking the kids to school — assuming they even go to the same school — and making it to work on time would be a logistical nightmare. And trudging to parent classes at night, parent Jaime Rodriguez said, "would be a lot more dangerous."

Herald staff writer Sylvia Moore contributed to this report.

Alex Friedrich can be reached at 648-1172.