

## **Testimony of Pepe Gonzalez**

**Vice Principal, Venetia Valley K-8 School**

**Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education**

**"Improving NCLB's Accountability System"**

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Thank you, Chairman Kildee, Congresswoman Woolsey, and Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify. I am Pepe Gonzalez, Vice Principal of Venetia Valley Elementary School in San Rafael.

### **I. School Background**

Venetia Valley, a K-8 School, embodies a diverse population with an enrollment of 609 students. Students attending Venetia Valley School come from three major communities within San Rafael: Los Ranchitos, Santa Venetia which are areas that are in the northeast corner of the city near the Marin County Civic Center. Students come with a variety of skills and from very diverse homes. The demographic break down of our 609 students is as follows: 60% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 6% African American and 2% Filipino and 27% white. Of these students 44% are English Language Learners and 21% of the students have been Reclassified as Fully English Proficient. Our average parent education level is 2.6 (1 meaning that parents had not finished high school, 5 having a post graduate education)

Over the past 5 years, the following demographic trends have emerged: the percentage of Hispanic students has increased from 38% to 60% and the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch has increased from 33% to 52%. Seven percent of our students have moved outside the city of San Rafael, a number that has doubled in the past five years. Along with these demographic trends, we have been tracking student progress. In the past 2 years our API has increased by 54 points overall, currently placing us at a 6 in overall school ranking. The past two years we have met our Yearly Adequate Progress Goals as 42% of or students are at or above the proficient level in English Language Arts while 53% of our students are at or above the proficient level in Math.

Venetia Valley is the only school in Marin County to run a dual immersion biliteracy program, and only one of hundreds in the country. The program

was being funded by Federal Title VII money that over rides the state mandated proposition. Parents are required to sign a waiver allowing their children to be taught in both English and Spanish. Our Biliteracy program is offered to two out of the four K-3 classes, roughly 40 students per grade level. In the fourth and fifth grades the program condenses down to one class of roughly 28 students.

Literacy and all Language Arts are taught strictly in English. Thematic units in Science, Social Studies or the Arts are done in Spanish as Mathematics is taught every other day in Spanish. Our teachers vary, coming both from various Latin American countries having Spanish as their native tongue while some have acquired Spanish as their second language. As our demographics have changed it has become more difficult to balance the number of native Spanish speakers with non-native Spanish speakers in the biliteracy program.

## **II. Best Practices**

Venetia Valley has had to adjust and modify teaching practices in order to continually meet NCLB growth expectations. The District adopted a mandated reading program starting in the 2002-2003 school year. Teachers were trained and expected to meet district pacing guides to be consistent for all grade levels throughout the district. School sites created literacy coach positions that mentored teachers and guided them through the new program adoption. Routine assessments became implemented to obtain quarterly lexile and literacy scores to better meet individual students' needs.

After school programs were created with community partnerships to give students who are not proficient or advanced extra support. The after school program has two components, literacy and mathematics enrichment and homework support. Computer programs were implemented and are part of the program to give struggling readers support outside of the structured classroom environment. The after school program has a strict entrance policy, beginning with teacher nomination, parent permission and the signing of a contract. If a student fails to attend the program more than three days students from the waiting list will be activated. The program coordinator works very closely with the administrators and teachers to

continually meet the children's' needs. Venetia Valley offers after school programs for Kindergarten through eighth grade students.

Venetia Valley is striving to increase the level of parent involvement and general school knowledge. Through a partnership with Parent Service Project our goal is to increase the number of Latino parents who attend meetings, extracurricular activities and over all participation in the classroom. Parent universities are held monthly to teach parents how to better serve their students needs. Classes range from how to help children with homework to reading report cards. Parents gain an understanding how to be better parents. The increase of parent knowledge ultimately benefits the children and what they gain from school.

### **III. Measures of Success**

Though our demographics have changed over the years we have met our expected API goals. Being a K-8 school makes us very unique and allows us to see our kids grow throughout their elementary experience. We are able to foster a high level of community as families often have multiple children in our school ranging in various age levels. Parents respect the security of our school and its programs.

Venetia Valley prides itself in being diverse while still maintaining high academic expectations. We team with several community organizations that bring in outside programs to better round our students education. Art, drama, physical education and music programs balance out the academics.