

VERBAL TESTIMONY OF
KATHRYN M. GIBNEY
SAN PEDRO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

BEFORE

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORKFORCE PROTECTIONS
OF THE
EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MAY 20, 2008



San Pedro Elementary School
San Rafael City Schools

310 Nova Albion Way
San Rafael, CA 94903

(415) 492-3221

Thank you, Chairwoman Woolsey and distinguished members of this panel. I very much appreciate you holding this hearing and inviting me to testify today. My name is Kathryn Gibney and I am Principal of San Pedro Elementary School in San Rafael, California. My school serves 400 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, 96% of whom are Latino, with the largest cultural groups coming from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. These children, and other students in our district, have suffered severe trauma as the result of ICE, raids in the low-income Canal neighborhood of San Rafael.

In the pre-dawn hours of March 6, 2007, federal immigration officers pulled up in white vans in front of three large apartment buildings. Suddenly, without warning, agents identifying themselves as “police” stormed the three buildings and began pounding on doors, attempting to serve 30 warrants for people who had prior deportation orders. In the process, these agents used the warrants as rationale to sweep the neighborhood sending ripples of fear throughout the community. These raids were part of a campaign called “Operation Return to Sender.”

They shined bright flashlights in the faces of young children who were still asleep. They handcuffed parents in front of their children and took them away, threatening that they would soon be back for others. They left behind them a trail of fear.

Traumatized by the vicious nature of the intrusions and terrified to take their children to the bus stop, many families held their children at home, in hiding. Other parents, recognizing that school might be the safest place, enabled their children to go to school. One child whose father had just been taken away was told by her mother to pack some essentials in her backpack and leave it by the door so that if, when she returned from school she found no one at home, she could go to her aunt’s home in case her mother was seized and deported. Imagine this child’s frame of mind as she left for school that day.

Later that morning, my staff and I first learned of these events as clearly shaken and crying students exited from school buses and blurted out their stories of what had happened earlier. On a day when we were scheduled to administer the state exams, forty students were absent – seven times the normal absentee rate. Throughout the day, muted and trembling voices asked teachers if agents would come to school and take them away, what would happen to their mommy or daddy or aunt or uncle, and what would happen to them.

During the next two weeks, the situation escalated as ICE threatened to hold more raids, as parents continued to be afraid to leave their homes, even to take their children to and from the bus stop, and as this fear took its mental and psychological toll on children, on families, and on teachers and staff who worked long hours to ride buses and ensure that students were released safely into the care of an authorized adult.

The San Rafael community responded with speed and compassion. The community launched efforts to discover the facts of what had taken place and express opposition to the way in which these raids were implemented. In one detailed response, ICE leadership in Washington, D.C. responded that although they avoid entering schools, places of worship or hospitals, they would do so if the situation warranted it. Consequently, we could no longer assure the children that schools were safe.

In San Rafael, on May 8, 2008, agents stopped a father walking his daughter to school at Bahia Vista Elementary School. Since agents were not able to communicate with the father, the second-

grade daughter had to serve as translator between her father and the agents, who ultimately took the father away.

The impact of these raids has been devastating. Absentee rates have soared. Test scores have dropped. Students who do make it to school remain distracted as they worry about whether their families will be at home when they return. Families lose sleep at night as they worry about possible home interrogations. Families whose breadwinners have been seized are struggling to survive. Even when family members were successful in proving their right to be in this country and were allowed to return home, the memories of children remain – the memories of U.S. agents banging on their doors at dawn, shining flashlights in their faces and taking their parents away in handcuffs. Mental health services have been substantially increased to address the on-going emotional fragility of San Pedro students.

Many of our children are American born, full-fledged citizens, with a right to a quality education and the rights guaranteed to all American citizens. They are America's children and the nation's future workforce.

Success in schools depends on a three-way partnership – between students, schools, and families. The current environment strains the family component. There must be a better way to execute a federal mandate in a more humane manner. Thank you.