

# Charges of bias in bilingual program in Watts

By Leiloni De Gruy  
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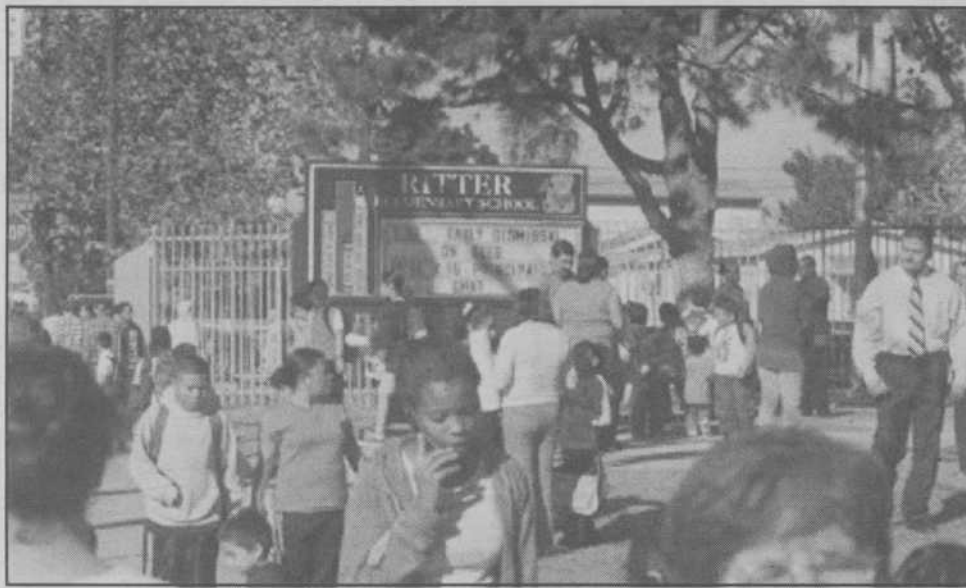
WATTS (NNPA) — When Ritter Elementary School was selected to Partnership for Los Angeles Schools in May, parents and teachers were told to expect reform and change for the better on the campus.

But they had no idea that the program, led by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, would include suspension of the school's dual-language curriculum.

The decision to end the four-year-old program came after the Los Angeles Unified School District, the state of California and Superintendent of Instruction Angela Bass reviewed data suggesting that the program was not boosting student achievement.

Also, according to Bass, there were not enough participants to complete the program. In addition, after speaking to four of the dual-language teachers, two did not feel prepared to teach the class effectively.

"In working with the Los Angeles Unified School District and the state of California, along with the Partnership, when we look at all the



Sentinel-Voice photo by Gary McCarthy

Students leave the campus of Ritter Elementary School, where some teachers are fighting to save a dual-language curriculum. The school is located in impoverished Watts, Calif.

student achievement data we saw number one that our children were not achieving," said Bass. "They were not learning how to read, to write, to think critically... When we look at the waivers... all 400 letters of intent went out to our families and when it came back to the school the numbers showed that we did not have enough... families of children in each grade level to complete a full dual-language program."

Ritter has 416 students; of them, 225, or roughly 60 per-

cent, are English-learners. Approximately 75 percent are Latino and 25 percent are African-American.

When the letters of intent were sent out June 13, only 139 responses came back. Of them, 41 parents desired to have the program while 39 did not. The remaining letters did not state a preference.

Since then, parents have campaigned to get others on board, resulting in submission of additional waivers. But according to Bass's assistant, Doc Ervin, there are still not enough students to

reinstate the program.

"Most of them [parents] in the beginning only had five or six, but as they did additional recruitment, they were only able to muster up 10 or 11. We need 20 students to one teacher per class," said Ervin.

Prior to the program's suspension, there were four dual-language classes and four teachers that taught it in grades K-3; the remaining 17 taught English-only. According to Bass, after speaking with the teachers, 18 were against the program.

"A lot of the teachers are not interested... and I think, like the [teachers] union said, if we do have enough I can't come to you as a teacher and say too bad I don't care, I'm forcing you to teach it," said Ervin. "That creates some other issues as well."

Two of the dual-language teachers, as well as a member of the United Teachers Los Angeles, are unmoved by the Partnership's sentiments and say that things are much different behind closed doors.

Alejandro Rojas, a dual-language second grade teacher at Ritter who is fighting to keep the program alive, said "There have been repeated conversations about this being America and in America we must only speak English and that's the kind of mentality that is around here... They promised that they were going to be our partners and the mayor [Villaraigosa] came here and asked for our votes but yet they are not working in partnership — they are coming here and just telling us what to do... They always try to confuse. They say our scores are low [but] they take the entire population of students but they don't separate the students that were in the

dual-language program and the non-dual-language and they continue to use that data."

He added that since the suspension, he and the other dual-language teachers have been forced to eliminate Spanish from their curriculum. He charged that they have also been reprimanded for using the language in the classroom, and contacting parents about the program.

"I would say 90 percent of the kindergarten students are the ones that are now impacted by it, because English is a foreign language," said Rojas. "It is something that is completely different and if [we] are not allowed to use Spanish like a scaffold, as a way to communicate with them, then the kids are going to continue to stay behind."

As an alternative, he and Angela Cisneros, a dual-language kindergarten teacher, have been teaching Spanish after school and on the weekends — but not on school property. Instead, parents have opened "their garages, their front yards, we are going to the local park, we are going to the university, we are doing it anywhere we can but the school. Because at this time we have offered the school to rent their facility and they aren't willing to allow us to use the facility after school or Saturday," Rojas said.

This, Rojas believes, is a sign of discrimination. To support that claim, he points to an incident that occurred during a protest outside the school about two weeks ago, which teachers were not allowed to join. That day, Rojas claimed there was a faculty meeting and following it everyone was allowed to vacate the premises except himself and Cisneros, whom he alleges were forced to remain indoors until 3:30 p.m. He also added that during the demonstration, school administrators called police in hopes of breaking it up.

Cheryl Ortega, director of bilingual education for United Teachers Los Angeles, said she was called by teachers when the program was suspended. Parents "picked a program that they were told and believed was the best thing for their kids, then the program got taken away without consulting them," she said.

"Then the principal refused to see them until the day they were outside the school with picket signs.

That's what it took to get a meeting with the principal. So, they feel that their voices aren't being heard and they feel that something good for their kids is being taken away."

She added: "Half of each class was made up of African-American kids learning Spanish," said Ortega. "At one of our first meetings... the principal, said, 'Why in the world would African-American parents want their kids to learn Spanish?' I thought 'Wow, why wouldn't you'... [Then] there was an inference that having the program is what made them a low-performing school, but there were only as many as four classes of this in that school and 20 classes that were pure English so if it's a low-performing school, you can't lay it on four classes."

Green, who met with parents on Dec. 5 to discuss the matter, declined to comment for this story. But in a Sept. 16 letter, the principal wrote that "Every staff member was presented with the opportunity to leave if they did not want to be a part of the Partnership. And at that time it was also made clear that there would be reform/change under" the program.

Cisneros, whose class of 21 students contains 17 Spanish-speakers, said, "Many African-American parents that want their kids in the program are told not to do it anymore because what good is it going to do for the African-American kid? And everybody knows that if they start communicating in kindergarten, they are going to be friends at least and be able to communicate — so they don't fight when they grow up. We forgot the human side of all these things."

She added: "We feel harassed over here; we feel like no one understands; we feel powerless, because we support parents and because we speak Spanish also. They think we are from the moon [or are] aliens. We are hated [and] harassed."

"I have three kids here," she said. "None of them speak Spanish, I don't speak Spanish, [but] my family speaks Spanish... A lot of jobs you need to know two languages, and for our kids to go on in life they need that. I would love for my kids to come home and teach me Spanish," said Stephanie Segoviano.

Leiloni De Gruy writes for the Los Angeles Sentinel.

## Racial chasm in deaths from colon cancer rise

ATLANTA (AP) — The racial gap in colon cancer death rates is widening, a new report says, and experts partly blame Blacks' lower screening rates and poor access to quality care.

Colon and rectal cancer death rates are now nearly 50 percent higher in Blacks than in Whites, according to American Cancer Society research being released Monday.

The gap has been growing since the mid-1970s, when colon cancer death rates for the two racial groups were nearly equal.

"We have seen this enormous progress in Whites. We could be seeing the same progress in Blacks, if we could overcome disparities in access to healthcare," said Elizabeth Ward, who oversees surveillance and health policy at the cancer society.

Colorectal cancer is the third leading cancer killer in the United States. About 50,000 Americans will die of the disease this year, the cancer society estimates.

Last month, researchers reported the rate of new cancers in general is inching down and death rates continue to decline in the United States — important good news in the fight against the dreaded disease.

But when it comes to colon cancer, progress has been greater for Whites than for Blacks, the new report said.

The rate of diagnoses in Blacks was

about 19 percent higher than it was for Whites in 2005, the most recent year for which statistics are available.

The death rate difference was even more pronounced. Among Blacks, there were about 25 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 17 per 100,000 in Whites — a 48 percent difference.

The two groups' death rates were similar until the 1980s when colon cancer began to kill Blacks at a higher rate than Whites.

Researchers say it's not clear why Black mortality jumped in the 1980s, but it started a gap that continued to widen even after the Black rate began to fall again.

Colon cancer deaths can be prevented by early diagnosis through screening and quality care. The screening rate for Whites is 50 percent compared to just 40 percent for Blacks.

The screening rate for Hispanics is an even-lower 32 percent, but the death rate for Hispanics — fewer than 13 per 100,000 — is lower than it is for Whites.

That paradox is not unique to colon cancer: Poorly insured Hispanics have fared better than Whites and Blacks in several measures of cancer and heart disease.

"It's a mystery," said Dr. Daniel Blumenthal, chair of the Morehouse School of Medicine's Department of Community Health and Preventive Medicine.