

SEQUOIA UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
**A Conversation with Superintendent Gemma
on Everest Charter School**

July 31, 2009

Q: Why did you want to address the topic of Everest charter school in this interview that gets posted on the district website?

A: There are a couple of key reasons. Sequoia district business is conducted in the public arena through open board meetings but we know that not all members of the community can attend these meetings. And even though minutes are posted on the district website, the community may desire additional detail. So we thought we'd address some of the additional questions that may be on the minds of the community. Also, there's been some misinformation and misconceptions out there, and we wanted to address that as well.

Q: Is one of the misconceptions the view that the district is trying to block Everest from opening and being successful?

A: That's a serious misconception but likely not one held by more than a handful of people. The Sequoia district is known for its strong advocacy of all students, regardless if they attend one of our traditional, comprehensive high schools or a charter school. Our community knows that every student matters to us and that we wouldn't do anything to prevent the success of any student.

Q: Perhaps a source of the misconception is the fact that the district denied the Everest petition?

A: That's definitely a possibility, but perhaps people who connect the dots this way don't fully understand the process. Charter school petitions go through an objective review and evaluation process based on charter school legislation and public comment. District staff recommended denial of the Everest petition based on findings of fact following a comprehensive and thoughtful review, analysis conducted by an external financial expert, and input from the community. The district and county school boards both denied the petition. But once the state board approved it, we turned attention to accommodating Everest students as part of our larger responsibility to all students in the district.

Q: Didn't state board approval basically prove the district and county got it wrong?

A: No, not at all. I believe the district and county boards made reasoned decisions. Now, I've made no secret of the fact that I believe these decisions are best made locally by publicly elected officials and not by folks in Sacramento who have been appointed by the Governor. State board officials have no accountability to our local community, and their record is clear: they approve nearly every charter petition that comes before them. We're well past that now. The state board approved the Everest charter, and our commitment now is to support the success of Everest students as we do for all students in the Sequoia district.

Q: Some people suggest that school districts oppose charter schools as a result of union pressure. Do you think there's any truth in that?

A: I don't believe this is a union issue, and I certainly don't believe teachers are the problem. In fact, in my view, teachers are the solution. The Sequoia district enjoys a healthy, balanced and collaborative relationship with teachers. We have high-caliber teachers in our district who are strong student advocates and who, as part of their calling to a career in public education, are deeply committed to the success of students. The district shares this deep commitment, and we work in collaboration with teachers to engage and prepare students for success in a 21st century, global society. Our record of success in this regard has been strong.

Q: Is there any truth to the assertion that the Sequoia district is anti-charter?

A: No. The Sequoia district has demonstrated its support of charter schools, particularly the ones that currently operate in our district. We fully support quality charter school programs that seek to establish incubators of innovation. We also fully support charter schools that strive to meet the legislative intent of the Charter School Act in terms of a commitment to serving low-performing students. We enjoy a positive, collaborative relationship with our existing charters schools in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park – two good examples of charter schools that possess these aspirations and commitments.

Q: With the current wave of support of charter schools in California and now, with a President and Education Secretary who are such strong proponents, will the Sequoia district be opening its arms wider to new charter schools?

A: Any additional charter school petitions would be individually reviewed and considered, but charter schools aren't a panacea for all that ails us. It seems that a number of prominent charter school proponents are coming at this from a perspective and experience with poor-performing schools that are in critical need of reform. Nobody would characterize the schools in the Sequoia Union High School District this way. The Sequoia district has four distinguished, award-winning comprehensive high schools with entrenched college-going cultures – in fact, more than 95 percent of graduates go on to pursue higher education. The academic rigor and student enrichment programs in our schools are stellar, and our facilities and technology are among the best anywhere. In addition to these four traditional high schools, we now have four charter schools in the Sequoia district. Are more needed? I'd answer that question this way: If additional charter schools aren't focused on the lowest performing students in our district, then I would suggest that any additional charter school is addressing a problem that doesn't exist.

Q: You've gone on record with the reasons you didn't believe the Everest petition should advance. Do you believe your statements have been misunderstood?

A: I suppose there's been a little bit of that as I've tried to elevate the public dialogue and focus on what I believe to be flaws in current charter school legislation. I see as a shortcoming in the current legislation the fact that we transfer tax dollars to charter schools that aren't run by publicly elected trustees with any accountability to the local community. I see as a shortcoming the fact that the Legislature intended charter schools to serve all students and particularly low-performing students but that no new charter school must demonstrate it will serve low-performing students. Again, I fully support incubators of innovation and schools committed to closing the achievement gap.

But if a charter school is designed to create a tuition-free private school with taxpayer dollars, then I would suggest, as a community, we need to look long and hard at this.

I'm also focused on diversity – racially, socioeconomically *and* academically – in the schools in our district. I hear from parents all the time, and particularly from parents with the means to send their kids to private schools, that they choose and value our traditional high schools not just because of the academic rigor and wide array of student enrichment opportunities but also because of our rich diversity. We don't want to compromise that diversity. Equally importantly, we want to prevent any compromise to the diversity of the charter schools in disadvantaged communities in our district. We desire to support these schools in achieving academic, socioeconomic and racial diversity. We believe it's our moral imperative to ensure no advancement in our district of the racial and socioeconomic isolation that has been creeping back into our nation's public schools.

Q: Let's turn attention to the facilities request for Everest. There's been tension between Everest and the district, and now a lawsuit has been filed. Why?

A: That's been very unfortunate. The district responded to Everest's request for facilities with a quality learning environment that's been repeatedly declined. The reasons they express for rejecting the school we offered and choosing instead to rent an office building are difficult to understand.

Q: Everest made it clear they didn't want to be on Green Street in East Palo Alto, the site the district offered. Everest expressed a desire to be on the Sequoia High School campus. Why not meet that request?

A: Enrollment at Sequoia High School has been on an upswing. When school starts next month, they will have 200 more students than last year. We informed Everest that the Sequoia High School campus doesn't have space to accommodate a charter school and that this would involve displacement of English-language learners and special education students enrolled at Sequoia.

Q: The district offered to house Everest at a new school on Green Street in East Palo Alto – a location Everest maintains is on the outskirts of the district and inconvenient for parents. How have you responded to this?

A: We've reminded Everest that more than 20 percent of students in the Sequoia district reside in East Palo Alto. In addition, if the burden to parents is great, Everest could request bus transportation services. Speaking more globally, as a district, we can't look in isolation at just the 100 students attending Everest. We're committed to those 100 students and 8,900 others. Daily, more than 1,500 students travel from East Palo Alto to our district schools. Certainly, it's reasonable for 100 or fewer Everest students to travel to East Palo Alto to attend a school within the district's boundaries.

Q: How was Green Street chosen as the site for Everest?

A: As you noted, Everest initially expressed a desire to be on the Sequoia High School campus, so we started there. For the reasons stated earlier, that wasn't possible. We evaluated all of the sites held by the district. Obviously, we wanted to try to identify a site we already owned. We owned the land on Green Street and we had already planned and budgeted to build a school there, and voters had approved this. Also, the

school at Green Street could accommodate Everest students come August, so it really was ideal.

Initially, Everest was concerned our Green Street plans called for Everest to use the school during the day and our adult school would offer classes in the evening. That all changed when the state budget crisis required us to postpone opening of an adult school satellite at Green Street. At the end of the day, this worked out well for Everest because they could have exclusive use of the school.

The other beauty of Green Street for Everest is that it allows them their own school – an expressed desire of theirs. I understand a self-contained site would be preferred over being squeezed into pockets of space spread out on a large comprehensive high school campus. If you think about a charter school and their aim to establish a small-school environment for students, the independent school site on Green Street really emerged as the ideal setting and location for Everest. It's in a stable residential neighborhood in a community where more than 20 percent of our students reside and a community with a fair number of students who might benefit from a small-school setting.

It really was fortunate that we had Green Street available, that we could offer it for Everest's exclusive use, that we could have it ready in time for their first class of 100 freshmen in August, and that it represented no additional cost to Everest, to the district or to the community. It's truly a win-win-win all the way around.

Q: If located on Green Street, would students have to travel seven miles round-trip to get lunch every day?

A: Students would not leave Green Street for lunch. We make lunch meals daily at the district office, and these meals are delivered to the school sites. Everest could request to have student meals delivered to Green Street as well.

Q: How does the district respond to the contention in Everest's lawsuit that the offer of Green Street is not legally compliant?

A: Green Street meets and exceeds all legal requirements, and we are confident the court will agree. Green Street is located in a stable residential neighborhood, not far from the Four Seasons Hotel and IKEA on a site we always intended to develop as a school. The campus includes spacious classrooms of nearly 1,000 square feet each, a library/media center and a separate administration building. We're installing all new lighting; parking and outdoor eating areas; and landscaping. The school has been planned to be attractively integrated into the homes, churches and parks in the neighborhood. We've made preliminary arrangements with the YMCA to provide for physical education instruction of the students in the Y's new, fully equipped facility just a short walk away – the cost of which would be paid for by the district. We've also offered use of additional facilities at Menlo-Atherton High School. Green Street is legally compliant, and it's superior to either of the alternatives Everest selected. In my view, it's the best site for Everest students, and we'd like to see them move into the site that's best for them.

Q: Everest contends that the Green Street school isn't "reasonably equivalent" to facilities provided to students in the district's traditional high schools. Is that true?

A: Well it's true that Green Street doesn't offer a swim stadium, 500-seat performing arts center and similar types of facilities found on our comprehensive high school campuses. Each of our comprehensive high schools has enrollment of approximately 2,000

students. Everest will have 100 students in its first year and grow to a maximum of 400 by its fourth year. I doubt the community believes that facilities provided for 100 to 400 students should be identical to those provided to 2,000 students.

Nonetheless, at Green Street, Everest students would have access to the swimming pool, performing arts center and additional facilities at the nearby YMCA and Menlo-Atherton High School. Neither of the options Everest has pursued offer facilities similar to those found on our comprehensive high school campuses and, in fact, the Everest options offer less in terms of facilities and amenities than Green Street.

Q: It's been suggested that the district tried to scuttle Everest's attempt to open on Charter Street in Redwood City, the site Everest selected prior to entering into a lease on Main Street in Redwood City. Is that another misconception?

A: Absolutely. Public records document concerns at Charter Street about toxins, along with environmental impact concerns. These were concerns raised by city officials and the community, not the District. Please understand that the district has a responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of students in our schools. As part of that responsibility, we contacted the city planning department to ensure that the concerns about the Charter Street site would be fully addressed.

Another key concern the District had was the \$2.3 million cost associated with renovations and rent for the building, in addition to the cost of a lawsuit that was being threatened. We are stewards of the community's resources and, as such, we tried to help Everest understand that, particularly in today's economic climate, spending \$2.3 million on tenant improvements and rent for three years makes no sense when a quality learning environment was being offered at no additional cost to Everest, to the District or to local taxpayers.

I'll confide that we've been puzzled watching the sequence of events unfold. Everest will receive more than \$3.5 million from the District in the first three years of operation for their first 100 to 300 students. They filed a claim seeking an additional \$2.3 million for tenant improvements and rental of a building that, at the end of the three-year lease, would provide no further return on taxpayers' multi-million-dollar investment. We've been disappointed that Everest believed it was appropriate to claim that – for the benefit of their 100 to 300 students – an additional \$2.3 million should be taken from the budget that supports several thousand students.

Q: Will the District resist Everest moving into the Main Street building?

A: We have similar concerns to the Charter Street site. We want to know it's a safe, appropriate environment for students. Unlike at Charter Street, Everest has exempted the Main Street site from local zoning and city planning requirements. Questions have been raised about this exemption. At the same time, we remain perplexed as to why Everest won't accept the school on Green Street. It's superior in terms of facilities and amenities, and it's the best option currently available. There's also the issue of cost. It doesn't make any sense to spend taxpayer money unnecessarily. Green Street is a school site built with a bond on District-owned land. There's no need to rent space elsewhere. Pouring money into rent of another site just isn't a responsible or wise use of community resources.

Q: Doesn't the money deserve to follow the student?

A: That's another common misconception. The District will provide financial support to Everest students – more than \$3.5 million in the first three years alone. The rent for the Main Street building is on top of that. Another consideration here is the economies of scale that are achieved in educating 9,000 students as compared with a few hundred. Peeling off 100 to 400 students on the margin doesn't offset the economies of scale we realize in serving several thousand students. Virtually the same number of teachers and staff still need to be hired.

Q: Once Everest turned down the offer of Green Street, why did the district continue building the school?

A: The district has made a commitment to expand educational opportunities in East Palo Alto. As part of the last bond measure, we committed to building a satellite of our adult school on the Green Street site. As a result of the current state budget crisis and its impact on adult schools, plans for the adult school satellite were placed on hold. We offered to develop the site to enable Everest to open in the fall at Green Street but with eventual plans to use the site for the adult school. The offer remains open for Everest to use the facility, should they have a change of heart. If not, a quality educational program will be housed there and our promise to the community will be fulfilled.

Q: Hasn't the district announced it is building a campus to be shared by multiple charter schools on the Green Street site?

A: The district's long-term plans call for developing a site that will be shared by two to three independent charter schools. Green Street is not large enough to accommodate multiple charter schools operating at maximum capacity. The district will plan the multi-school site in East Palo Alto on property that allows space for a sports field, library, multipurpose room and other shared facilities in addition to classrooms and other buildings for each of the independent charter schools.

Q: Why has East Palo Alto been chosen for development of a shared charter school campus?

A: There are a number of advantages to developing a multi-charter school campus in East Palo Alto. Over 20 percent of students in the Sequoia district live in East Palo Alto, a community currently without a traditional public high school. Research shows that small-school settings help promote the success of low-performing students, so EPA students in this category who are drawn to a small-school setting would be able to enroll in a school located in their own community.

Charter schools are schools of choice and, thus, no students are required to attend a charter school by virtue of attendance area designation. Students in EPA wouldn't be required to attend any of the charter schools on the shared campus and, thus, racial isolation would be avoided at the same time we would be increasing educational opportunities offered to EPA students in their own community.

Development of a shared campus in EPA would be a win-win for students and taxpayers – a win for students for the reasons just mentioned, and a win for taxpayers because the district would be able to develop a high school campus with a library, fields and other shared facilities. It would be impossible to build such a campus for multiple stand-alone charter schools, each with just a few hundred students. We're also confident there is a parcel of land available in EPA for this purpose.

Q: Aren't there rankings and measures that show charter school students in the Sequoia district outperform students enrolled in the district's comprehensive high schools?

A: Some show that, and some show the reverse so I'm not convinced such comparisons are particularly helpful. Some of these rankings and measures don't take into account the differences in the achievement levels of students at the respective schools, so it can be a real apples-to-oranges type of comparison. Rankings and measures, if not weighted or fully understood, can be a real disservice to the community. As a top-performing school district, we try to minimize comparisons of our schools because we know that a student is going to receive a high-quality education no matter where the student is enrolled – Middle College at Cañada, the Summit charter school, Woodside High School or any of our other traditional and alternative schools and programs.

Q: It's been reported that approximately 25 percent of incoming freshmen to the district applied to Everest and its sister school, Summit. Is that true?

A: We don't know that to be true as we don't have confirmed information about the applications to Everest and Summit. Likely, some students applied to both schools, and there's a possibility that those who applied to both were counted twice. There could also be a number of students in private middle schools who applied to one or both of these charter schools, and the parents of these students may never have planned for their students to attend one of the district's comprehensive high schools. There may also be students who "applied" to one of the district's comprehensive high schools through an intradistrict transfer request, along with applying to one or more charter schools and one or more private schools and, in the end, chose to enroll in a private school – this would never have been a student who would end up in one of our comprehensive high schools. In other words, we should probably be skeptical about the authenticity of percentages of incoming freshmen who applied to Everest and/or Summit.

I'd also like to make one additional point. In six years as superintendent of the Sequoia district, I'd have to say we haven't been particularly proactive in promoting our good works. It just hasn't been our culture to be boastful. Our distinguished faculty and professional support staff tend to humbly attend to their work without a whole lot of fanfare. The wisdom of this could certainly be argued, but the effect has been that awareness in the community likely doesn't match reality. I suspect there are a number of parents who are unaware of the high caliber of our traditional high schools, the academic rigor and student enrichment programs offered in our schools, the astoundingly high number of graduates who go to college – many to top-tier universities and many who are first-generation college students. Perhaps many parents and students are unaware of the small-learning communities and "schools-within-a-school" we offer on our comprehensive high school campuses. Perhaps if awareness were higher, more parents and students would make different choices. Moving forward, we're going to focus on more communication with parents, to help arm them with the information they need to make informed decisions about the high school setting and school that would be best for their individual children.

Q: It's said that charter schools spend thousands less in cost-per-student as compared with non-charter school students in the Sequoia district. Typically, it's reported that \$9,000 is the cost-per-student for non-charter school students in the Sequoia district. Is either of these statements true?

A: Here's what true: The district transfers per-student dollars to charter schools as determined by the state. This amount is supplemented by additional revenue the charter schools brings in. According to the 2008-09 budget for Summit, Everest's sister school, the cost-per-student at Summit this past year was right around \$9,000, which, yes, is the per-student cost that sometimes gets *inaccurately* reported for non-charter school students in the district. Why is that figure inaccurate? It's inaccurate because whoever is reporting this is not considering the huge variance in the cost-per-student outside of the charter schools. For example, our district currently serves 40 students who *each* requires in excess of \$80,000 in services annually. None of the charter schools in our district have these types of special needs students enrolled in their schools. Clearly, it's not at all accurate, or appropriate, to simply divide the number of students by the revenue and say that's the cost-per-student. It's a bit more complicated. I might add, too, that Everest will likely spend more in the first years of operation than later down the road, but would cost-per-student averages in the first years be an appropriate gauge or form of comparison? I would say, no.

Q: **What comes next?**

A: In a few weeks, 9,000 students across the Sequoia district will be welcomed to their first day of school. Like school districts up and down the state, we face significant challenges in the next couple of years, particularly on the financial front. The Sequoia district has lofty goals and an ambitious agenda for the new school year. We certainly want to do all we can to ensure the continued excellence of our schools as we continue on our upward trajectory. At the same time, we'll continue to invite open communication and discussions with Everest as they join our exceptional school district. We'll continue to encourage Everest to work with us to ensure that all 9,000 in the Sequoia district are supported in achieving success in high school and beyond. As part of our collaboration with Everest, we hope to avoid costly litigation and any negative impact on our students. The success of all students and responsible stewardship of the community's resources with which we have been entrusted remains our highest priority.