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## EDUCATION

# Parents Struggle With The Ways Gentrification Changes Bilingual Schools

BY [CASEY QUINLAN](#) OCT 12, 2015 8:00AM

CREDIT: CLIFF OWEN, AP

On an unusually cold October day, children were exercising on the gleaming floor of Powell Bilingual Elementary in Washington DC's Petworth neighborhood. It was an overcast, rainy day but the school's picture windows allowed the natural light to pour in and highlight all of primary colors of student's artwork – some of which featured maps naming countries in English and Spanish and drawings of Frida Kahlo.

"I need your energy, guys. I need energy. Mas energia, por favor!" a man instructed the students.

All over Powell's walls, you will find forms and flyers for parents in both English and Spanish, including one for Hispanic Heritage Month, which will be celebrated at the school this week. High parental involvement is essential to Powell and teachers and administration do a lot of work to reach out to families by scheduling home visits, which allow teachers to visit a child's home and observe how much the child speaks certain languages versus others, and setting up parent and principal meetings once every month.

Powell has one parent meeting at 9 a.m. and another at 5:30 p.m. to make sure all parents are included. Primarily Spanish-speaking parents tend to go to the morning meeting, where there is a professional translator, and primarily English-speaking parents attend the evening meeting, where

parents fulfill the role of translator if needed. Because Powell is a neighborhood school, it has been affected by Petworth's gentrification over the years. Parents have also come from outside of Petworth to attend the school as the reputation of its bilingual program grew.

Carla Ferris used to be one of a very small number of white parents at Powell. Her son is in preschool and her daughter is in first grade.

"This neighborhood is gentrifying and the schools are gentrifying. So my first year at Powell? I was the blonde lady ... And they used to mix me up with another blonde lady. But it's totally different now," Ferris said.

She decided to enroll her child in daughter at Powell instead of Oyster-Adams Bilingual School, which is across the street from her home, because it was important to her and her husband, who is from El Salvador, that their daughter be able to speak Spanish and have ties to her culture.



*Artwork by pre-K students at Powell Bilingual Elementary*

"What I love about Powell is that the Spanish they get there is a lot more organic. I wanted a school where they would have a lot of native speakers that were their playmates. For so many reasons, you know, like cultural differences, family differences, language differences," Ferris said. "For the longest time, our daughter would flatly refuse to speak Spanish. She could understand a little but she wouldn't speak it. And after kindergarten, when they started really teaching them Spanish, all of a sudden, girl loves to speak Spanish. She speaks it with her friends. So that's been really interesting."

Powell's white student population has grown from 1 percent in the 2010-2011 academic year to 5 percent in 2014-15. The Hispanic/Latino population, which increased in 2012-13 to 84 percent has dipped back down to 82 percent, the same as in 2010-11 and the black student population has fallen from 15 percent in 2010-11 to 11 percent in 2014-15, although it is a slight improvement from 9 percent in 2013-2014. The most interesting change, however, has been the dip in English language learners attending the school, from 66 percent in 2010-11 to 55 percent in 2014-15. Pre-K instructional aide Dadee Ramos said she has also noticed more Ethiopian students and Filipino students coming in.

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Besides the demographic shift, the school is undergoing major changes, in part because because the former Principal Janeece Docal, who was chosen as DC's 2014 Principal of the Year, recently left Powell and a new principal, O'Kiyah Lucas-Lyons, is stepping in this academic year. Although Docal only needed to replace a few teachers each year, Lucas-Lyons has had to hire teachers to both replace those who left after Docal's exit and take on new positions to serve the increase in student enrollment.

All of these changes at Powell are a pressure cooker for parents, who want to ensure their children's education won't change drastically and that they will have the same amount of input on school decisions with the new principal. One parent became emotional because she worried that the matter of student's schedules wouldn't be discussed enough at the meeting and she was concerned about transparency in communication to parents. This concern about communication isn't helped by the fact that the separate meetings make it difficult for parents to coordinate with each other, especially since parent communities are already experiencing a rift.

Sometimes parents dismiss other parents or don't hear other parents' concerns because of differences in race, income, language, and education, said Allyson Criner Brown, associate director of Teaching For Change. Criner Brown has been working with parents at Powell to make sure parent communities are able to communicate across race, education, language, and income, but it's a work in progress. Now that parents in the evening meeting have started a nonprofit organization for parents at Powell, Parents Organized for the Power of Powell, or POPP, many of the differences between parent communities are being highlighted.

"Powell has been full of parent leaders for a number of years ... That is one of the reasons Powell is a school parents are clamoring to get their children into. They are primarily families of color, immigrant families, Hispanic-speaking families, so they were doing things for the school but they weren't necessarily doing as a [nonprofit organization]," Criner Brown said. "So how do we bridge those ways of working and acknowledge that people have different experiences? You're more likely to have experiences operating in organizations that use Robert's Rules of Order, and more likely to work in an organization that has a board a secretary and a treasurer and is going to do minutes at every meeting, and that's where we're trying to look at."

Ramos, who has taught pre-K at Powell for four years, said she noticed that white parents tended to ask more questions about the school, while Hispanic parents tended to trust the expertise of teachers and asked fewer questions.

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*"Caucasians have asked 'Oh how is the curriculum? How is this going to happen?'"*

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*... [W]hen you go to a Spanish family, they basically give you their child and say, 'Educate my child. You know what you're doing.'"*

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"At the home visits, again, culturally I have noticed that Caucasians have asked, 'Oh how is the curriculum? How is this going to happen? How is the park going to happen?' And then when you go to a Hispanic family, they basically give you their child and say, 'Educate my child. You know what you're doing.' And I think in my four years working here at Powell I try to encourage Hispanic parents to please ask me any questions, like, 'Why is my child doing this?'" Ramos said.

Percia Williams, who has been active in the parent community at Powell for eight years, said that the way parents organize has changed a lot over the years. At one time, mostly Spanish-speaking parents would meet and discuss not just educational issues, but emotional and personal issues, and were more collaborative in their approach to discussions, Williams said.

"It was like a family," Williams said. Now, with the nonprofit organization, Williams said there is more of a focus on power and who gets to be a leader in the parent community. "I'm just saying I love that Powell changed a lot now and the demographics are different now. It used to be only Spanish and there were a few black families, and now we're more mixed. But now, there are all of these high-powered, and I say, 'high-powered' because I think that's how they think of themselves, high-powered parents coming in and changing everything," Williams said.

She said that parents may take their approach to work to the parent meetings, which makes it more difficult to be collaborative. Williams also added that mostly English-speaking parents will send emails suggesting how to organize an event but won't carry the idea to fruition through cooking and bringing in food for Hispanic Heritage Month, for example. Then the mostly English-speaking parents thank the parents who wrote the emails suggesting ideas for their hard work, but not necessarily the parents who cooked food and oversaw the event.



“They cook the food and bring all of the food and they donate their time and their money but the parents who talk a lot and make suggestions through emails, they don’t come to these things because they say ‘We’re working,’ So you let the Hispanic parents do the work. Is that fair? That’s not fair,” Williams said. “They’re the ones who get the accolades because they’re the ones using heavy words in meetings but when it comes to doing the hard work, they’re not there. So the Hispanic parents stop coming. That’s why everyone stopped coming. And when they stop coming, no one will do the work.”

Criner Brown said the demographic changes that contribute to the problem are multi-layered and that it takes time for new parents coming in to understand that despite their intentions, what they do or say may still be hurtful and exclusionary to the older parent community.

“It’s the intersection of race and class and that’s part of what makes it complicated. There are Hispanic parents and African American parents who are also affluent who are doing some of the same behaviors that other parents who are black and Latino and low-income don’t take very kindly to, so yes, it’s going to take a lot of work,” Criner Brown said. “And there have absolutely been instances where there are direct tensions and conflicts because people didn’t fully understand how something they were doing was not fully inclusive of other groups, and it’s a challenge. It’s really hard to stop that in advance unless you’re doing serious work around it.”

Criner Brown has been working on these problems by having parents at both morning and evening meetings voice their concerns at what she calls “listening circles” and “healing circles.” At listening circles, Criner Brown writes down the ways in which parents have felt isolated from each other and takes the concerns to the other parent group.

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*“It’s the intersection of race and class and that’s part of what makes it complicated.”*

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“There were specific points they were coming up against, like for instance, in the morning meeting and the evening meeting, how do you communicate what was said in the evening meeting effectively much less with language challenges? ... So parents were able to see and very quickly identify what some of these challenges were,” Criner Brown said. “Now the harder part is finding the solutions, so we’re still in this process, but we held several listening circles and then we brought people together for what we call healing circles to acknowledge the challenges and the hurt that had come up and to start looking for solutions.”

Williams said that she is working with one of the parents who attends evening meetings, Ellyon Bell, to ensure that the two communities of parents work together. Williams said that many Hispanic parents have told her they will stop coming to meetings if Williams doesn’t stay involved in the nonprofit, through a position she was given as director-at-large. Although Williams isn’t interested in a leadership position, she says she’ll stay involved for the next year, while her son still attends the fifth grade at Powell.

“We’re going to try to bridge that gap. We’re going to trying to fix it and I think it’s going to get better,” Williams said.