

## Elementary Students Advocate for Peace



Spring 2003

When the Oakland School board first brought up the idea of a districtwide teach-in, some board members and parents were concerned about exposing elementary students to information about war. Several board members said they changed their opinions after four fifth grade girls from Sequoia School testified in favor of the teach-in.

The girls read excerpt of letters they had written to President Bush asking him to consider not attacking Iraq. "We think it's strange to go to war with a country you taught war to," student Emma Styles-Swaim said at the meeting. "We think it's strange because, well, it's weird."

Betty Olson Jones, the girls' teacher, said the girls initially approached her on the playground and said they wanted to start a petition against the war and write to President Bush. They gathered 180 signatures, wrote letters, and shared them with the class. They invited Bush to attend their school and participate in a conflict-resolution program in their school called Second Step.

When they spoke before the school board, the students said they thought the board should adopt the resolution because they were curious and thought other students were, too.

According to Jones, at the end of the meeting, Superintendent Dennis Chacones commented on the demeanor of the Sequoia students and the way they presented themselves.

Jones said she wanted to broaden the focus from the four girls to the whole class. She explains how she uses the district's mandated reading program, Open Court, to invite students to bring in questions about Iraq. She lists some of the students' questions: "If he has a problem with one person, why doesn't he deal with him?" "Why would they send 18-20 year olds to war?" "Why don't the people who want to go to war fight it?" "What's the war about? I heard it had to do with oil."

"A number of kids in my class have lost family members to violence in Oakland," says Jones. "A boy whose mother was killed in March said 'I was thinking about sending George Bush an article with names of all the people who were killed.'"

On January 14, Olson Jones looked for a speaker to bring into her classroom who would be appropriate for elementary level kids. She chose to have a representative from the Middle Eastern Children's Alliance come in to answer questions. "I was incredibly moved by how these children participated," says Jones. "Out of 26 in the class, 21 spoke today. They were responding, they listened, they participated. They asked 'Aren't there other ways to solve it?' One boy said. 'I heard North Korea has weapons of mass destruction and we're not doing anything there. Saddam Hussein says they don't have any, but we want to go to war there.' I was amazed to hear words like 'weapons of mass destruction.'"

Because of the media attention her students have received since the school board meeting, Jones has been asked often if she should provide a different point of view in her classroom. "Sure, I think kids should learn how to make decisions. At the same time I think that this is a different point of view from what they're getting in the media."

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