FALL MOVE TO LEMOYNE CONCERNS INTER AMERICAN MAGNET SCHOOL PARENTS
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Special to Inside

Veronica Moreno’s dark hair and eyes plus fluency in Spanish reflect her Mexican American culture. Her second and third grade kids ride the bus to north side Inter American Magnet School from the west side community of Humboldt Park.

Jim Cusick’s blue eyes and fair skin show his heritage as a mixture of European countries that includes Ireland. His second and fourth grade kids ride the bus to Inter American from the far north community of Rogers Park. They learn Spanish at Inter American, the only dual language Spanish immersion program in the city.

Native Chicagoans Moreno and Cusick said their families would not have communicated with each other without Inter American. Moreno, Cusick and about thirty other parents discussed concerns about the future of Inter American with Chicago Public School officials on March 21. Parents say that CPS policies and shifting demographics on Chicago’s north side combine to erode Inter American’s Spanish-English language immersion program.

Moreno said in the 1990s, Inter American parents and CPS thoroughly discussed construction plans for a brand new school building. And they waited.

Published media reports confirm $18.7 million set aside in the 1998 capital budget for a new building for Inter American under then CEO Paul Vallas. In 2006, CPS plans no new school building for Inter American. Instead, Inter American’s 660 students are scheduled to relocate from 919 W. Barry to nearby LeMoyne Elementary at 851 W Waveland.

CPS officials said the board expects the ninety students at LeMoyne, many of whom are special education students, to coexist with Inter American and to share space and resources. Inter American’s move is scheduled for mid August.

“We know that it is a challenge to move in the last few weeks of August, but that is unfortunately the best option,” said CPS Chief Operating Officer Shaun Murphy.

Parents present at the meeting expressed skepticism about the logistics and the impact of moving on their children’s learning. Of most concern to parents present was the smaller rooms for kindergarteners than Inter American currently allocates. Murphy said that CPS standard classroom size in school buildings that are not new construction measure 750 square feet. Parents want oversized classrooms 1.5 times that size.
“We don’t just teach kindergarten with kids just sitting at their desks,” said one parent during the meeting. “So we need a bigger room.”

The Inter American and LeMoyne school communities are meshed together under strained CPS finances. The cash strapped system manages 600 schools with a bulging budget deficit of $228 million.

“We’re in a culture where we have to maintain budgets to the best of our ability,” Murphy said.

Murphy responded to a 31-item list of parent requests regarding relocation renovations at LeMoyne. He said that Inter American must balance essential needs such as safety vs. wants, such as extra comfort and aesthetics. Murphy and two CPS officials with expertise in architecture and building planning rejected requests like central air conditioning, which they said is not standard for CPS schools. The team did approve items such as handicapped accessible entrances, that align with standard CPS building codes.

“We have to go through and turn a wish list into what we can actually fund and what we can actually provide,” said Murphy.

Yet some parents say that moving Inter American represents more than a transfer from building to building. Parents said the survival of school’s dual language program depends on retaining attendance parity between native and non-native Spanish speakers.

Lincoln Square mother Erica Clark said her third grader speaks both English and Spanish fluently after attending Inter American. “We should be in a neighborhood with Spanish dominant families so that even if they don’t have busing the program can still succeed,” said Clark.

More native Spanish speakers lived in Lakeview when Inter American was founded in 1975. In the last 30 years, without the rising income needed to pay the higher property taxes associated with rising home value, Latinos moved out of Lakeview to more affordable communities on the city’s west side.

Census reports compiled by the University of Illinois at Chicago indicate a 13.5% Latino population in 1970 when the median family income in the neighborhood was about $10,500. The Latino population peaked in 1980 at 18%, while the median family income in Lakeview almost doubled in those 10 years. By 2000, the Latino population dipped to 8.7 percent, with median family income in the neighborhood at nearly $85,000. Median house value soared, from about $18,000 in the 70s to nearly $393,000 by the year 2000.

Parents said that as a result, the majority of Spanish speaking students at Inter American now commute from communities outside Lakeview. “Our families will not be able to get to the school without busing,” said Clark.

Moreno and Cusick said that tension surrounding Inter American’s move erodes the mission of the school program known not only for academic excellence, but also for
commitment to two cultures and two languages learning side by side.

“The brick and mortar is not the most important thing about our program,” said Moreno.

“We really feel that our philosophy and our principles are at risk,” Cusick said.

After the two and a half hour meeting on an early spring evening as chilly as early winter, Moreno and Cusick said they hoped both school communities would work together. They said they hoped Inter American would not be pitted against LeMoyne families.

“We have gone from having an amazing community where people walked in the door and volunteered and got involved to you walk in here and you can just sense the tension,” Moreno said.

Cusick said that he hoped that issues can be resolved to reduce tensions between Inter American and Le Moyne by merger time in August. “We would feel badly about that, those parents have their hands full with kids with very serious needs.”