



Published: 04.04.2008

TUSD faces Pledge of Allegiance furor

By Josh Brodesky

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The Tucson Unified School District has found itself tangled in a web of online discontent, following outrage over the way a second-grade class recites the Pledge of Allegiance.

For years, Gale Elementary School teacher Anne Lee has had her students recite the pledge in three languages — English, Spanish and American Sign Language — as a learning exercise. The kids start with English.

When Lance Altherr learned last week that his son was reciting the pledge in Spanish, he was outraged. He spoke with Lee and then Principal Paula Godfrey, demanding they stop the practice. They wouldn't, and Altherr moved his son to a different class.

In the days before the Internet, that's where the drama would have stopped.

But Altherr, who is a member of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, took his case to the Internet, sending out mass e-mails and posting on message boards.

The result has been a swirling Internet controversy marked by crushing e-mails sent from across the country to Godfrey and the district.

"You are pledging your allegiance, and your honor and loyalty to your country," Altherr said in a phone interview Thursday. "And I find it ironic that anybody would want to do that in a foreign language."

TUSD officials have been chagrined by the e-mail barrage, essentially viewing it as an ugly outgrowth from the nation's roiling debate over immigration, citizenship and the English language.

"It's really not a story," said Chyrl Hill Lander, the district's spokeswoman. "They recite the pledge in English every morning, and they recite the pledge in Spanish. After they recite it in Spanish, then they sign the Pledge of Allegiance."

After Altherr raised his concerns about multilingual pledges of patriotism, Godfrey checked around on the practice. She checked with the district's legal department, and the state's Department of Education; both said it was fine. She even checked with the national office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to ensure it wouldn't offend. The VFW gave her mixed signals on the matter.

A VFW official first said in an e-mail that it was "not disrespectful to say the Pledge of Allegiance in either" language "as long as it was stated as written."

But when the heat turned up, the VFW's national director sent the TUSD Governing Board an e-mail Thursday demanding a stop to the practice of Spanish-language pledges.

"To allow Spanish speaking adults the freedom to pledge their allegiance to our nation in their native language is completely respectful. However, to require English-speaking second-grade students to recite the Pledge in Spanish is another matter entirely," wrote Stephen Van Buskirk. "To the Veterans of Foreign Wars, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is a sacred and meaningful exercise."

Van Buskirk also chastised Godfrey for not identifying herself as a school principal when she first inquired.

On StarNet: For more stories about TUSD and the local education scene, visit azstarnet.com/education.

This isn't the first time the district has been at the heart of such ugly debates related to immigration. The district received national attention following a politically charged speech in 2006 by labor activist Dolores Huerta after she said that "Republicans hate Latinos" at Tucson High Magnet School.

It happened again in November when police called immigration officials to Catalina High Magnet School when a student was in custody for having marijuana, resulting in the deportation of the teen and his family. It led to a student protest march to Downtown.

This time, the district has plenty of outside support for its stance on saying the pledge in Spanish.

"I don't have any problem if they are doing that in English first," said Tom Horne, the state's superintendent of public instruction. "As long as they do the pledge first in English, I think it would be a good way for kids to learn."

Governing Board member Judy Burns offered similar sentiments, saying she viewed the whole controversy as a "spillover" from the immigration debate.

"If they were only saying it in Spanish, I could see where it might irritate somebody who believes you ought to speak English if you are a citizen of this country," she said. "But that's not what they are doing."

And Governing Board President Alex Rodriguez, who served in the military, said "it was clear ... there was no patriotic disrespect intended."

But to Altherr, a 34-year-old landscaper, the disrespect has been made, and the e-mail campaign will continue.

"It's nothing against Spanish," he said. "I would be just as upset if they were making my son say the Pledge of Allegiance in German."

On StarNet: For more stories about TUSD and the local education scene, visit azstarnet.com/education.

● *Contact reporter Josh Brodesky at 807-7789 or jbrodesky@azstarnet.com.*

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.