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Principal puts school election on hold and gets a lesson in democracy

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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Grade Level 8 Word Count 534

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — The principal at a mostly Hispanic middle school delayed the results of a student government election, saying that the winners did not reflect the school's diverse student body. The decision turned the election into a debate about the democratic process.

Everett Middle School Principal Lena Van Haren announced the winners more than a week after the results were known. She said that she had no intention of saying the votes did not count, but she wanted to first engage all the candidates in a discussion about how to ensure underrepresented groups were heard.

One idea was to add representatives to the student council, she said.

"I apologized to parents for causing any anxiety," she said. "I was never planning on changing the elections."

Hispanic and Black Voices Needed

The school of about 500 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders is 56 percent Hispanic or Latino and 9 percent African-American, according to the California Department of Education. The school is in the city's Mission District, where rents have soared as technology workers move in and make the neighborhood more expensive.

Van Haren said African-Americans and Latinos were underrepresented among the students who became president, vice president, treasurer, secretary and representatives for the three grades. Most of the Hispanic or Latino students at the school are native Spanish speakers, but that group was not represented in the winners, she said.

"I feel really strongly that it's not just about having a diverse student council so it looks nice," she said. "I, as principal, want to elevate student voices and see how they are experiencing school. If I'm missing certain groups, I'm not going to get a clear picture."

Parent Says Principal Hurt Democracy

Todd David's son Noah is an eighth-grader at the school. David said the principal undermined the democratic process in the name of social justice.

"I think it sends an unfortunate message to students when you say that the people you elected, they're not representative of you even though you're the ones who chose them," he said.

The argument started with an email that Van Haren sent to parents. She told them the results had come in, but they did not reflect "the diversity that exists at Everett." She invited all the candidates to meet with school leadership before deciding the next step.

"This is complex, but as a parent and a principal, I truly believe it behooves us to be thoughtful about our next steps here," Van Haren wrote. She said that the aim was to have a diverse student council "that is truly representative of all voices at Everett."

Another Parent Backs the Principal

Melissa Daar Carvajal has twin sons who are sixth-graders at Everett. She said Van Haren may have been wrong to delay announcing the election results, but her goal of making it a lesson about ensuring all people are represented was right. The election reflects the fact that some students don't have adequate resources and support to run for student council and win elections, she said.

"I think it's gotten people talking," she said. "I'd like to see them act. I'd like to see them go into the school and support the kind of democracy we all want."

Possible Response Questions:

- Do you agree with parent, Todd David, who believes the principal is undermining "the democratic process in the name of social justice?" Why or why not? Provide evidence to support your stance.
- Do you agree with parent, Melissa Daar Carvajal, who believes the principal's goal of "ensuring all people are represented was right?" Why or why not? Provide evidence to support your stance.

Quiz

1) Read this sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

She said that she had no intention of saying the votes did not count, but she wanted to first engage all the candidates in a discussion about how to ensure underrepresented groups were heard.

How does using the word "engage" affect the tone of the sentence above?

- (A) It conveys the principal's frustration with the underrepresentation of certain groups on the council.
- (B) It conveys the principal's hope that students will take the discussion of underrepresentation seriously.
- (C) It conveys the principal's optimism that the underrepresentation of certain groups on the council will be easily remedied.
- (D) It conveys the principal's desire that students will be actively involved in the discussion regarding underrepresentation.

2) Read the following sentence from the section "Parent Says Principal Hurt Democracy."

She told them the results had come in, but they did not reflect "the diversity that exists at Everett."

The author uses the word "reflect" to mean:

- (A) assist
- (B) promote
- (C) demonstrate
- (D) encourage

3) Read the following paragraph from the section "Hispanic And Black Voices Needed."

Van Haren said African-Americans and Latinos were underrepresented among the students who became president, vice president, treasurer, secretary and representatives for the three grades. Most of the Hispanic or Latino students at the school are native Spanish speakers, but that group was not represented in the winners, she said.

Why does the author include the second sentence in this paragraph?

- (A) It provides an example of the underrepresentation mentioned in general terms throughout the article.
- (B) It shows how seriously Van Haren has taken the issue of racial underrepresentation on the student council.
- (C) It gives specific details about how flawed the student council election process is at Everett Middle School.
- (D) It describes that barriers that Hispanic and Latino students at the school have faced due to their language differences.

4) Which sentence from the article MOST strongly supports the principal's central argument?

(A) The school of about 500 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders is 56 percent Hispanic or Latino and 9 percent African-American, according to the California Department of Education.

(B) "I think it sends an unfortunate message to students when you say that the people you elected, they're not representative of you even though you're the ones who chose them," he said.

(C) "This is complex, but as a parent and a principal, I truly believe it behooves us to be thoughtful about our next steps here," Van Haren wrote.

(D) The election reflects the fact that some students don't have adequate resources and support to run for student council and win elections, she said.