

Parents for Public Schools
San Francisco, Calif.
Sandra Halladey, Associate Director

Oct. 17, 2001

Dick Rogers, Readers' Representative
San Francisco Chronicle

Dear Mr. Rogers,

I appreciate the respect for readers' concerns demonstrated by the Chronicle in appointing you as readers' representative. Please convey my thanks to Chronicle management.

I'm writing to express concern about accuracy and fairness in coverage of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), and to request a consistent, ethical and conscientious policy for correcting errors. I cite specific examples below and enclose hard copies of all Chronicle articles mentioned.

My first concern addresses coverage of the "e-rate grant" scandal. An April 2, 2001, article ("S.F. Schools Can't Afford Huge Grant") covered this complex issue in completely inaccurate fashion.

Here's the gist: The federal government awarded a grant of about \$42 million to SFUSD, contingent on the district's putting up about \$8 million for \$50 million worth of technology. When the grant was announced, SFUSD turned it down. The April 2 article by Julian Guthrie entirely misrepresented the situation, inaccurately indicating that the district refused the grant because "its budget woes are so severe that it cannot come up with the required 17 cents per federal dollar." The article implied that the district was losing out and called the grant a "boon for schools trying to upgrade technology and connect to the Internet."

The article thoroughly mischaracterized the situation. In reality, the grant was strictly for technology that the district did not need and could not use, which is why the district refused it. The grant application had been submitted during a previous district administration by two renegade district staffers, both under investigation for other suspected wrongdoing, without authorization from the superintendent's office. The grant application contains false statements and apparently directs the \$50 million worth of business to a specific contractor under suspicious circumstances that are now under investigation by the FBI, at the instigation of SFUSD Superintendent Arlene Ackerman.

An April 3 column by Ken Garcia ("Educators Racing to Shed Blame/It's oh so easy to point finger at Bill Rojas") perpetuated the inaccurate account and the general bashing of the school district, scathingly referring to "the [missed] joys of getting \$42 million for a cash-strapped school district."

Community members who follow SFUSD issues were already aware of the actual situation when the April 2 and 3 coverage appeared, so the accurate story would not have been difficult to unearth. One parent immediately e-mailed the correct facts to several Chronicle reporters and editors after the April 2 article appeared.

No correction ran. But five-plus months after the original inaccurate coverage appeared, a Sept. 23, 2001, article by Julian Guthrie and Chuck Finnie, written as though the Chronicle had never covered this issue before, reported the situation accurately ("Grand jury investigating S.F. schools/Technology grant flagged by superintendent"). We readers appreciate the eventual accurate coverage, though the headline should have indicated more clearly that the current administration was the instigator rather than the subject of the investigation.

However, according to my understanding of accepted professional newspaper standards, an inaccurate article calls for a correction as soon as the inaccuracy is discovered. A separate article months later, reporting the situation as though it has never been mentioned before, creates confusion rather than clarification and seems at odds with accepted practice for correcting inaccuracies.

The inaccurate Garcia column brings up another issue: that of columnists with no background in covering district issues swooping in to assail the schools without enough research to understand the facts or get the whole story.

Only four days before the inaccurate Garcia column ran, Rob Morse ("Turning Off the Lights at Edison," March 30, 2001) bashed the school board over its investigation of problems with controversial, for-profit Edison Charter Academy. Morse led with savage language: "San Francisco

school bureaucrats specialize in the three Is: incompetence, idiocy and ideology." Yet in classic "check-it-and-lose-it" mode, his long item gave one unattributed side of a complex issue without even alluding to the fact that a visible, credible contingent takes the opposing view.

In another example of over-the-top district-bashing, a March 7 editorial likened the school board to Fidel Castro, Jim Jones and, with the headline "Educating in Goosestep," Adolf Hitler.

And an inaccurate July 12 article ("Judge lets S.F. schools get desegregation funds/Using race for admissions remains banned") about the SFUSD enrollment process remains uncorrected. The Julian Guthrie article covered legal proceedings involving district proposals for achieving court-mandated desegregation. The story got the facts wrong.

The article indicated that the district plan "proposed using race as one of eight factors in assigning students" and "was rebuffed" (in light of a court order prohibiting the use of race as a primary factor in assigning students). That account was inaccurate. In reality, the district proposal uses factors other than race, with the stipulation that if that process fails to achieve desegregation after a period of time, race could be used as a last-ditch, limited factor in certain circumstances. The proposal was accepted, not rebuffed.

Despite e-mails to Chronicle editors, the Chronicle has run no corrections or follow-ups on this erroneous coverage to my knowledge.

In addition, the Associated Press picked up and disseminated the inaccurate story, and apparently based on the AP version, the San Jose Mercury News blasted SFUSD with an editorial accusing the district of ignoring the judge's order not to use race as a factor. The inaccurate, uncorrected coverage thus spiraled into further inaccurate reports and unjustified attacks on the school district.

According to a recent conversation with Ms. Guthrie, she does not intend to cover the nationally discussed verdict that the court handed down last month on the assignment issue. (This topic affects thousands of families and deserves adequate coverage, as the school application process is now under way. It's news!)

All these coverage problems appear to be part of a Chronicle pattern of portraying SFUSD as a dysfunctional, underachieving district - when the Chronicle covers the district at all.

Many readers perceive that the Chronicle underrates and underplays San Francisco public schools and views them as serving only the desperate and downtrodden, who are not a valued readership demographic.

The Chronicle's attitude belies the fact that San Francisco's public schools perform at or above statewide average test scores in almost every area, a significant achievement for an urban district serving many disadvantaged students. "Has any district ever had more underperforming schools and students?" Ken Garcia snarled rhetorically in his April 3 column. The actual answer would show that San Francisco has a much smaller percentage of underperforming schools and students than most urban districts.

We have many middle-class parents who choose public school even when they could afford private or suburban schools. We have a strong culture of support for public schools, many excellent public schools (both prestigious high-visibility schools and lesser-known gems), and a large number of volunteers working to improve schools and remedy problems that do exist.

I'm not calling for puff pieces or cheerleading. I support thorough, fair and thoughtful coverage of our school district (and I urge the Chronicle to cover school board meetings). I hope you can encourage the Chronicle to cover our schools following the same professional journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and thoroughness that we expect from all news reporting. And I invite you to take a closer look at our school community, which would reveal that despite sharing the challenges faced by every urban American school district, SFUSD boasts many successes. The Chronicle's consistent implication that all is gloom and doom does a disservice to children, families, our community and our schools.

Finally, a coalition of children's and school advocacy organizations sent the Chronicle a letter in May, requesting a meeting to discuss coverage of schools and other children's issues. Our letter has gone unanswered despite many follow-up calls. We are re-sending it separately and hope that your intervention will inspire a response. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sandra Halladey