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# PANTHER PAGES

Piedmont Avenue Elementary School's Newsletter

## At Piedmont Avenue Elementary, the Future Is Now

Welcome to Piedmont Avenue Elementary School's inaugural newsletter! In this and future editions, we hope to give voice to our vision: that every student on our campus will develop a love of learning and be prepared for higher education and participation in a global society with respect for diversity.

Thus far this year, we have watched this vision take clear shape at PAE. Principal Zarina Ahmad defers praise to teachers and families, but in a recent Yahoo! group post, Parent-Teacher Association President Elizabeth Briones wrote that "[over] the last two years we have made some wonderful changes to our school and that begins with our principal." Briones, whose two daughters go to PAE, says Ahmad has "really [taken] the initiative to start the college culture in the school...among many other positive changes."

When Ahmad came to PAE, she brought a lifetime of Oakland education experience with her. Born and raised in Oakland, Ahmad attended Oakland public schools from kindergarten through high school, and she has earned her stripes over a distinguished and diverse career in education. 23 years ago she began this journey, teaching in small alternative schools focused on African-centered education. She came to Oakland Unified in 1993, where she quickly earned New Teacher of the Year honors. She spent 14 years teaching kindergarten and 1st grade, while working with 3rd- to 7th-graders during the summers. 2006 brought more acclaim: a Disney Teacher Award for her creativity, innovation, and ability to inspire young learners. Among more than 75,000 nominees, she was one of just 44 winners.

In 2007, she left the classroom to join New Leaders for New Schools, a leadership training organization which



placed her at East Oakland's ACORN Woodland Elementary, where she spent a year as assistant principal. In 2008, she came to Piedmont Avenue Elementary as a new leader with a set of clear, ambitious goals.

Topping that list is a high level of family engagement. "The families at PAE are so important to our school," explains Ahmad. As PTA President Briones puts it, "With the help of our wonderful families we will make this school the BEST." The PTA plans events such as Family Movie Night, Bingo Night, the PAE Fall Festival, and the Spring Carnival. Parents volunteer often in classrooms and on field trips, and family turnout at PAE's frequent multicultural celebrations is always amazing.

"For me that diversity piece is huge," says Ahmad. "17 different languages are spoken on our campus, and we want all of our students to feel they are appreciated and valued for who they are and for their different ethnic backgrounds."

PAE staff is also focused on making learning tangible. "We want our students to know that their learning is relevant," she says. "I want students to see life connections to what they're learning. And when they are in class, we want them to think about their future. One of the sayings I have is: *My future is now*. What they are doing now is preparing them for their future."

To that end, she and the staff have created a palpable college-going culture on campus. Teachers have brought in Stanford alumni to speak, and current Bay Area college students have visited to talk with kids, including a PAE graduate who's now attending San Jose State University. These visitors, says Ahmad, are impressed with the college-minded environment on PAE's campus. "They reflect back to elementary school and say they didn't really think about college that much but wished they had. We want our kids to know that they all have the opportunity if they stay focused and work," she says. "If they do that, they can go to college."

When she envisions their futures, she needn't look far for examples. Her own six children all attend or attended public schools, and the oldest of them "are now college graduates and are starting to feel good about the contributions they are making to society."

"For all of my students at Piedmont Avenue I want the same," says Ahmad. "I want them to gain the knowledge and skills to one day become independent young adults that make positive contributions to society and are able to reflect back on their lives with joy."

### Experience Corps Volunteering: "Wonderful and Fulfilling"

When she retired after working more than 30 years for different health and social service organizations, Karen Patterson went searching for the perfect volunteer opportunity. She tried a few different things, but none quite worked out to her liking. That is, she says, until she found Experience Corps, a national organization dedicated to connecting adults over 55 with volunteering experiences that make a difference in their communities. When she learned that Experience Corps was working with Piedmont Avenue Elementary (PAE) to offer tutoring for students, she saw it as a great fit.

"PAE is near my home, and I really enjoy the diversity here." What's more, she can relate to the grade-school age group, having a nine-year-old granddaughter of her own. "I have to tell you, I'm just so



excited because it took me a long time to figure out what it is I wanted to do in terms of volunteering," says Patterson. "This is truly what I want to do."

Since September, she has been tutoring and mentoring two 4th-graders to give them a boost, working mostly on English and Math. "I work with them quite closely – we're trying to follow their progress through the year," she says. She communicates with their teacher, Dana Graham, and uses the Experience Corps binders that offer materials and activities for every grade level. While the work is serious, she says she and fellow volunteers aim to make it fun as well.

"I like to give them an opportunity to just be free to engage in the subject matter in a way that makes sense to them," she explains. "Sometimes that's with games,

or we'll act out some things. It's just amazing how much they get into it, and I feel like I'm making great progress. I'm excited to see what it will look like come the end of the school year."

"What a wonderful, fulfilling experience it is for me," she says. "I hope the youngsters are enjoying it as much as I am!"



If you'd like to volunteer at Piedmont Avenue Elementary, or are interested in enrollment for 2010-11, please call 510-654-7377 to set up a meeting with Principal Ahmad.

## SUPPORT PIEDMONT AVENUE ELEMENTARY!

Everyone on our campus – from our staff to our families to our volunteers – is committed to offering our students all the resources they deserve. Through our PTA, we have held several successful fundraisers, but the reality is that state cuts have reduced our public school budget significantly, and 2010-11 looks even more challenging. To fill these financial gaps, we must appeal to the wider community. You can help!

To make a tax-deductible donation, visit [www.smallschoolsfoundation.org](http://www.smallschoolsfoundation.org) (designating "Piedmont Avenue Elementary") or send a check to "OSSF/PAE," P.O. Box 20238, Oakland, CA 94620.

Thank you for your support!



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