

Bidding school a fond farewell

Generations of students find its closing bittersweet

By **Leonel Sanchez**, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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EL CAJON — Nereyda Monzon remembers telling her 6-year-old son in March that his school would be closing. She had just finished reading a book about change to him.

"He was sad," Monzon, 33, said about his reaction to the closing of Cuyamaca Elementary in El Cajon. "I said there's not enough money to keep the school open. You have to go to another school."

Generations of El Cajonians learned to read, write and count at the school, which opened 61 years ago during the post-World War II population boom and will close in 15 days.

Such a neighborhood loss of a school is becoming more common, as districts face declining enrollment and financial issues. San Diego Unified officials said they will close North Park Elementary, and they are looking at whether to close other small elementary schools. The Del Mar Union School District also will study the possibility of closing a campus.

Wendy Edwards, who has two daughters at Cuyamaca, is sad about the closure.

"It's more than just a building," she said. "It's kind of like a little community."

The neighborhood that surrounds the south El Cajon school was once rural, then suburban and now part of the city's urban valley. Once predominantly white, the majority of the students now are the children of Latino immigrants and Middle Eastern refugees.

The Cajon Valley Union School District, which oversees Cuyamaca, has lost millions of dollars in attendance-based state funding during the past decade as its enrollment dropped from about 19,000 to 16,000.

"East County has been harder hit with declining enrollment than other areas," Superintendent Janice Cook said. "There's not a lot of growth in East County. Families aren't selling their homes as much. The kids are growing up and moving out."

Cuyamaca had 724 students in 1995, when it was named a California Distinguished School; today it has about 540 students. The school, where most of the students are classified as English learners, is on a federal watch list because of low test scores.

In March, the Cajon Valley district board voted to close Cuyamaca, saving about \$446,000 annually, mostly in administrative salaries. The school's students will be reassigned to Chase and Johnson elementary schools, each about a mile away.

The district closed Ballantyne Elementary in 2004 and may consider closing Crest Elementary in the future to save money.

Cuyamaca Elementary Principal Kathy Skube wants to finish the school year on a positive note. "Every day is a powerful day of teaching and learning," she said.

But closing a school is no easy task.

Parents want to know how their children will adjust to their new schools. Cuyamaca Elementary is planning a farewell ice cream social during the final week of classes. Teachers will pack their belongings the following week.

Longtime neighborhood residents said they will miss the school.

"It was a big part of my life for so many years," said Nadine Merritt, 73, whose children and grandchildren attended the school.

A former PTA president and office manager, who moved into the neighborhood in the late 1960s, Merritt remembers the ice cream socials, Halloween carnivals and other activities that brought the community together.

"There's a lot of history there, but you know times change," she said.

The Cuyamaca Elementary School sign will come down eventually. But the campus will not go dark.

In August, the Excellence and Justice in Education Academy will move onto the campus. The charter school opened four years ago at Chase Elementary, after the district closed Ballantyne. Several Ballantyne parents enrolled their children at the Spanish-English-language immersion program, rather than send them to district-assigned schools.



Cuyamaca Elementary School parent Ana Laura Castaneda (right) read to a table full of kindergartners during a Family Reading Friday program last month. The school, which opened 61 years ago during the post-World War II population boom in El Cajon, will close June 19. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune) -



Cuyamaca Elementary Principal Kathy Skube picked names during a raffle held for parents taking part in a Family Reading program last month at the El Cajon school. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune)

SAYING GOODBYE

Farewell Ice Cream Social

When: 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. June 17

Where: Cuyamaca Elementary School lunch area, 851 S. Johnson Ave., El Cajon

Admission: Free for current and former students, their families and community members

TRIBUTE

Cuyamaca Elementary fifth-grader Aryanna Edwards and her mother, Wendy, wrote a poem about the closing of the school.

Cuyamaca Cougars, today's your final roar.

Don't be sad or be upset.

Let's take a look back and not forget.

The district by law must provide rent-free space to the charter school, which needs a bigger facility to add a middle school.

The charter school, which receives funding directly from the state, will enroll more than 400 students and pay for its own staffing, supplies and utilities.

Eva Pacheco, the charter's executive director, said the school works closely with immigrant families and will bring some of its traditions to the neighborhood, such as opening up Mother's Day celebrations to the entire community.

Dozens of Cuyamaca parents want to enroll their children at her school, though there is limited space, she said.

"They started calling immediately," Pacheco said. "Parents are looking for the best place for their children.

Edwards, who moved into the neighborhood eight years ago because of Cuyamaca Elementary, protested its closing, but she is now resigned that it will happen.

Edwards helped her fifth-grade daughter, Aryanna, write a poem about the school, which its PTA plans to distribute to students.

It ends this way: "Cuyamaca Elementary, you could do so much more. But now the time has come for you to close your doors."

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You've set the foundation for many boys and girls to take what they've learned and rule the world.

You've raised peace builders by teaching them respect.

You've also taught them how to regret the bad decisions and all their mistakes by turning them into something great.

You taught them to spell. You taught them to add.

You gave them some of the best memories they'll always have.

You taught them to tell time and count money too.

The Pledge of the Allegiance for the Red, White and Blue.

Not only did you feed their minds but you fed their bodies too.

Providing good nutrition and supporting milk is good for you.

You took them on many field trips, showing learning can be fun.

And imagine, no children were lost — not a single one.

You have excellent staff and great teachers too.

I have to sit and wonder how hard this is for you?

Cuyamaca Elementary, you could do so much more.

But now the time has come for you to close your doors.