

District officials concede certain specialized multi-lingual programs at Alexander D. Sullivan School P.S. 30 need better resources, particularly to lower class sizes, and are promising to try rectifying the situation by the start of the 2017-18 school year.

At the board of education's Oct. 18 caucus, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles and Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Aldo Sanchez-Abreu promised a teacher and a parent addressing the issue that they will look to bring about smaller class sizes.

Also, they said they are committed to furthering in other ways what Lyles described as (at least as of 2016-17) highly successful programs moving forward at the K-5 Seaview Avenue school - a magnet for children coming from other area schools for such purposes - and in other designated facilities districtwide.

Programs under the multilingual umbrella include English as a Second Language (ESL), Dual Languages and Bilingual.

In terms of lowering class sizes, it will simply require the district to eventually commit more certified teachers to those programs, Lyles and Sanchez-Abreu acknowledged.

Sullivan School Second Grade teacher Maria Martinez told the board she has previously seen problems, first-hand, every day.

She urged officials to respond to the perceived deficiencies since Sullivan's specialized programs in her grade - and others - take in qualifying students from other elementary schools during the school year.

Yet on this night, Martinez, a 20-year district ESL veteran, wore two hats. She spoke as a teacher and a grandmother, with a grandchild she feels suffers with other children in a different class at the same

school.

"I do believe there is an overcrowding issue," Martinez said, citing 29 students currently in her granddaughter's Dual Languages classroom, which, she said she anticipated, will only grow as additional pupils are directed to it.

"We also get students at the end of the old year, and the beginning of the new year," Martinez said.

She predicted her granddaughter's class is poised to gain "five or six more" Dual Languages students in 2016-17, bringing the number to about 35.

The teacher insisted her own observations during 2015-16 showed that, given the level of teacher-to-student commitment required for such specialized programs, it was difficult to most effectively teach them to levels even as low as from 20-22 students.

Martinez advised district officials her research confirmed that, "Just as I expected, class size is important to student outcomes."

She added that, in researching one particular study of a similar program, it revealed, "Gains are stronger in smaller classes in every grade."

"I'm here to make you aware of this and, hopefully, you'll be able to find a way to lower the class sizes," Martinez told the board, assuring doing so will give the children the proper "level of attention" they deserve.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Education, following a comprehensive two-year review, concluded the city's entire English Language Learners (ELL) initiative, was severely deficient in a wide range of areas.

The results of the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR) report, initiated before Lyles' arrival in 2012, prompted the superintendent to sign a consent decree in December 2014 with the office, part of the federal Department of Justice. She assured significant improvements would be made by defined timelines for each deficiency cited.

The federal review essentially concluded the district's ELL practices and offerings were discriminatory, compared to the rest of the student population.

Concerns raised included placing ELL students in separate and unequal facilities, limiting access to specialized programs compared to non-ELL students, and narrowing the inclusion of ELL students in the district's Alternative Language Program through asking improper questions on a survey parents of candidates must take in determining potential placement.

Martinez's daughter, Melissa, expressed her own first-hand frustrations as a parent, telling the board, "Speaking to my daughter, she says, 'Every day, there's another kid in my class,'" joining the Dual Languages program.

But the parent maintained the teacher in that class is "overwhelmed," given there are also "a large number with behavioral problems."

"I want the very best for her (daughter)," the mother said. "and not only for my daughter, but for all the children. It's not fair to the teachers, it's not fair to the students and it's not fair that they suffer."

Sanchez-Abreu acknowledged the entire district now only has a small number of teachers licensed to deliver the affected programs (22), leading to larger class sections than the administration considers optimum.

He said the system will need to find a way to recruit more instructors to become certified to teach the programs optimally - costing it more money.

Lyles conceded that there have been some bumps in upgrading the targeted programs, at P.S. 30 and elsewhere, but attributed them to the growth which has resulted from efforts to make them better.

She described the school as "very much being the victim of its own success," in implementing the recommended improvements.

"I was in the school last week and we spoke to the administration," said Lyles, assuring the board it was committed to modifying the programs in line with Martinez's' concerns.

"We have too many students in our Dual Language classroom," the superintendent acknowledged, citing one observation made during her P.S. 30 visit. "And we're trying to work with the school."

"We will be making changes," she assured, mentioning the school's Dual Language and ESL classes in particular.

Board Members Gerald Lyons and Lorenzo Richardson expressed concerns over potential shortfalls in such programs throughout Jersey City. Richardson reminded his colleagues that the district must aggressively implement the OCR's requirements.

"I think we should be spending every penny available to get as many people (licensed teachers) as we can ready to meet the needs of the students," Lyons said.

"We certainly see this as a priority," Lyles replied.

And, more than spending money, attracting additional qualified instructors - be they incoming graduates or those now on staff - will require affected personnel enrolling in training courses to meet specific academic requirements.

According to the New Jersey Department of Education's website, for ESL, to teach the program in any school, current teachers enrolling in an approved "post-baccalaureate certification program" must have "a minimum of 13 semester-hour credits," as well as demonstrate they reached a certain level of proficiency in specified oral and written English language tests.

Richardson expressed concern that the district might not be in compliance with the OCR's requirements two years after the decree was signed.

Yet, despite her acknowledging certain shortcomings in the relevant programs, Lyles replied, "We're not out of compliance. ... We continue to fulfill their requirements, so we're in compliance."

While he said he did not get a copy of the OCR report, Board President Vidya Gangadin told Richardson, "A copy went to the board members a few months back and we did discuss it at the meeting."

By Chris Neidenberg