



WW STAFF

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A DIVERSITY TRAINING SESSION FOR SPANISH-SPEAKING PARENTS IN PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS WAS MISSING JUST ONE THING: SPANISH.

BY BETH SLOVIC bslovic@wwweek.com

On the evening of Jan. 27, about 50 parents from three Southeast Portland schools gathered at Creative Science School to learn how to overcome racial barriers.

The session, called “Beyond Diversity,” is part of Portland Public Schools’ training programs to “deinstitutionalize racism.” Sessions include talks on “Personalizing Race” and “Examining Whiteness.”

Instead, what many parents got was a lesson in the same barriers that so often trip up minority students.

About a quarter of the parents who attended the first training session spoke only Spanish. But the school district provided material for the intensive workshop only in English. No interpreters were present.

Lorenzo Poe, chief equity officer at PPS, says the district made a well-meaning mistake. “It’s one of those times where we had good intent, we moved forward,” Poe says. “And then it’s, ‘Oops, OK, I should have seen that.’”

The training is part of the district’s ongoing diversity campaign, “Courageous Conversations,” on which the district has already spent more than \$2.5 million in a big push by Superintendent Carole Smith to close racial disparities in the Portland schools.

Subsequent sessions at Creative Science, Bridger and Harrison Park schools included Spanish interpreters. Printed materials were also translated.

Kim Nguyen, a retired PPS employee who worked in translation services and dual-language immersion until 2014, says the lack of materials at the first session raises questions about the district’s ability to serve families who speak foreign languages.

“The district has spent millions of dollars

on Courageous Conversations,” Nguyen says, “and how they provide the information to non-English-speaking families will show how successfully they have achieved their mission.”

Since 2007, when Superintendent Carole Smith took over, PPS has paid \$1.8 million to Pacific Educational Group, the San Francisco company that created Courageous Conversations and Beyond Diversity.

The district has spent even more covering the costs of training for teachers and other employees. That includes sending 89 representatives to New Orleans in October for a national Courageous Conversations summit. One of the sessions covered “the Latino experience through language.”

How such a mistake could have been made by a district so committed to diversity is still unclear. According to one explanation, the terminology the racial diversity program uses is difficult to translate.

In a Jan. 28 email, obtained by *WW* through a public records request, Veronica Bañuelos, a school-family partnerships coordinator, wrote she was told that PPS officials couldn’t agree on how to translate many of the concepts in the training session’s 76-page workbook.

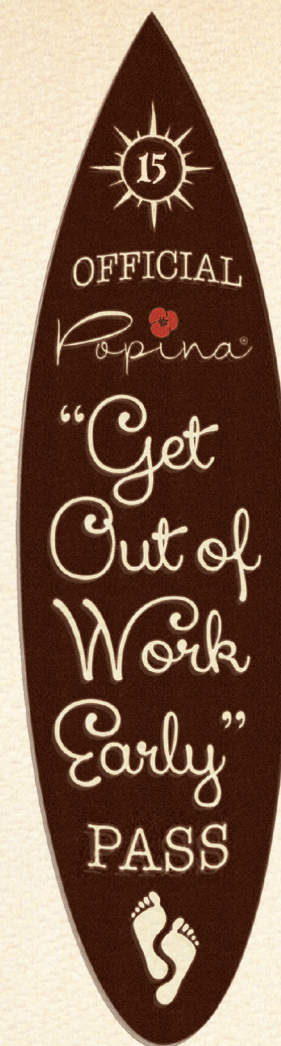
The booklet talks, for example, about “social construction of knowledge,” “racial consciousness” and “whiteness.” Still, Bañuelos wrote, the district had an “obligation” to provide some sort of translation.

PPS chief spokesman Jon Isaacs told *WW* that Pacific Educational Group, which oversees Courageous Conversations courses, owns the copyright to the material and didn’t allow the district to translate it.

Isaacs later corrected his statement, saying a translation had been approved but didn’t get finished in time. “There was a miscommunication,” Isaacs said, “and that’s not acceptable.”

PPS now wants to offer Beyond Diversity training to more parents. Poe, the equity chief, says the district is working to translate all Courageous Conversations material into Spanish and other languages.

“We’re trying to get multiple languages translated so we can do it in a very comprehensive way,” he says. *WW*



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