

Evelyn Alemán Macias: Why I'm a Vergara parent

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By Evelyn Alemán Macias

"Maybe you're just not good at math. Some people are good at some things, and others aren't. Maybe math isn't your thing." Those were the words my child, Julia Macias, heard from her second-grade teacher at a San Fernando Valley elementary school when she struggled to learn new math concepts.

At the time, I didn't realize that my daughter was hearing these words throughout the day in her classroom until the teacher repeated those same words to me during a parent-teacher conference.

My 7-year-old child believed her teacher because she was an adult whom she trusted. Over time, this began to erode my child's confidence in the subject — and in herself. When I repeatedly shared with the teacher my concerns about Julia no longer wanting to attend school — her class in particular — she complained about how Julia simply wasn't performing in any subject. Worst of all, she suggested Julia — who is now a 13-year-old honor student — might have learning disabilities.

This is the story of why my family joined Vergara vs. State of California — the lawsuit challenging five statutes in California law that protects some teachers, even bad ones, and created a system that ultimately harms students.

Last week, Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Rolf Treu ruled that those statutes were violating the rights of students to get an equal public education, especially for those in low-performing schools.

We experienced first hand how students are affected by the current rules. When I met with the principal to ask for guidance about the second-grade teacher, she told me that the teacher was the problem, not Julia. But since the principal couldn't do anything because of the teacher's tenured status, she recommended I move Julia to a classroom with a recently hired teacher.

I took the principal's advice, and within a week of the change, I saw a difference. I saw the same child I dropped off on the first day of school — an inquisitive young student who was happy to learn, unafraid to ask questions and who simply enjoyed her school experience.

There never was any indication that Julia had the problems that the first teacher had reported.

At the beginning of the next school year, I learned that the new teacher had been pink slipped and wasn't coming back. I've since learned that this teacher was pink-slipped three more times at different schools for being a last hire. Though she was an outstanding teacher, the rules protect senior teachers and toss out newer ones, regardless of their ability, when the budget is cut.

I'd like to say that this was an isolated case in Julia's education, but it wasn't. Every year, we hope that Julia (and her sister Lucy) will be "lucky" enough to get great teachers, and for the most part she has. She's had amazing teachers who have inspired her love for math and science. But she's also had teachers who have negatively impacted her learning. Her academic performance from year to year rises or falls dramatically depending on the strength of her teacher.

The difference now is that I've gotten smarter about how to deal with it. I now know that it is easier to remove my child from the classroom of an ineffective teacher than it is to remove the ineffective teacher from the classroom.

I've heard the argument that poverty — rather than teacher effectiveness — is the main factor in student performance. Poverty isn't a factor in our case — neither is lack of parent engagement.

Students and parents simply don't have a voice when it comes to education. Any and all discussion about education is often debated between unions and districts, while the state Legislature — the body mostly responsible for education policy — remains silent or completely detached from the plight of parents and students.

Like so many parents and students throughout the state, we believe in our public education system and believe that all students deserve to have a great teacher in every classroom. We believe that stellar teachers shouldn't be fired because they're new while teachers who negatively impact student learning are kept because of seniority laws. It doesn't make sense!

Judge Treu agreed. When he ruled in favor of the nine children who are plaintiffs in the case, including Julia, he started us off on a path to ensure that our education system — and our laws — works for all of California's students and teachers.

This is a historic opportunity and we must not allow it to be squandered.

Evelyn Alemán Macias is a full-time business owner and mom in Los Angeles.