

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin ("FFSJ") Press Conference Statement re *Ella T. v. State of California*

My name is Sammy Nunez, and I am the Executive Director of Fathers & Families of San Joaquin. FFSJ is a community based organization based in Stockton, California that works to promote healthy communities, including the positive development of youth and families through organizing, advocacy, and direct services. Our organizational mission is to promote the cultural, spiritual, economic, and social renewal of the most vulnerable families in Stockton and the greater San Joaquin Valley.

Literacy is cornerstone to our mission and imperative to the health and dignity of the youth and families we serve.

The data on literacy test scores in Stockton, and specifically in schools like Van Buren tells a story. It shows us that the kids in our community do not have access to even a basic education. When the state fails to provide schools that are capable of teaching our kids to read, that tells me that the State of California has abandoned the kids of Van Buren, and abandoned the kids of Stockton.

Sadly, the unjustifiably low test scores we see in this complaint are not a surprise to our community and our organization. Our youth and families are intimately familiar with the tragic consequences of a public education system that does not teach our children to read. One of our staff members, Raymond Aguilar is a powerful example of what happens when the state fails to provide schools that educate our children.

Raymond stated, "I grew up in Stockton, where by the time I was a sixteen year old high school student, I had a 5th grade reading comprehension level. I became institutionalized at the age of 9 years old, as I was in and out of the foster care system. As a ward of the court without proper love, support and representation, I would look at documents concerning my life trajectory that I couldn't understand and ultimately, signing documents that gave away my rights away as a child".

A 5th grade reading level does not let you read your high school history text book or write an essay or read the instructions for a chemistry experiment. "I couldn't do any of those things as a sixteen year old should, and instead was forced down a path that led to incarceration. It was only during his time in prison that I learned to read and write. I learned to read not in California's schools, but California's prison system. Unfortunately, I am realizing that not much has changed and many children and youth are forced down this same path of despair and hopelessness."

Our state let Raymond down. And today, the state continues to fail students across Stockton and kids across the state, especially in low-income communities of color. At FFSJ, we break down the barriers to kids receiving a quality education. Literacy is at the core of our mission, and it is at the core of what our children need and we are responsible as adults to provide them as a foundation.

Without the ability to read or write, many children become frustrated, act out in school, and are subject to exclusionary punitive discipline that pushes children out of the classroom and into the prison system. As a result, our failing schools supply the next generation of inmates in a cycle of incarceration and illiteracy that has robbed our communities of far too many fathers, mothers, children and siblings. It's time for the state of California to step up and make sure our kids receive the education they deserve.