

# The Boston Globe

BOSTON.COM

## Overlooked city school creates a buzz

By Jenna Russell | GLOBE STAFF    DECEMBER 25, 2011



The first time she brought her 4-year-old to Mendell Elementary School, Ellen Shattuck Pierce braced herself for disappointment.

She knew little about the small Roxbury school in Egleston Square; she had never heard other parents talk about it. An artist and educator living in Jamaica Plain at the time, Pierce had imagined her son at the nearby Curley School, or in the wildly popular bilingual program at Hernandez Elementary - just around the corner from Mendell, but a world apart in reputation.

But her son had not been assigned to those better-known schools in Boston's public school lottery. Under pressure to find an alternative in the fall of 2009, she

went to tour Mendell.

Whatever the opposite of buzz is, this school had it. The year that Pierce entered the school lottery, only one family, citywide, had listed Mendell as its first choice for prekindergarten. None had ranked it first for kindergarten. The Kilmer and Lyndon schools in West Roxbury, by contrast, were each the first choice of more than 60 kindergarten families.

“I thought it was going to look desperate, because I was desperate at the time,” Pierce said of her first visit. “Instead I found a lovely, cheerful, well-lit place, where kids were happy and engaged.”

Three other mothers of prekindergarteners - also white, in their 30s, and coming to terms with a school that wasn't their first choice - had the same surprised reaction. After their children had settled in, after they had gotten over their amazement at the marble floors and art and music classes, outdoor classroom and dynamic principal, they remained amazed by one thing: how much other parents did not know about Mendell.

“It was completely off the map,” said Karen Pfefferle of Jamaica Plain, curator of a corporate art collection, who enrolled her twin daughters there in 2009. “People were saying, ‘What is that, a private school?’ ”

They might have shrugged and let the school's low profile go, but then, in the middle of their children's first year there, the district reassigned the principal they loved. For the four mothers who had embraced Mendell - Pierce, Pfefferle, Kristin Barrali, and Flavia Graf Reardon - the principal, Karen Cahill, was a huge part of its appeal. With her transfer to a larger, more popular school in Dorchester, they worried that Mendell was “a sinking ship.”

As they fought the reassignment and helped choose Cahill's replacement, they came to a realization: Raising awareness of their school, and polishing its reputation, could prove vital to its long-term survival.

“What feels disturbing, as a BPS parent, is the sense of instability, that at any time they could close your school or move your principal or teacher,” said Reardon, a teacher at a charter school in Boston. “Buzz didn't matter to us, but it's what we tried to create. . . . To the administration, to parents, buzz matters.”

To spread the word about the Mendell School, the four mothers targeted the West Zone Parents Group, an influential online forum with hundreds of members in Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and West Roxbury. On the website, they talked up the Mendell School and answered questions.

Away from their computers, they spoke at informational meetings for families, invited reporters to cover school events, and led school tours for prospective parents. They recruited a dozen families to march in a Jamaica Plain parade wearing “Magical Mendell” T-shirts in May 2010; afterward, they set up a table where children painted flower pots while Mendell supporters chatted with their parents. “We did get a reputation as evangelists,” said Barrali, of Roslindale, the publisher of Nonprofit Quarterly magazine.

At times that role could be uncomfortable. Barrali recalls debating test scores with one father; she, like the other mothers, acknowledges the school is not for everyone.

Mendell does not offer advanced work for its ablest learners, and its MCAS scores, like those at other city schools, are well below state averages, with about 30 percent of students scoring proficient or higher.

Still, by last spring, the buzz about Mendell had begun to spread. It is still not one of Boston’s hottest schools, or anywhere close, but 16 families listed it as their first, second, or third choice for kindergarten this year, twice as many as two years ago.

Most of the new students have come from whiter, more affluent neighborhoods, quickly shifting the school demographics. From 2009 to 2011, the percentage of Mendell students who are black decreased from 36 to 29 percent, while the percentage of students who are white increased from 6 to 16 percent. The school’s first-grade classes are full, after years with empty seats, and the kindergarten waiting lists are growing.

The school’s young, energetic principal, Julia Bott, is grateful for the momentum. But she also worries how the changes will be seen by the school’s black and Hispanic families.

“As the demographics shift, we need to figure out how to meld our Roxbury identity and our Jamaica Plain identity,” said Bott. “We don’t want the message to be, ‘The Mendell will be a good school when it’s more white.’ ”

Most of the 40 prospective parents who showed up to tour the school recently were white. So Bott is reaching out to families who don't read blogs or go on tours, she said, scheduling visits to Roxbury housing developments to meet parents.

School leaders are also working to involve more black and Hispanic families in the Mendell Parent Committee. Started three years ago with a handful of members, the group attracted 30 people to a recent meeting, held in a crowded classroom on a rainy night. They snacked on popcorn, considered raising money for ceiling tiles to reduce cafeteria noise, and brainstormed a list of raffle prizes for the school's upcoming Winter Feast potluck.

Back when her children didn't get into the Curley School in Jamaica Plain, "it was like being excluded from a country club," Pfefferle said.

Now that sense of loss is gone, and Pfefferle, like the other Mendell mothers, sees her lottery disappointment through a different lens.

"All that anxiety doesn't matter now," said Pierce.

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