

Madison School Board Interviews

Melania Alvarez (February, 2004)

**JIM ZELLMER:** I'm with Melania Alvarez, as candidate for the Madison School Board, and we'll have a few questions today. The first one is, Melania, if you could describe your background.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Okay. I'm Mexican born. I've been in the United States for 21 years now. I manage a . . . and am actually also a mathematician. And then I have a master's degree in . . . University. And I have a master's degree from UW in economics and also one in anthropology. I have worked at the University for the last eight years doing quantitative assessment analysis. What I do is I test how much mathematics students know and learn while they are there, okay, and if they have the math requirements that they need in order to, you know, take courses physics, in geography, in biology.

This is not just math . . . we want to know if these people actually have the quantitative skills in order to go into this honor career and fields . . . so that's what I do. Also for four years, from first, fourth grade, I was a volunteer at Thoreau. I used to go there once, twice a week to help teachers, you know, teach some kids with math and also their Spanish, if they have some problems and try to introduce them into English and things like that. And, well, so that stuff, that my background.

Now this background help me to see what happens at both ends, what is happening with children in elementary school and what is happening when we get them at the University, and how well-prepared they are, and what is going on with the programs, how the curriculum is changing, how, you know, and how much, how well these kids have learned math. I think the standards are going up or going down.

And I've started to be really concerned because, around three years ago, while I was looking at the Madison Metropolitan School District, that where west side, I looked, I saw that they wanted to change the curriculum and they wanted to implement this Discovery Math, which the needs that will say is controversial is not a great failure if it was where it had been implemented at California, at Minnesota, and Michigan. They have . . . in California. They have produced . . . in Minnesota. In Michigan, there, because this where all these programs started, I mean, this big fight and so this is what's going on.

Also, to my dismay, I found out that Connected Math is now fully implemented in all the middle schools and this is going to be very soon the only option our kids are going to have. And so, and then, I started to get complaints from teachers from high school who are seeing that our kids are not learning algebra. They're not learning any basics of trigonometry, you know, or even arithmetic, the basic skills in order to be able to go into high school.

And so then the educators have now asked them to get into their new program that they have for high school so that then the kids can, you know, grow on with the project with the, you know, the school. And this is called plot(?) that now is being implemented at East High, and that people in West High and Memorial are fighting, they don't want that thing in their school, now being implemented there.

What happens, if a child goes through this program without any supplementation, which, thank God, doesn't happen, you know, completely, these kids basically will be rendered useless to do any kind of science, and this is shocking. And I know that this is true because there were kids that were under this system for five years in California and the kids, well, the kids that were on more than five years on this system in California, when they tried to again, you know, teach them and work with them, these kids couldn't get it. It was very, very hard. So we have effectively lost the generation in California. Children, and many of them, really, really . . . and that's lost. I never want this to happen here.

What happened also is I went and I talked, three years ago, I went and I talked to people at the Madison Metropolitan School District and I asked them if they were trying to implement Discovery, if they were going to do, you know, Connected Math for everybody, and they told me that that was not what they were going to do. And I don't know if that parents go . . . parents go there, they discuss, they talk with people, they will assure you you're out there thinking that, you know, that they told you truth, and then come find later on that that's not the case.

So all these . . . reasons are running is the mathematics, but it's also, you know, all the parts of the curriculum, like reading. There are things that work, phonics work. Let's not forget that the best spellers, the people that go to spelling bee in Washington, those people learn, you know, through phonics. I don't think it's the only way. I think also for language has good points and direct language also . . . work. So why don't we use all these things in a balanced way so that our kids can learn how to read and write, and spelling is important.

I also have seen people, teachers who say, well, as long as they write, you know, it doesn't matter how the spelling is important because those things stay with you forever. So it is history, I want our kids to know the history of our country. I want our kids to know the geography of our country, but not just our country, also all North, South America, Europe, you know . . . every kid, and we're losing that.

**JIM ZELLMER:** So give your background, how do you feel that supports your School Board aspirations?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** What do you mean by that?

**JIM ZELLMER:** Well, how do you think that your background makes a better candidate for the School Board?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** I think that I know what's going on about all these education curriculums. I know who are the experts and why they're implementing this thing. I know how many of these curriculums have been implemented in most places, and what curriculums have failed, and what curriculums are succeeding. And what happens is

that one of the main jobs of the School Board is to choose curriculums, set curriculums, and the implementation of those curriculums. And, unfortunately, they have not been doing that in the last year. They've been . . . that to the Madison Metropolitan School District.

And, of course, then the interest of the few group of educators who want to leave their mark in the world with their own system, this is the way you become famous for life. If your system, if your methodology work, then that's it, you know, you're remembered for generations, yeah, and so that is, so this, you know, it's like a religion, something like that.

And so what happens is that we have to really look at all the possibilities out there, which are being looked at. Like I said, in 19, in late '90s, when these curriculums were starting to be implemented, we already knew that these curriculums were controversial and they were failing. And so I am up to date to all those things. I know math. I'm also a history, you know, enthusiast and I care. I know how the system works up and also down, you know, from the beginning, from elementary school to . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** The University.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** . . . to the University.

**JIM ZELLMER:** . . .

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** And who is who in teaching methodology that can help me.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Excellent, excellent. So if you were elected, what do you hope to accomplish during your first . . .

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** I would like to go and review all the curriculums, the math, the reading, and to look at what has failed and what's succeeding. I want to also see if our curriculums stand on their own. Let's not kid ourselves. In this city, most parents supplement. Many teachers supplement, but not all. And so there's a group of children there that the only thing they get is the curriculum as is, okay. Are those children being educated? Does the curriculum . . . happened? I will tell you that in math, you know, that I was the one to see what's happening with reading. I want to see what's happening with geography, with history, with science, okay. And I would like to say, I change, as soon as possible, those curriculums that are not working.

**JIM ZELLMER:** What do you see as your financial priorities for the District, you know, do you, obviously, there's been ongoing discussions about referendums in school spending and do you have any comments or opinions on that?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Well, I am, I would like to see how the money is spent and also how, for example, now, there's this new bilingual program, also another failure in California, bilingual education the way it's set up here, which is that you take, you remove the Latino kids from the classroom and you put them in a Spanish-speaking class with a little bit of English.

And also they feel comfortable, you start incrementing English and stuff, that doesn't work. That doesn't work. And now they tell it takes seven years to become bilingual. That's a lie. That's just, where you now you do is just those kids again, they will not learn English well. That's one of the priorities. Perhaps the program like the one in . . . like Nuestro Mundo, which is a charter school that they wanted to start, that would work. But the way as it is, bilingual education is not working.

But you now what? Now we have all these people hired in administration, all these specialists, all these people, and it is all this money in something that is not going to work and it's not working. The same thing, the math curriculum is not curriculum since it's a lot of cutting and pasting, and to learn materials and all stuff is incredibly expensive, you know, and how it's implemented. So how is spending also the money, you know. It is through . . . we're spending in curriculum, but is, first of all, is this the best curriculum, why is it so expensive, how to spend it.

And also bilingual education said, now we have this whole department of bilingual education and the management at Madison Metropolitan School District with all these people, do we really need to hire all these experts, do we need to hire all these people, you know. So we have to go and look at who has been hired for what the person is doing, you know, that's why. I don't want to cut any part of teaching. I don't want to cut teachers. I don't want to cut, you know, the teaching experience. Music, music is an important part of education.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Absolutely.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** And I hate this emotional blackmail that they go through every time they, you know, they want us to vote for referendum. I think we have to do is say, why you are not balancing the budget? Let's not forget that they had expected just 5% increment in our property values and actually we have an average 10%, and so that makes more money for the School Board and for the School District, and that was money now, why? So we should really, that's one thing. Now even at the end of the day, we need the money, then we need the money.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Okay? And I'm not against, you know, paying more for education.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Sure.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Personally, I am paying for education, but I would like know, I think there's a lot of waste, and many people are complaining that there's a lot of waste there. And that's what we have to do, cut away, see how we're spending it, and then from there, if we need more, we need more, yeah.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Okay. We'll stop. Melania, what are your thoughts on the role of technology in the classroom from elementary to high school? I know that some classrooms are teaching things like Microsoft Power Point and other tools, you know.

Do you feel that that has a role in today's classroom or do you think that there's other priorities?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** I think that, if we, I think those things are good if we actually have the money and we can spend on that. I think, unfortunately, there are other things that are more important, like knowing basic math and reading, that we are not getting right, and I think it's where the money should go first because if we can first cover basic education, then technology is fine.

But also what people has to understand is that learning Microsoft and learning, this is not teaching kids to program. It's just teaching kids to become consumers of computers, that's all there is. Also you don't need years and years and years of being taught these things in order to learn them, okay, and perhaps these kids start in middle school, you know, it wouldn't be a disaster if they don't start in elementary school.

There was a man in India who actually put several computers around in India, just in the wall, without any instructions, just a keyboard, you know, stuff that will, and the kids were actually able to figure out after a few hours of playing with it. So it is, you don't need to be a rocket scientist. You don't need to be incredibly bright to get this stuff, especially children. Perhaps for adults, you know, but for children, they get it.

And what bothers me is that I see more on teaching kids to become consumers of the computer than programmers. In order to become a good programmer, you need to know math, for example, you need to know logic, you need to know algebra, and actually those are skills that now, thanks to these new programs, many kids are not going to learn.

There's also, I'm really disturbed about the use of calculators. I think that from early on, especially with these programs like . . . Investigations and Connected Math, the new philosophy is that our kids don't need to learn our tables, tables of multiplication or long division or any of those things because now you have calculators, so we don't need to subject children to the frustration of learning or memorizing these skills. There's a lot more about just memorizing these skills.

Long division, the algorithm that's long division, is one of the first, you know, difficult algorithms that the child has to learn, but it is an algorithm where you have knowledge there, you know, the tables of multiplication, you know how to add and subtract, and then for the first time, you're confronted with taking decisions according to what you see there with the numbers. And this is important because this teaches you a way of thinking, a way of attacking problem, and we're losing this.

So I am against the use of calculators, you know, for, basically for elementary school. They have for middle school, perhaps for a few classes, and that will now be the math class, and also for high school. I started, I've been working with computers now for over, I don't know, 25 years now, well, 25, 20, 34, 35 years. I started when I was 18 years old. I have never seen a computer in my life and I have to learn program. That was part of the courses I have to take at the University.

Well, because of my math skill, I was able to learn program within six months, and I started with, I started in ancient times(?), but, and then within a year, I was actually even a tutor for kids in other fields, like, well, law, and that they didn't know math. So, actually, I know, I was one of those people who, let's assume now for the standards of today, I came late into computers, but I have the basic skills of thinking and

knowledge. And I did not become just a consumer of products, I am a person that can program. I know I have learned to program more than 20 different languages, okay. Why? Because I know math, because I know logic, because I know how to think, and I know how these computers work. So I think technology is okay, but it shouldn't be so much a priority. I think the priority is to first teach kids those skill that would allow them to become producers, not just consumers.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Excellent. Today's public schools, Melania, are in many ways the front lines of a great deal of society's challenges from illiteracy to childcare and basic nutrition. Can you comment on where you see this going and what the role of schools and the School Board should be beyond the core educational services?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Well, I'm really disturbed about something that's happening, for example, with behavior at schools. There are some, there's, lately I've been getting complaints from many parents that their children in the classrooms that have these behavioral problems, and then what happens is that the whole class goes into trying to control this child and there's no learning going on.

I believe that the school has a responsibility of teaching a child how to behave, but up to a point. I think that also parents have the responsibility, okay, and that if you have a child that completely disturbs the classroom, you cannot allow that child to stay in the school. I mean, I'm not saying that just the first time the child is talking he should be out, but I think you should warn the child, you should talk to the parents, you should work so that, you know, you, the child can stay in the classroom. But after all that, if the child does not behave, we have to find other options.

Now is it the responsibility of the school or is it the responsibility of the parent? I think that perhaps people who will not agree with me is, I think it's the responsibility of school, only if there's a real problem with parents, and then it's the responsibility of society. But I would like to see schools are places where people go, children go to learn, where children are not disturbed by great disruptions in behavior, where children learn how to behave and how to respect everybody else, where bullies are, you know, put on notice and they suffer the consequences.

And so I think this is a question, what do we expect from schools? Are schools social life or are schools places of learning? And I think that's what we have to choose. If we choose that to be a place where we feel, where we take care of children, where we fully educate them, and where parents completely get rid of their responsibilities, parents and responsibilities, then we should say so, and then you put the consequences of that. But if we want schools to become a place where our children go to learn, then we have to do everything to provide that and parents should take the responsibilities.

There's, now they want to start this fourth grade kindergarten, for four years old, I'm sorry, and I don't know, I don't know about that. We have to really see, you know, I think that for kids, the best thing is to stay home as long as they can. I understand that their parents got, how they need this. And what we have to ask ourselves is, is this something that the school should provide, childcare for four years old, because that's basically what it will be.

And if we decide that this is the way we want to go, I will perhaps call for a referendum on that. We want to go, fine, we want to go for that, but I will not make it

obligatory. I think that if parents want their four years old to stay with them at home, I think that they should stay at home.

Now about lunch, I think what they were saying is that most parents here feed their kids, no, it was breakfast, they want to make that kids go to school to eat breakfast. I don't like that. I think that we have programs where those kids who don't have breakfast at home, they can have breakfast there, but I will not make it mandatory for everybody. I think, you know, actually, those, if the breakfast is going to be at the lunch, you might as well . . . I don't want it to be mandatory. I'm sorry, but I don't think much about what the kids have get for lunches here.

But, and I think that the schools have taken too much on this excuse that parents don't care. Their kid, we care. Many of us parents care and we want to give our children our values, and we want to give, feed our children, and we want, and I don't think that the school should teach our kids some values that we don't want, like with something like sex education. Not everybody agrees with everything that goes on there. And we have to be very careful with what's going on there, in that sense.

And also about feeding our, if the school is not just the world, I think there's a world outside school, and that we parents are there to provide it, and we are all not responsible, and this is something we have to make clear to schools.

**JIM ZELLMER:** What career advice would you give today's students? Obviously, you've had a long and interesting career. So what advice would you give students in middle school, and elementary school, and high school?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** What I will tell them is keep your options open, you know. Perhaps there is a course that you don't like and you don't put a lot of effort in, put the effort, just even if you never like it, even if you end up being ninety years old or ten and never really like that, it's a matter of discipline, self-discipline, you know. And also you never know, for many years, I said, why am I studying English? I'm never really going to use it. I know, you know, it's just to get by and, look, I ended up in the United States, so you never, you never know.

So what I always tell them is keep your options open. Prepare yourself the best, so when you have to choose, you can choose because you were out there, you know, getting as much knowledge from everything you, you know, you could get. So that's my piece of advice, you know, have self-discipline, even for those things that you don't like, and you will be rewarded for that.

**JIM ZELLMER:** How about political advice? You've obviously chosen to get involved in the political system to some degree and, you know, that will put you up to, obviously, plaudits as well as criticism. What advice do you have for students then?

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** Yeah, I will say that we, in this last month to month that I've been doing this, has been wonderful to see people involved. Not everybody needs to run, but I think we all need to get involved. And, for example, I found some problems with the school system with curriculum and we all have a responsibility. Personally, my children are going to be okay, you know, but that's not enough. We, it's not that just we

are okay, it's because we need everybody to be okay. Because if everybody is okay, we'll have a better world as it is.

And I think that you should look out there for what's working or what's not working, and if you can make a difference for small it is, it can, it will, you know, things accumulate, and you can be there, you know, but you're really seeing to a better world. So be, you know, go out there and, you know, be challenged.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Thank you very much, Melania.

**MELANIA ALVAREZ:** You're welcome.



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