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# Alameda parents fight to keep school open

By Otis R. Taylor Jr. | May 17, 2017 | Updated: May 17, 2017 6:00am

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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

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Alameda Unified School District says it learned of the safety problem after soil tests in advance of a planned school expansion determined the site could sink 5 to 10 inches in a major earthquake.

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Three weeks ago, the Alameda Unified School District notified parents of children who attend Donald D. Lum Elementary School that it would recommend that the school board permanently close Lum on June 8. The reason is liquefaction, the weakening of soil due to water saturation that can cause buildings to collapse in earthquakes.

It's a revelation that has parents worried. But they're also skeptical, questioning why the district is moving so fast to close the school

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They're demanding more tests and want to know if the problem is fixable.

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To understand why the parents would fight for a school the district doesn't think is safe, I took a walk with Kelly Scott to pick up her two sons from Lum on Monday afternoon.

In 2009, Scott settled in an Alameda neighborhood that's less than a 10-minute stroll from Lum. Several groups of parents operate what they call the walking school bus, which is a tag team of parents who take turns escorting neighborhood kids to and from school.

Taking away Lum means taking away why many bought homes in Scott's neighborhood in the first place: Their kids can walk to school. If Lum closes, it means they'll probably have to sit in traffic on an island clogged with cars trying to beat the morning commute.

Lum opened in 1959 and sits on Sandcreek Way, about a block from the Alameda shoreline on San Francisco Bay.

The district says it learned of the **safety problem** after soil tests in advance of a planned school expansion determined the site could sink 5 to 10 inches in a major earthquake. A structural engineer recommended in a one-page letter that the

district "provide suitable alternate facilities for students and staff as soon as feasible."

"The people that we're working with have experience specifically with school facilities," Susan Davis, a school district spokeswoman, said.

But parents have **produced their own research** and had experts weigh in on

Lum's structural safety, including a proposal by a Berkeley engineering firm that suggests there are alternatives to closing the school.

Scott was walking from her home to pick up Wynton, who is in the third grade, and Zeke, a fifth-grader. In the fall, Zeke will start sixth grade at Will C. Wood Middle School, which is across the blacktop playground from Lum and past the jungle gym, ball fields and bike racks. When Scott moved to Alameda, she expected Zeke would walk with Wynton, and soon

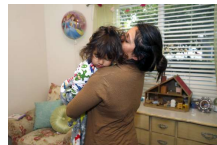
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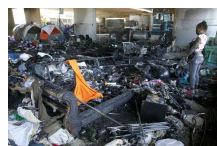
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Emme, to school.

Scott, a stay-at-home mom and the president of Lum's PTA, is at the school almost every day. She told me many parents of the ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student body feel the decision to close Lum and redistribute its 500 students to six schools across the island has been rushed.

It's got parents concerned about child care, which is available at Lum. Will they be able to make new arrangements on such short notice?

"That's a big issue for a lot of parents who rely on the older siblings to walk the younger kids to and from school," Scott said as we stood at an intersection taking in the light ocean breeze.

We passed Rittler Park, where children were running through soccer drills. At the school, several parents approached Scott, almost as if to commiserate.

"Let me know what else I can do," said Brad Hange, who runs the school's garden docent program and was clad in overalls to pick up his two daughters.

Jamie Soper was one of several parents I saw walking with a dog on a leash. She lives four houses down from Scott. She also chose the neighborhood because of its proximity to an elementary and middle school.

"Next year, we were planning for our boys to walk to school together in the morning," Soper said. "That's not going to be an option. They're basically taking away our neighborhood, our community."

Scott pointed out that she doesn't believe there's an immediate danger to safety, because otherwise the school would've been evacuated.

"There's clearly concerns," Scott said. "Let's get additional information to determine do we indeed need to close. If not, can it be fixed?"

She also wants to know whether the other elementary schools in Alameda, some two and three stories tall, are safer than Lum, which is one-story with hexagonal classrooms.

"If you're saying our school's not safe enough, then we would like something to make us feel a bit more confident that we're sending our kids to a safer school," Scott said. "We don't know that."

The parents want more than a one-page opinion, which is why they put together the opposition research in less than a month.

“The school is not safe enough, then we would like something to make us feel a bit more confident that we’re sending our kids to a safer school,” Scott said. “We don’t know that.”

“I feel like we’re having to do the district’s job,” Joe Keiser told me. “We’re doing their due diligence.”

Keiser, a family law attorney, has done his own investigative sleuthing. He learned that part of the soil analysis is based on data from 1990.

“And the 1990 data shows the same if not greater levels of liquefaction at the site, and they didn’t do anything about that for 27 years,” said Keiser, whose two children, Toby and Madeline, joined Scott and her children for the walk home.

When asked about the 1990 tests, Davis said the school district isn’t sure why students have been allowed to go to school there for almost three decades without sounding a warning bell.

“We didn’t know that *that* report existed, and it wasn’t until they started to do the new analyses that that report was surfaced,” she said. “Probably what happened is that the standards were really different. The scientific understanding of liquefaction has grown immensely over the last two decades.”

The school board is expected to vote on Lum’s fate on Tuesday.

*San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Otis R. Taylor Jr. appears Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Email: [otaylor@sfchronicle.com](mailto:otaylor@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@otisrtaylorjr](https://twitter.com/otisrtaylorjr)



**Otis R. Taylor Jr.**

East Bay Columnist