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Education, Equity, Parity and Partner Organizations

By Jean Follmer

Whether it's an annual fund drive or a black tie auction, parents from certain Lamorinda school districts traditionally have more fundraising success than others.

Although they may have the ability to fill more site needs or wants than another school in the same district, the concepts of equity and parity (no favoritism and overall equality) are being applied in many districts to provide equivalent opportunities to all students within the district.

Sticking with this guideline, however, is not always easy. In some cases, the equitable concepts can become more of a challenge for a school district to maintain.

"We had a school that was capable and willing to hire a certificated employee," said Moraga School Superintendent Rick Schafer. However, funds were not available to hire the same type of certificated employee for the other Moraga elementary schools. As a result, Moraga developed the Supplemental Instructional Resources Fund (SIRF) - a fund that all of the Moraga PTAs contribute to that is dispersed to the schools equally.

Since all of the Moraga elementary schools funnel to Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM), the district decided that all students entering JM should arrive from an equitable playing field. Schafer said the District decided, "We would live and die together."

To date, Moraga has only required parity in the area of personnel. "Our next area of concern that's been brought up is 'things,'" said Schafer. While the district currently allows its school communities to purchase things like whiteboards, computers and other materials, he said the district is likely to step in to level that playing field as well.

Like Moraga, all Lafayette elementary schools funnel to one middle school: Stanley. The Lafayette School District's equity policy applies to both personnel and to "big ticket" items.

For instance, Springhill recently gained approval from the district to complete its garden. Although the garden was paid for by the Parent Faculty Club and grant money, the district approval process was lengthy. While the Board did not dispute the perceived value of having a garden on site or the fact that other Lafayette elementary schools have gardens, there were many questions raised regarding equity and potential costs to the District.

When the Lafayette School District receives a request from a school site, Superintendent Fred Brill said the district essentially considers five questions: Is it a strategic priority for the District? Is it equitable? How many potential stakeholders are there (is 90% of the school requesting this or is it three parents)? Is it a one-time payout or are there ongoing costs for the District? And, has it been approved by the Board and all Principals?

"It gets really challenging when we have an expense reduction plan," noted Brill. In these times, it's even more about priorities and making sure the students have the basics first. Brill said the District seeks to "serve meat and potatoes before dessert."

"We don't take all parent dollars and redistribute them. We're careful to give some autonomy to the sites," Brill explained. In short, the District recognizes that each school has its own culture and seeks to support that.

Contributions from partner organizations are vital in Orinda as well. About six years ago, the Orinda Unified School District (OUSD) addressed the equity issue to

determine if all students were getting their fair share.

"We wanted to ensure an equitable school experience for all students as they moved on to OIS [Orinda Intermediate School]," states OUSD Governing Board President Riki Sorenson. Parents across the District worked together to establish priority needs and then agreed to fund these "equity items" with fundraising monies from Parents Clubs and other sources first.

"We try to maintain equity across the schools for anything that will affect the instructional program," states Orinda Union School District Superintendent (OUSD) Dr. Joe Jaconette, "and it is fairly well-balanced."

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