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## Public Forum

### Save Environmental Education in Orinda

Budget issues in the Orinda Union School District have been the source of great controversy and have triggered parent outrage in the city of Orinda. Earlier this year, the school board published a list of programs that may be cut in the 2009-2010 academic year. The naturalist position at Wagner Ranch Nature Area was at the top of the list. This position is the backbone of the environmental education program, which is a unique, hands-on, standard-based outdoor classroom for all of the elementary school students in the district. As an Orinda parent, I would like to comment on this issue and to explain more fully what I see happening in this community.

While it is true that many parents in the community are angry and frustrated, they did not approach the school board from an adversarial position. In recent school board meetings (both in March and April), community members pleaded with the school board to work with them in a collaborative way to look at options for saving the nature area and the environmental education program. Three specific proposals for alternative funding for the program were presented to the school board. In addition, several requests were made by members of the SEE committee (Save Environmental Education) for a task force to explore other options. However, this seems to have fallen on deaf ears. So far, there has been no response from the school board to any of these requests. It is difficult to understand this silence. It certainly makes me, as a parent in this community, question whether the school board sees itself as accountable to its constituency.

I am struck by the lack of transparency in the board's decision-making and what appears to be a lack of interest in parent input. The board talks about problems with the budget that would make the cut to the environmentalist position necessary. However the budget is posted nowhere. At the recent board meeting, they mentioned that surveys of the community were used to prioritize programs and to place the environmental education on the top of the list of potential cuts. However, as far as I can tell, the last survey conducted by the district was in 2006 and it was never published. We don't know how many parents completed that survey or how representative it is of the parents' views. I am told that the district no longer surveys parents, but as far as I can tell no alternative was put into place to hear parents' perspectives - there is no parent teacher organization within the OUSD through which to bring concerns. The school board meetings are held at 4PM on weekdays, which is difficult for working parents to attend. As a parent, one begins to wonder if the school board really wants to hear your voice. As a parent who gives money each year to the District to supplement state funding (and to fund programs such environmental education) I find their stance insulting. It is as if they want my money but don't want me to be a partner in the decision-making about how my money is used.

What started as a desire to preserve environmental education at the Wagner Ranch nature area has become something much larger. Nearly 600 community residents recently signed a petition to save the environmental education position. This is certainly not a small group of disgruntled parents but a large number of citizens who do not agree with the board's stance on this issue. Until the school

board responds to the community and engages in a dialogue about budget decisions, this firestorm will only grow stronger.

Sincerely,

Susan Bell

*Susan Bell is a concerned parent of an Orinda 5th grader, a signer of the SEE petition, and a psychologist at UC Berkeley.*

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