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AUHSD Prepares for Dramatic Budget Reductions

By Cristina Kim

The Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD), which includes Miramonte, Campolindo, Acalanes, Las Lomas, and Del Oro, is one of the top ranked high school districts in all of California. But the AUHSD has been heavily affected by California's current budget crisis. The Governor's proposed budget creates a \$4.8 million deficit for the school district in the 2010-2011 school year. As a result the AUHSD Board is having to take extreme measures to balance the budget, such as cutting seventh period, electives, closing a school site, and laying off teachers, counselors, and other staff.

On February 3rd, the AUHSD Board held an open meeting to address the financial crisis. The closure of Del Oro High School and the reduction of "Particular Kinds of Service", i.e. the reduction of district staff by 56.9 positions, were the meeting's major deliberations. The small boardroom was packed with concerned teachers, parents, and students.

At the meeting the school board voted to close Del Oro High School. AUHSD Superintendent John Stockton explains, "The proposed closure of Del Oro High School is especially upsetting due to the exemplary efforts and successes of the school. This decision is a result of the state education budget cuts and the costs associated with operating a small school." Del Oro, the district's alternative high school, has a total of 65 students and costs \$650,000 to operate annually.

Del Oro has provided an alternative education for students whose needs were not met at comprehensive schools. The school's closure will deeply impact students, who must now undergo a difficult transition into a new school or individual study plan, as well as teach-

ers and counselors.

Del Oro's co-principal, Rae Eckholm, remains strong and optimistic. In a letter to Del Oro parents after the meeting, Eckholm states, "Our students have been given challenges at Del Oro, which they met and even exceeded...now, we must ask them to take the challenge to make an adjustment to another school setting. But please, rest assured that they will not do this alone. Our motto of 'one kid at a time' will still apply. We will discuss educational options and will put together a transition plan that will best suit the needs of each student."

The closing of Del Oro was not the only difficult decision the Board had to make at the meeting. The Board also voted to reduce the number of teachers, counselors and classes offered in the district. Currently, 85% of the district's budget goes to personnel costs, making layoffs necessary in order to address the budget deficit. Approximately 67 employees will be receiving notices by March 15 with final notifications by May 15, 2010. In addition to these layoffs the number of periods a student may take and the variety of courses from which students can choose will be limited.

Students recently turned in their course choices for next year, without the benefit of a seventh period class and in the likelihood that they may not their first choice classes. In addition, popular extracurricular classes are likely to be cut. According to Associate Superintendent Chris Learned, "Leadership, journalism, and yearbook could all be high priority cuts. The AP (Advanced Placement) classes won't be entirely cut but they are likely to see significant reductions in class offerings."

Students from all of the

AUHSD schools came to the meeting to defend leadership, journalism, and AP courses. The students, including some seniors who will not be impacted by these changes, passionately argued the numerous educational benefits of the at-risk programs. The Board agreed with the students' points, but ultimately had to make decisions based on the financial capabilities of the Acalanes Union High School District.

In spite of the evening's somber decisions, there may yet be hope for the district. Learned explained, "The Governing Board approved calling a \$112 per parcel tax election for May 4, 2010. The parent clubs and foundations are working hard on obtaining donations. They provided \$800k this year to save counselors, librarians and leadership classes."

If approved, the parcel tax and the additional monies raised by parents could change the scenario, but for now the budget seems to have beaten the high school district; lay-off notices are being sent out and Del Oro will close at the end of this school year.

Del Oro High School

Del Oro High School was founded in 1967 to provide an alternative education for students that were not benefiting from the education provided at comprehensive high schools. In 2009 it was named a Model Continuation High School. California's Continuation High Schools were created in 1919 to focus on school-to-career education and provide an individualized space for students that are at risk of not graduating. Del Oro's largest graduating class was in 2008 with 40 seniors. Most Del Oro graduates go on to community college, 4-year colleges, the military, trade school, or full time work.

Acalanes Continues Decathlon Tradition

Submitted by Jonathan Lance, CCCOE



The Acalanes High School Academic Decathlon Team Photo Diane Morrell, CCCOE

Acalanes High School was announced as the overall team winner of the 2010 Contra Costa County Academic Decathlon at an awards ceremony on February 11th. This is Acalanes' fourth year in a row as the county's team winner. The top high school teams that followed Acalanes were, in order, Campolindo, Miramonte, and Pittsburg. This year's Top Overall Academic Decathlon Individual

Award went to Campolindo's Grace Ma.

The annual event, which was held over two consecutive Saturdays (January 30 and February 6), is directed by the Contra Costa County Office of Education (CCCOE), along with the assistance of numerous community volunteers. Close to 150 participating students had been studying and preparing for this event with their

coaches since September.

The Academic Decathlon provides an opportunity for high school students to compete as individuals and teams in a series of ten academic tests and demonstrations including: art, economics, language and literature, mathematics, music, science, essay, interview, and speech (both prepared and impromptu). The curriculum for this year's event-ending team SuperQuiz was The French Revolution. Acalanes High School will represent Contra Costa County at the California Academic Decathlon that will be held in Sacramento March 12-15. Last year, the Lafayette high school was named as the overall Division III Team Winner in the California State Academic Decathlon. The National Academic Decathlon will be held in Omaha, Neb., April 21-24.

For more information go to www.cocoschools.org/supe/events/decathlon.htm.

Rheem Sings a Story

By Bonnie McNab



Rheem 1st graders sing with Kristin Jones Photo provided

The San Francisco Opera Guild has put together a program, under the direction of Jennifer Ashworth, called "Sing-A-Story" designed to bring opera directly into the classrooms of public and inner-city schools. The idea is to engage young chil-

dren directly both as audience and performers.

Sing-A-Story is managed by Caroline Altman, the Education Director at the San Francisco Opera Guild. She has expanded the program so they are now going to more than 250 classrooms a

year and have five Teaching Artists.

Kristen Jones, a long time singer and performer, has been with Sing-A-Story for five seasons. Last week she came to Rheem Elementary School in Moraga, to Ms. Strohmeyer's first grade class, to present Mozart's "The Magic Flute."

She first takes the children through the opera explaining the characters and story via action and song. They then are given the opportunity to perform the individual parts themselves under her expert guidance. Jones feels that by giving them a chance to get up and perform, a child who is not excelling in one area can have a chance to shine on "stage" in front of their peers. As music is a language that transcends all cultures and barriers, a bond is formed that can only strengthen the kinship in the classroom.

Family Focus

The Importance of Family Time for Teens

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

Anyone who has teenage children knows that parents' popularity takes a rather drastic dive during these years. We go from being the center of our darlings' universe when they're little, to the years of being well-tolerated and sometimes admired servers and providers, to the teen years of being regarded as slightly above plankton on the food chain.

Some parents make the mistake of letting their teens' pervasive silence, grumpiness, or outright disdain drive them away. They think something along the lines, "Well, if I'm not wanted, I'll take the hint and make myself scarce. Maybe in a few years my child will want more time together." A few times of being ordered to walk several body lengths behind her teen son when in public led to one friend's understandable desire to avoid putting herself in such a situation again.

A neighbor confided that her daughter asked her not to laugh when she was around her daughter's friends because she sounded like a donkey. The message seems to be, "Mom and Dad, avoid drawing attention to yourselves in any way at all times." Isn't this a fun period of time for parents? If your self-esteem is not firmly in place, this is the time for it to take a complete nose-dive.

In working with parents of teens, I urge them to resolve to hang in there and establish a presence, despite what can be overwhelming feelings of rejection. Many teens would love to spend the majority of their time with their peers. They have common interests, speak the same language, and provide each other with limitless fun, drama, and social education. But the truth is they need us, just as they need to eat vegetables and get enough sleep. As our teens become impacted by so many physical, emotional, academic, and social influences, their families can be a safe refuge. Even though they are forging their own identities and need to detach a bit from us emotionally, we are the constants in their lives during these years.

I suggest that parents not be deterred by initial poor attitudes of their teens toward family time. It is important to insist on regular family interaction, although there also needs to be flexibility in accommodating social needs and desires of your child as well. One essential point: The rationale you present for spending time together needs to be positive -- because you enjoy his company and miss being with him -- or something to that effect. Mandatory get-togethers, on a "because I said we're having family time" basis, tend not to produce desirable results.

Some examples of family time may include regular family dinners, game nights, bike rides, walks, hikes, volunteer activities, outings of all kinds, creative pursuits such as cooking together or playing music together, doing chores together such as painting a room or planting a vegetable garden. Allow your child to choose among activities and timing, and also to make his own suggestions as much as possible. We don't hesitate to do these activities with our children when they are young, and it is just as important to continue doing them when our children are older. Of course, time together with your teen will necessarily be more limited than when he was younger, but perhaps it is possible to expand on what you are already doing together.

Even if the family consists of two or three members, it is important to spend alone time together. Many parents compromise and agree to include friends of their children in this family time. This makes teens happiest, of course. But the idea of family alone time is not just about pleasing your teens; rather it is vital to continue building communication, common experiences, understanding, and fun into your relationship. So while it's wonderful to include your child's friends in your family activities at times, it's also important to carve out enough exclusive family time with your teen.

Research indicates that teens who lack significant parental contact fill this vacuum with peer and media influences and values. Unfortunately,

it sometimes takes children experiencing problems and requiring therapy before parents take a stand. It can be hard to find the fine line between imposing your will on your teen and gaining cooperation, but parents need to continue to try.

My practice is full of examples of how increased parental involvement helped a great deal in the healing process. Tyler, age fourteen, felt somewhat abandoned by his mom, a single parent who was preoccupied with her new boyfriend. Tyler came in for help with anxiety and depression. When we included some family therapy sessions, his mother was able to see how, despite his being withdrawn and seemingly uncaring, Tyler still needed regular contact with her for meals, activities, and the communication that was a natural part of spending time together.

Stacy was a sixteen year-old who had very little involvement with her parents or younger brother. She had her own car, a credit card, the usual electronic devices for communication, and evidently no desire for family relationships. Her parents both worked long hours and also traveled occasionally for work. They made no demands on Stacy, and no chores, curfew, family dinners, or family time. All they required was that she get good grades in school. And when she didn't, they dragged her in for therapy.

Stacy's parents were so out of touch with her that they had no idea who she hung out with or what she did in her free time. Unfortunately, she was sexually promiscuous, experimented with numerous drugs, including cocaine and mushrooms,

and had very little self-respect. While Stacy's parents thought they were doing her a favor by giving her freedom and what they thought were ingredients for happiness, she was actually suffering in silence.

After participating in family therapy, Stacy's parents were able to provide the structure and family involvement she had been lacking. Initially, of course, Stacy resisted all attempts to establish limits and expectations. But eventually she grew to enjoy the time her family spent together. She began to feel more worthwhile and deserving of good treatment from others and, most importantly, from herself.

So, difficult as it may be, try to ignore your teen's snarls or lack of enthusiasm when you initiate plans together. Making time with him a priority is ultimately one of the best gifts you can give him.



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