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## Nickerson to Take the Helm at AUHSD

By Sophie Braccini



Dr. John Nickerson Photo Jill Ramsay

introduced to school leadership."

Upon his return, Nickerson taught in Brooklyn, New York, before coming back to California (he grew up in Long Beach), getting his masters and teaching credential at UC Berkeley and pursuing his teaching career first at Piedmont High School then at Miramonte.

While principal at Acalanes, he worked on his PhD dissertation with the University of La Verne. "I did my research on cognitive conflict," explains Nickerson, "I studied how we can get to the best decision when people do not agree; how this dynamic can function well." Nickerson measured productive disagreements in school districts where excellent decision-making happens. "For this productive way to work you need an environment where people feel safe to disagree, some level of trust," he says.

In his new position, Nickerson's first order of business will be dictated by the State budget. "The short term challenge is - how do we maintain the quality and great opportunity we offer our students?" asks Nickerson. "A large number of students come to school equipped to learn and excel. That said, a crisis like the one we are facing can be detrimental to the enrichment opportunities we have been able to offer and that the kids deserve."

Thanks to Measure A, that was recently passed by voters, the District should not have to issue pink slips for the 2011-2012 school year; although some temporary teachers might not be asked to come back for another year. Nickerson says the real challenge will be the 2012-2013 school year. "There are a lot of unknowns," he admits, "and we could face a loss of funding between \$2 and \$4 million dollars a year."

Nonetheless, Nickerson is looking toward innovation. "One of the areas where we have historically struggled is in supporting students that are not achieving, not accessing the curriculum," he says. "Tutoring programs are offered; we are starting to do more parallel classes in Math and English to develop foundational skills, and some of the preliminary data suggests that it is effective. We are also working on how to differentiate teaching to a whole class, and that's increasingly challenging with class size going up."

Another area where innovation has taken place under his leadership as Associate Superintendent is testing. "This year we did something completely new in our four schools: all of the World History students in 9th grade were asked to analyze primary source documents in their historical context, and make an argument or develop a thesis," explains Nickerson, "The teachers discussed the results together and built upon it through the school year."

Nickerson also sees opportunity in the meaningful integration of new technology in teaching. "Some classes are starting to use iPads for reading at Acalanes and Miramonte," says Nickerson, "teachers report that digital reading increases the ability of students to analyze text. They can manipulate it, check words, color code by theme, and add comments as they read." He envisions, in the next 5-10 years, a world in which students don't have to carry heavy backpacks; just a digital reader to access textbooks that will be constantly updated and enriched.

"I feel lucky to be working with a staff and teachers who are so innovative," says Nickerson. The only thing that may stand in the District's way is the money.

Dr. John Nickerson will become Superintendent of the Acalanes Union High School District on May 1st, upon the retirement of John Stockton. Currently serving as the District's Associate Superintendent of Educational Services, Nickerson has been involved in the District for 15 years; as a teacher at Miramonte, assistant principal at Campolindo, then principal at Acalanes before moving to the District office.

"I care a lot about this District," says Nickerson, "I feel ready for this position. In these difficult times, I can bring some stability to the District." Nickerson, who met his wife while they were both teaching at Miramonte and has children in 3rd and 6th grade in the San Ramon School District, adds that he feels fortunate to have this opportunity.

As a young graduate from the Harvard's School of Economics, Nickerson decided to respond to the request of a faculty member who was pursuing research in Kenya and went there to teach for two years. "After a few months I became the headmaster of this harambee school," explains Nickerson, "it was a life changing experience. I fell in love with the notion of becoming an educator, and developing a relationship with a community. And I was also

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