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Moraga School District Issues Public Apology

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The Moraga School District is not out of the woods yet in the aftermath of the abuse of Kristen Cunnane in the 1990s; but on the night of Nov. 13 it made significant steps toward an honorable resolution of the crisis that started a few months ago with the uncovering of the failure to report possible abuse, as required by law, by school administrators at the time. The school board, through the voice of Board President Charles MacNulty, offered a long-awaited apology to Cunnane both for what she suffered as a student and for what he called a grave mistake in the district's initial response to her lawsuit.

MacNulty announced that the district is seeking mediation of the civil suit brought forth by Cunnane. "Each of the parties involved within the district, including our insurance company, have agreed to mediate the claim," he said. "There is no guarantee mediation will achieve resolution, but we are hopeful that we will reach a resolution that satisfies all."

"The district is deeply sorry about what happened to students in our care. These students were entrusted to us. We are parents; knowing that children were subject to sexual abuse in our district is painful and disturbing," said MacNulty in a statement he read on behalf of the school district. "We (are also) sorry about our initial response to one lawsuit. We made a terrible mistake by including two defenses that were entirely inappropriate. We never believed that the victims in these cases bear any responsibility for the abuse they suffered. We are committed to making sure it cannot happen again.

"Insuring the safety of our children will become the cornerstone of all the work we do, as long as we are a district," MacNulty concluded. He introduced the members of the Student Safety Committee, created by the district at the end of last school year and comprised of parents and district staff, who presented the results of their work.

Parent and committee member Jim Obsitnik outlined the training staff would go through twice a year regarding children's safety and mandatory reporting. Rebecca Eirich reported on information the district is providing to parents through its website and conferences, and on the search for adequate curriculum to empower children. It was also indicated that the committee would discuss possible barriers to reporting with teachers and staff.

The district is proposing to sanction staff members who do not report suspicion of abuse by noting in a former employee's personnel file that he or she should not be rehired.

Ryan Cunnane, Kristin's brother-in-law, told the school board, "You cannot change the past, it is the student today and the student of tomorrow who need your help, make sure they're protected. The only way to do it is to investigate how Correa and Witters (the two abusive teachers) were able to hide in the open, how they slipped through the cracks, who knew what when." He concluded by saying that his family, knowing the pain that comes from abuse, would do anything to make sure it never happens again.

When asked after the meeting why the district had not offered an apology sooner, Burns replied that dealing with litigation was challenging and can occupy the full focus of a board or any defendant. "The statement Charles (MacNulty) read was from our hearts and I hope it wasn't diminished for not having come immediately in what has been a difficult process," he said.

Dexter Louie Resigns from School Board

Just days after being re-elected to the Moraga School Board, Dr. Dexter Louie resigned his position. In a recent interview with Lamorinda Weekly, Louie indicated that his decision to resign was linked to the developments in the sexual abuse scandal. "There were so many complex issues, and I can't disclose a great deal because of the pending litigation and privacy concerns," he said. "I thought about not running again, but Mr. (Dennis) Kelleher had already indicated he was not running for re-election, and I felt experience was needed on the board." Louie wouldn't say what changed between the time he decided to run again and the time he resigned. He was aware of the Cunnane suit when he decided to run, "and the newspapers said she was at Campolindo (which is in a different school district) when the Correa abuse occurred," he said.

Recently two new, anonymous, plaintiffs came forward to accuse the district of negligence. "I have done nothing wrong," affirmed Louie. "I want to thank all those who have supported and trusted me all these years. The day after the election, I had a talk with Mr. Charles MacNulty, the vice president of the board. Later that day I made a very difficult decision, I believe the right decision for the district, to resign. It was a very painful decision, and my reasons were very personal. At some point, I hope I will be able to explain further." Louie added he loved serving on the board for 14 years and had hoped to serve one more term.

At the Nov. 13 meeting, Superintendent Bruce Burns indicated that the board would soon decide on a procedure to replace the seat left vacant by Louie's resignation. It could decide to either appoint someone or convene a special election. Three members of the community asked that Parker Colvin, who came in third place in the recent election, be appointed to the board.

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