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## Final Closure for School District's Painful Past

*By Sophie Braccini*

The lessons will not be forgotten as the Moraga School District puts a sad, shameful episode of its past to rest with the settlement that was reached mid-June between the district and two women who were sexually abused by middle school teacher Dan Witters in the 1990s.

After the facts came out, Witters committed suicide in 1996. An alleged school district cover-up surfaced when another former student, Kristin Cunnane, revealed her abuse at the hands of a different teacher who was subsequently convicted and sent to jail. Separate suits were filed against the district by Cunnane and the two unnamed victims who claimed that responsible parties at the time had been repeatedly inactive regarding assertions of sexual misconduct by Witters, which led to prolonged sexual abuse. The district settled with Cunnane last year.

"We want to again apologize to these women and to their families for the pain that was inflicted on them by former staff of the district," said Superintendent Bruce Burns. "They were innocent victims, abused at a young age by someone in a position of trust. The betrayal of that trust has caused real and lasting suffering. It is our hope that this settlement will allow these women to continue to heal and will help them and their families move forward."

Under the terms of the agreement, the district's insurer will pay each of the two women \$7 million for the suffering they and their families experienced as a result of the abuse. In exchange, the women have agreed to drop their lawsuits and release all claims against the district and its former staff.

The crisis led the district to strengthen its safety policy and requirements to ensure that all employees report suspected abuse of a student. The district also pioneered a child safety prevention program, partnering with the Lafayette and Orinda school districts and the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa County.

"The curriculum we are using is called 'Speak Up, Be Safe,'" said child safety awareness coordinator Carol Shenon. "It has been rolled out extensively, it is very age appropriate, and parents are an important part of it."

This year Shenon met with 3,457 children in 148 classrooms across the three school districts - all of the first, third, fifth and sixth graders. "It is about child abuse prevention and bullying," she added. "In upper grades we also talk about sexual abuse." Shenon emphasizes that kids are told that if something happens that makes them uncomfortable it is never their fault and that they should reach out to their 'safe-adult,' since it is adults' responsibility to ensure children's safety. The program, which Shenon says has been very well received, will continue next year.

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