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## New School Board Hits the Ground Running

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Bruce Burns, Jim Obsitnik, Parker Colvin, Shari Simon, Jon Nickens, Heather O'Donnell Photo Andy Scheck

A new school board took its place on the Moraga School District dais for the first time Dec. 9. Three of the five board members are brand new to the job - Heather O'Donnell, Jon Nickens and Jim Obsitnik; the other two, board president Shari Simon and vice president Parker Colvin, have been on the board for only two years. The previous board had members who served for many terms; most of their children had long since left Moraga schools. All of those on the new board have children currently enrolled in the district, some still in elementary school. The newcomers share an interest in bringing more technology to the classroom; but like their predecessors, they value and respect the school district.

the anticipation of the coming bargaining process with the unions. The new members asked pointed questions, showing that the matters at hand were not foreign to them.

They all have significant experience in the district. O'Donnell, whose third child is in seventh grade at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School, has been a PTA president and very active in the schools for the past 10 years; Nickens was on the board of the Moraga Education Foundation, the Rheem Elementary School Site Council, and has volunteered in classrooms. Obsitnik served on the Moraga Planning Commission for several years; he, too, volunteered at Rheem Elementary. He and his wife, Anna, were very involved with the school district in the aftermath of the Kristen Cunnane case, as they worked with the superintendent to make sure that the safety of students is at the forefront of the district's priorities.

With her older children now in high school and college, O'Donnell believes that knowing the district's "end-product" and not having a personal agenda are advantages. "It is about all the kids in this community, and educating the whole child," she says. Nickens' children are in second and fifth grade, with a third still in preschool, while Obsitnik's two children attend elementary school. "It is good for the board to have members who are part of the mix, it gets us closer to the topics," noted Obsitnik.

Each new member has issues he or she is particularly interested in. Obsitnik has a very sharp focus on student safety. He also became interested in how all of the schools work together to establish common practices when he and his wife tried to get their daughter transferred to another elementary school that had a reputation for handling food allergies more efficiently.

Nickens, who volunteered in the computer lab, is aware of the children's different levels of proficiency. "It's one thing to work on a tablet, but it's another to learn to type, to access a website, to choose what information is valuable and what is not," says Nickens.

All three express their respect and appreciation for the work the teachers do in the classroom, particularly at this time of profound change in the curriculum. They do not have experience in directly managing public finances, but all have relevant corporate experience. None of them has negotiated with unions before, and they look forward to a steep learning curve. "I did not ask how much work will come with this volunteer position," says O'Donnell. "I know I will do what has to be

done. What is important is the impact on the community, and doing something that matters."

"Yes, this is a new board," says Simon. "Parker (Colvin) and I have a solid understanding of the district, the strategic plan and where we are going. (Superintendent Bruce Burns) is very seasoned, with strong leadership. The new members have been involved in the schools, they bring a breadth of experience, and I'm confident that it will be a very solid board." Simon adds that the district is in very good shape; the biggest challenge remains the funding, a problem that "never goes away."



**Heather O'Donnell**



**Jon Nickens**





Jim Obsitnick Photos S. Braccini

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[back](#)

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