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Orinda schools team up with Anti-Defamation League to promote diversity and inclusion

By Sora O'Doherty



Orinda Union School District has entered into an agreement with the Anti-Defamation League to promote acceptance of diversity and inclusion. This cooperative effort will include training for teachers and staff and programs for children attending local elementary and middle schools. Some of the ongoing programs for the 2019-20 school year that support this work in classrooms include Kidpower and Thinkfirst at the elementary sites, and Epoch Education at Orinda Intermediate School. Service learning work through the OrindaCares partnership with Mindful Littles and the city of Orinda will also continue.

According to David Schrag, OUSD director of curriculum and instruction, "All Orinda schools will have a renewed focus on social emotional learning, and how to make sure we are supporting and connecting with all of our students beyond academics." Schrag said that includes a strong focus on character education, growth mindset and mindfulness, and students' social and emotional well-being. "We believe that students are capable of high achievement and success when they are supported socially and emotionally, and our goal is to develop empathetic, resilient, ethical young people, not just strong students."

Each year OUSD also chooses one "motto" that encapsulates its work for the year. For the upcoming year the motto will be "Everyone belongs here." There will be posters of this motto at each site and some in the community to raise awareness of this unified vision for all students.

Schrag said the district is very excited to be working with the ADL, which will begin with training site and district leaders in August, and will continue with anti-bias training for all classroom teachers in the fall. Jacqueline Regev, educational director of the ADL, Central Pacific Region, came to her role with the organization in 2016, in advance of the November election. She has focused on how to create a system that really influences change within the current political and social context. As a former classroom teacher, Regev says that students learn best in a school environment that is safe and welcoming to all students.

Teachers and principals reached out to her, noticing increases in conflicts between students that they hadn't seen before. One Livermore principal reported seeing a level of disrespect not seen in 20 years. After the election, students who were perceived to be immigrants were especially vulnerable. In an unwelcoming environment, they were told "don't speak Spanish," or, "go back to your own country."

Regev said, "Our Muslim population faces a level that is three times the national average; where nationally 18% of students reported feeling bullied, the number rose to 55% if the student was Muslim. In addition, there has been sharp increase in antisemitism on campuses." Regev reports an increase of 80-90% over the past two years, and while she says we have come to see our country as a place for religious freedom, Regev is hearing from students that they are choosing to keep quiet about their religious identity. Students in a nearby school district reported witnessing heil Hitler salutes in hallways, and being subjected to almost daily antisemitic jokes. "We are using what we've learned to make sure that everyone feels that they have an ally," she said, noting that the ADL pursues a pure anti-bias agenda.

The ADL began its "No Place for Hate" initiative with schools in 1985 in Boston. Regev is also involved with another ADL educational program, A World of Difference. The programs have three main goals: to encourage schools to work on building community, helping students to have a deeper understanding about other cultures, and developing ally skills to enable students to advocate for themselves and to stand up for others.

Each school, however, develops its own programs as part of the initiative. Each school site works on their own initiatives, with the ADL requiring at least three school-wide activities each year. For example, last February in the San Ramon schools, they had a week devoted to the principle that words matter, focusing on raising the importance of kind words, helpful words, and words of friendship.

One of the things the ADL has promoted at the elementary school level is the Buddy Bench. If a child is feeling isolated, he or she can go and sit on the buddy bench, and the children are socialized to go over and say, "Hey, would you like to play with me?" Even passive behavior can be hurtful, Regev noted, "by making people feel excluded."

In middle schools the programs focus on fighting bias to disrupt the escalation of hate and discrimination based on any characteristic, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Techniques that may help include the founding a Gay+Straight Alliance, or affinity groups where students who have targeted identities can come together with an adult leader.

The ADL is also in ongoing communication with the Moraga School District.

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