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OUSD board excited about new cameras in classrooms ... teachers not so much

By Sora O'Doherty

New cameras in the classroom could mean that teachers could teach those on campus and those at home at the same time, in theory, according to the Orinda Union School District board, which did a test run with the camera at its Oct. 14 meeting. This could cut a teacher's work load by up to half, but teachers had a different view of having their work constantly available to the eyes of all parents.

To test the poly student camera, OUSD IT Director Bobby Bardenhagen set one up in the boardroom. Board president Cara Hoxie and board member Jason Kaune were in the boardroom during the meeting. They wore masks and sat far apart. Bardenhagen explained that the camera is very easy to set up, it plugs into a computer via USB and is, he said, literally plug and play. Cara Hoxie said that the sound quality was very good, and Superintendent Carolyn Seaton and board member Carol Brown agreed that the sound was really incredible. The speaker view is around 120 degrees. It is not a 360 degree angle because of privacy issues. The audio can be muted or the video stopped as well. Board member Hilary Weiner inquired if there was any lag, and Bordenhagen explained that it is not connected to the internet but plugged in directly, like a gigantic version of a web cam. Because it is hard-wired, it eliminates a lot of lag, he said.

Teachers, however, approached the idea with less enthusiasm. Charles Shannon, president of the Orinda Educators Foundation, said that the fact that parents can observe teachers all day in the classroom causes them anxiety. Teacher Allie Bingham, said that, while she appreciates the board looking for solutions, she has concerns about privacy. "It feels like an invasion," she said. "Imagine having a Zoom going while you are teaching a live class," she added, and wondered if the cameras will remain after COVID-19.

Parents, however, seemed to like the idea of the cameras very much. Juana Rudani thought that the camera looked amazing, and she has no concerns about her child's privacy. "You can mute him the whole time," if desired, she said. Sasheel Daswani agreed that the teachers brought up good points, including privacy, but added that "this is a world where there are trade-offs." He felt that teachers would be relieved of the duty to teach the same material twice, but could see that there are issues about coordination. "Nothing will be as good as before the pandemic," he concluded.

The board members expressed sympathy with the concerns of the teachers, while also being enthusiastic about the potential uses of the cameras. Hoxie said, "I respect all of our teachers so much; I understand teachers feeling that they are on display, even on Zoom." Liz Daoust explained that the camera discussion stemmed from concern about the workload of teachers in the hybrid mode, dealing with two sets of kids per day, and cleaning the school.

Shannon said that while teachers have really stepped up with the technology, and have show an openness to trying new things, they have concerns. In his 32nd year of teaching, Shannon said, "there are things that happen that you don't want other parents to hear." He also complained that teachers asked for air purifiers and were told that money was an issue. Hoxie explained that air purifiers and cameras are not an "either/or proposition." "We don't have the money for either," she said, "it means asking our parents."

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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