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Passing the Baton - Kim departs as LES principal, Barclay steps in

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Ann Kim Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

When Ann Kim departs her role as the Lafayette Elementary School principal this month, she'll leave behind both a depth and a breadth of experiences in the district. Kim arrived in the Lafayette School District in 2006. In her 16-year tenure in the district, she spent three years at Stanley, two years at Burton Valley and four years at Happy Valley where she served as a special ed teacher and a reading specialist. After getting an administrative credential, she took on a position as assistant principal at Burton Valley, and finally landed the position of the Lafayette Elementary School principal. The one school in the district Kim didn't work at, Springhill, is the one Kim's sons attended, which Kim points out means that the Kims' have been at every school in the district.

Even as Kim has been teaching and leading students and teachers over the years, she has never stopped learning or even going to school, for that matter. Kim began a Human Resources certification course through the Association of California School Administrators months before the pandemic in fall of 2020 and then finished the program last spring. Her long-term goal was to work in the district for at least the duration of time her children were students here. "I am continually honing my skills,"

Kim says. Although Kim wasn't in a particular rush to leave, the serendipitous alignment of timing made now seem like the right time to transition. "When the Director of Human Resources job (opened up) in the Dublin School District, I was eager to apply and I'm excited about this new adventure."

While Kim says her decision to transition at this time has everything to do with her excitement to put her new certification to use and transition to her next professional adventure and nothing to do with the pandemic, she admits that the pandemic was a trying time. "Running a school during the pandemic has undoubtedly been the most challenging part of my time as a principal. We were flying the plane as it was being built, and we were often asked to change direction while in mid-air," Kim says. Kim and her teaching staff conducted the majority of the 2020-21 academic year virtually, while orchestrating weekly homework pickups and drop-offs and then returning to school for partial days in April.

"Balancing the needs and desires of all stakeholders with the ultimate goal of student and staff safety has been quite an adventure."

As Kim bids LES and the district farewell, she is leaving with a sense of pride and taking many lessons with her. In addition to the students she has supported, Kim is proud of the team that she helped put in place to ensure that the education at LES remains outstanding. "During my tenure at LES, we had many, many retirements of beloved, long-term staff," Kim says. "I am most proud of the new staff that I have hired over the past several years and their dedication to our students."

One of the most important lessons Kim has learned in her years as principal is to simply meet people where they are. "When you are able to sit down and have a conversation, you are able to uncover what is the crux of the problem and work together to find a solution."

As the mother of a rising fifth- and a rising second-grader at LES and a parent volunteer Jennifer McCarthy has worked closely with Kim over the years. McCarthy became acquainted with Kim and her style when her eldest child was in kindergarten and required a student study team, and says she observed many magical, transformative moments in McCarthy's presence when working in her role as a volunteer lunch helper. "It always made me smile to hear Mrs. Kim's 'quiet' voice come over the multipurpose room mic - the chaos immediately calmed and the kids suddenly were on best behavior - because they wanted Mrs. Kim to see them at their best Leopard selves," McCarthy says. "Hearing and seeing not just my own but so many other kids' interactions with her on campus, it is obvious they feel seen and known."

When asked what it is she's going to miss most about Mrs. Kim, it comes down to one simple thing for McCarthy. "How real she is," McCarthy says. "Whether it's a lunch vendor 'emergency,' a smoke day, distance learning, hybrid learning, a tricky student situation, once she says 'it's going to be ok; we'll make it work,' you knew you could count on that to be true."

In that same spirit, Kim is confident that things will continue to work out fine at Lafayette Elementary school even as she passes her baton to the next principal, Melissa Barclay. While Barclay will be new to this particular role, she's not new to the district. Barclay served as the district's curriculum and instruction administrator and Springhill Elementary's assistant principal for the past three years, and before that, she was a reading specialist and third-grade teacher at Lafayette Elementary School. Barclay lives in Lafayette with her husband and children and she says she's thrilled to be back at LES.

"As a teacher at Lafayette for five years, I know the dedication of the staff in academics but also in creating a caring and welcoming school culture and environment."

Editor's Note: The Lafayette School District governing board recently appointed Dr. Brent Stephens as its next superintendent, announced that Betsy Balmat, the current principal of Stanley Middle School, will be joining the District Office on July 1 as the new assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, and Nicole "Nikki" Chaplan has been selected as the new principal of Stanley Middle School. Profiles of these individuals will be included in upcoming issues of Lamorinda Weekly.

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