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Allegations surface of open drug use on high school campus; parent education planned

By Sora O'Doherty

At a drug and alcohol abuse forum held Oct. 19 at the Lafayette Library, six members of the Orinda Teen Advisory Council shared that marijuana is being used openly on the Miramonte High School campus, in the bathrooms, in the parking lot early in the morning, even at the back of classrooms. The students described Miramonte students smoking e-cigarettes or juuls in their cars before school or in the bathrooms during school hours. One student said it was even possible to conceal a device in a girl's blouse to enable her to vape in the back of the classroom.

When asked about the teens' comments, Miramonte Principal Julie Parks said, "I know about most of these things," admitting that Miramonte struggles with this issue like other schools in the Acalanes Union High School District.

Acalanes Principal Travis Bell stated that he was sure that there are similar things happening at all high school campuses. "If you were to interview our teens they might share similar things," he said, but the places might be a little different. "This is definitely an issue that all high schools have to deal with," he agreed. Principal John Walker of Campolindo High School did not respond to inquiries about that campus. Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel, when informed of the allegations of drug use on the Miramonte campus, stated that this "sounds like something we definitely need to partner with the school on and we are certainly willing to do that, to partner in any way possible." While he said that he had no reason to doubt the reports, he said that this was the first that the Orinda Police Department had heard these allegations, which he acknowledged, cause him some concern.

According to Parks, the last healthy kids survey reported 88 percent of Miramonte ninth-graders had never used, but by the time they get to 11th grade that number dropped to 58 percent. School officials are asking, apart from growing older, what might be happening to cause this uptick in drug and alcohol use between ninth and 11th grade?

The TAC students at the forum suggested that students feel a lot of pressure to be the "perfect Lamorinda person," successful, getting good grades, doing extracurricular activities, being accepted by really good colleges. They described how some students are turning to Adderall, a potent stimulant drug prescribed for ADHD, which is being abused by students who think they can enhance their test scores.

Parks believes that there is a moment between ninth and 11th grade that is the time to intervene.

Miramonte offers freshman seminars of 10 sessions during academy period focusing on topics such as decision making and coping with stress. "Addressing root causes" of substance abuse "is part of our strategy for interrupting the jump," Parks said.

Miramonte students also get a full quarter of mindfulness training to learn some tools to find balance in their lives, she added. New this year is a comprehensive health curriculum that includes one required semester of human and social development that looks at issues of identity, mental health, drug and alcohol use, as well as sexual health education, relationships, communication and other life skills. Miramonte will also be holding a parent education night in early November.

Students don't know about addiction as a disease, the TAC students reported, and think that alcohol and drug use is just fun. It was generally agreed that more education at the schools would be very helpful, perhaps as part of the new health classes being adopted for sophomores.

The sophomore year is critical to addressing systemic stress levels and helping arm students, said Parks, and deficits promote drug use.

Parks added that they would like to dig a lot deeper but haven't yet had time. Miramonte is working with Jaime Rich of ADAPT Lamorinda on various programs (see related story page A9), including Red Watch Band training for all sophomores where teens get some comprehensive training on signs of drug and alcohol abuse and how to respond if someone might be in an emergency situation, including first aid and CPR training.

Sometimes preventive measures are not enough, Parks said. "When we catch a child using they are suspended 100 percent of the time," she added. There have been no suspensions at Miramonte this year. Miramonte continues to put little things in place. Kids are not allowed to bring bags into football games. Generally we do not allow water bottles, Parks said, using them for alcohol is an old trick. Away games are harder to supervise.

Miramonte is currently working with their parents' club to get more cameras on campus, as well as partnering with the Orinda police department. Parks stated that officers are often on campus to get to know the kids so that the kids feel comfortable with them, adding, "They've been a great support."

Parks concluded, "I'm glad that we're talking about it, glad that the whole community is talking about it. Student leaders are brave and powerful. We all need to be talking about this and working together. While we remain vigilant and focused and are actively working with the police department to continue to tackle this issue, we feel strongly that the best approach is a collaborative one that involves all stakeholders. It takes a village to raise our kids!"

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[back](#)

