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## Moraga School District transforms an incident into a learning opportunity

By Sophie Braccini



Parents and teachers gather at the Oct. 16 Moraga School District Cultural Proficiency Committee meeting. Photo Sophie Braccini

When a couple of students a few weeks ago drew a swastika at lunchtime, which was discovered and erased within five minutes, on Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School grounds, principal Joan Danilson reported the incident to Moraga School District's Superintendent Bruce Burns, who, as soon as the facts were ascertained, sent a note to all MSD parents. The district balanced the risk of creating unease and negative publicity with the need of transparency and recognizing that there was an opportunity to improve the education provided to the students.

The school board met on Oct. 13, and at public request, adopted a resolution, not limited to the incident. One of the statements affirms the absolute necessity of a school-based ethos rooted in respect of differences. It also condemns the display of hate symbols as inconsistent with the district's values.

JMIS immediately turned the challenge into an opportunity for learning and all the students participated during first period in an activity about the meaning of symbols. After being given several examples and thinking about meaning, the students engaged in creating their own symbols, by themselves or in a group.

The drawings are now displayed in the school's library. Danilson commented that she was impressed by the insightfulness of the students. The symbols vary in size and intricacy and mostly focus on equality, fighting hatred, and respect of differences, but also solidarity with regions that have been hit by natural disasters.

At the Oct. 16 Cultural Proficiency Committee meeting, which was created by Burns in January, the superintendent recounted the swastika incident and added that what happened led to the district seeking to better itself and look at best practices across the nation. He noted that, so far, Alaska seems to be leading in the area of cultural awareness. He invited representatives of the No-Place-For-Hate school program to make a presentation to the approximately 30 parents and teachers at the meeting.

When the committee was formed at the beginning of the year, its first task was to amend the district's mission statement and include cultural awareness. The text can be found online on the MSD governing board page (<http://www.moraga.k12.ca.us/govbd>). Jessica Meeks, an MSD parent and chair of the committee, explained that it is now working on developing standards to meet this statement, and is seeking parent input. To illustrate that need, Burns asked, "Where do we draw the line? Do we do it when Johnny pushes Mary? When someone makes a comment on someone's weight or ethnicity?"

One district parent talked about her daughter, who is the only child in the district registered as of American Indian origin, and how the celebration of colonial days was difficult for the family as these episodes are reminiscent of how American Indians were nearly exterminated. Burns responded that this comment reinforced the fact that all voices needed to be listened to with an open mind, and reflect the best ways to prepare the children for their future.

A first action will be to increase the amount of books in school libraries that support cultural awareness with age appropriate material. Before the next meeting, members will start fleshing out high-level concepts. The next meeting will be held at the Joaquin Moraga Intermediate library on Nov. 27 at 3:30 p.m., it is opened to the public.

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