

Published June 20th, 2012

## Moraga School District to Create a Committee on Student Safety

By Sophie Braccini



School Board meeting on June 12 Photo Andy Scheck

The Governing Board of the Moraga School District (MSD) approved Tuesday night, June 12, the creation of a Board Committee for Student Safety that will be charged with reviewing MSD practice and training regarding child abuse and mandated reporting, and to propose changes and/or improvements by the start of the 2012-2013 school year. The decision came in response to media coverage of failures to report suspected abuse by MSD personal in the 1990s.

Few parents and members of the community chose to talk at the meeting, however, MSD Superintendent Bruce Burns said that he had received communication from about two dozen parents regarding the issue and that he responded to each of them.

Moraga parent and former Los Perales PTA president Julie Carlson spoke at the meeting in support of the Superintendent. "His abilities as Principal and now Superintendent have been by far the best I've seen in this District over the past 10 years," she said. "(He has been) professional and diligent in his duties and has always placed the education and the well being of the students in his district first and foremost."

In stark contrast, Moraga resident and KSFO radio host Barbara Simpson characterized the story as a massive cover up and demanded the resignation of the Superintendent and the entire Board. Simpson recently interviewed Kristen Cunnane, the young woman who brought charges last year against the Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School teacher who abused her more than 12 years ago. The trial that found the teacher, Julie Correa, guilty started the media enquiry regarding MSD staff.

Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School teacher John Tsubota also spoke at the meeting. He, with fellow teachers Jerry Gruen and Patti Forster, were accused in different media of supporting Correa at a bail hearing; he came to say that they would never support a child abuser. "We were asked to appear at her bail hearing and we did," said Tsubota. "Prior to the bail hearing, we had not seen the police report. . . . The bail hearing was an eye opening experience. . . . We were stunned, shocked and deeply saddened . . . we immediately cut off our relationship with Julie (Correa) and her attorney."

MSD parent Scott Rickman asked that the committee proposed by the Superintendent be staffed with competent independent investigators. "Part of this committee's task is to review how policies have been applied in the past," he said. "(I want) neither a witch hunt nor a white wash, but thorough independent investigation and recommendations."

The members of the new committee will be announced June 22. It will include one parent from each of the four schools, one Board member, the Superintendent, one site administrator from each school, and a representative from the Contra Costa County Child Abuse Prevention Council. It will review current policies, practices and training regarding child abuse and mandated reporting, and make proposals for improvement before school starts. Burns also indicated that the Committee will look into the appropriateness to better inform the children about their rights.

The Board did not discuss the idea of an independent investigation and adopted the Superintendent's proposal. Burns commented later that an independent inquiry was not necessary in his view. "We know what happened and the Committee will look into the reasons that permitted such a breach of duty," he said. Burns went as far as to say that the superintendent at the time should have immediately reported the abuse allegations when Bill Walters informed him of what he knew, but added that he didn't know if anything was done at the time. "It is clear for me that the first thing I'd do if I heard of such a crime today would be to immediately call the police and suspend the staff person from his/her duty until the investigation was completed," said Burns.

To the question of whether or not Walters was asked to retire when Burns learned of his past failure to report alleged abuse, the Superintendent refused to respond, citing confidentiality. "Only the Board and I were made aware of what was decided and it cannot be publicly commented on," he said. That remark echoed the statement by MSD Board Member Kym Leserman at the end of the School Board meeting Tuesday night, who explained that they (Board members) had received numerous enquiries about their decisions and actions over the past six months, but that they were not allowed, by law, to answer.

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