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Local High School District reinstates interdistrict transfer policy

By Sophie Braccini

The Acalanes Union High School District approved at the end of August a policy that will allow a number of students from other districts to transfer into one of AUHSD's public schools. Superintendent John Nickerson explained that the stakeholders' voices supporting this change had been heard. The board members voted unanimously in support of reinstating interdistrict transfers.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the AUHSD stakeholders, students and parents loudly voiced a need for change. The district quickly enacted several policy and curriculum changes that were implemented at the beginning of the school year (see the article in the Aug. 19 issue). Some, however, felt that a policy enacted in 2018 banning interdistrict transfers was in opposition to the district's desire to present itself as reducing racial inequities. A student-led movement began, and parents got on board to once again allow interdistrict transfers.

Sachin Lakhota and Josh Morganstein from Miramonte are examples of influential students in the movement that led to the change. The two wrote a 37-page report demonstrating that school district boundaries are a tool to perpetuate segregation in education, and that allowing the transfers would be a pragmatic though small step toward improving racial equity. The two students met online with four of the five board members to present their findings.

AUHSD alumni Carly Johnson and Ava Killbourn introduced the Acalanes Union High School District Committee for Multicultural Educational Reform in June, and current and former students joined them, such as 2020 Miramonte graduate Amrita Pannu, co-founder and former president of the Miramonte South Asian Culture Club, Nisha Andrews and Keshini Cardozo, along with Ava Moran, the current co-president of the Miramonte Black Student Union. The Acalanes Union Coalition for Transfer Students was also formed by AUHSD alumni and current students.

Students met with parents' diversity and inclusion clubs, spoke at board meetings and organized a protest at the district's building. They became the stakeholders' voice that was heard by the district.

Many students talked during the Sept. 16 board meeting discussion about the policy change. They presented the issue of equal opportunity in education and equity as the crux of what was at stake. Terms like desegregating the district were heard, some said that public education without transfer students was not public education, and they asked for the end of the ivory tower.

Ellen Zapalac, a district parent, noted that it will be important next year to make sure that the transfer students and their parents feel welcomed and included. Lakhota said the same thing, adding that equity and leadership student groups were working on educating each other about different cultures.

Nickerson explained that the 2018 change had been made strictly for economic reasons. Because of its status, the AUHSD does not receive any funding from the state for students coming from other districts. But the number of students coming from other districts is dependent on availability, and will not create the need to open extra classrooms. It will permit the number of students to stay stable in high schools, such as Miramonte where enrollment has declined.

Board member Bob Hockett had voted for the ban in 2018 and said that at the time the decision was made for financial reasons. He said he has since realized the value of diversity; he listened to a lot of students and parents, and saw this as an equity issue. Hockett supported reinstating the transfer, acknowledging this was a small step, and that more diversity needed to be brought to our communities. He recommended that the transfer students be spread out throughout the three Lamorinda high schools.

Board member Kathy Coppersmith was the only one who voiced a nuanced opinion despite the prevalent politically-correct vibe of the meeting. She noted that this policy would not be necessarily welcomed in the Miramonte community. She addressed students, telling them that their parents had likely chosen purposefully a non-diverse white suburban community to raise them. She said that she was concerned that not many parents had been heard at the board meetings and that those who talked to her privately about the policy change were against it. She neither gave a number nor names. Coppersmith also noted that the districts from which the students will come will lose funding as a result and that this change would not be a sure way to increase the schools' diversity as AUHSD cannot pick students for the color of their skin or socio-economic status. The board member voted for the policy, adding that this was not the answer to diversify the schools.

Transferring students from one district to another is preceded by the signature of a contractual interdistrict attendance agreement between the districts involved. The superintendent then accepts transfer students based on schools' impactation, enrollment and other district's financial considerations. January is typically the time when transfer requests are made, both in or out of the AUHSD.

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