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Popular Orinda Union School District superintendent retires

By Sora O'Doherty



Carolyn Seaton Photo Sora O'Doherty

After five years, superintendent Carolyn Seaton is leaving the job; indeed, leaving the state, to retire in Colorado where she will be closer to her family. Seaton has completed 37 years in education, including last year during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented challenges unknown in education for over 100 years.

Born in Dallas Texas, Seaton was raised in Torrance, California. But she returned to Texas for her undergraduate degree and master's degree, which she earned at the University of North Texas. Prior to coming to Orinda she worked 19 years with the Manhattan Beach school district in Southern California as executive director of educational services and executive director of human resources. She had previously taught in a suburb of Dallas for 13 years.

When Seaton was recruited for the position of OUSD superintendent, she was working on her Ph.D. and wasn't interested in a career move. However, the recruitment firm pursued her, and convinced her that the OUSD would work with her to permit her to defend her dissertation. Seaton was recruited by Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates, the same firm now recruiting for her replacement. Seaton had high praise for the firm and is convinced that they will produce excellent candidates to replace her.

Before last year, Seaton would have said that her major challenge at OUSD had been the public safety power shutoffs, but then came the pandemic, which proved to be much more challenging. "There really wasn't a road map; we hadn't dealt with this in our lifetime" she said. Seaton is really proud at how the educational community in Lamorinda handled such a tremendous shift, and what they were able to accomplish. She expressed her

gratitude to the superintendents of 'Walamorinda,' a nickname that includes nearby Walnut Creek and Canyon. She named John Nickerson, Acalanes Union High School District; Bruce Burns, Moraga School District; Richard Whitmore, Lafayette School District; Marie Morgan, Walnut Creek School District; and Lucia Sullivan, Canyon School District, as her helpful colleagues.

Not an epidemiologist, Seaton suddenly found herself giving pandemic updates at every OUSD meeting. "It's interesting" she mused, "what you become an expert in." One of the tricky parts, she recounted, was that there were still unknowns as we were working through this; experts disagreed, and she didn't want OUSD decisions to cause any student or staff to contract COVID-19.

During the pandemic, Seaton added, the OUSD board has been incredible, working so hard; the number of meetings alone was unbelievable, especially as all the board positions are voluntary. Seaton expressed herself to be so impressed with this particular board, "such smart dedicated individuals, respectful of each other and with me." Throughout the pandemic, she said, "they remained focused, and moved on even when we didn't agree. Orinda is really so lucky to have them."

Her successor will certainly have the mental health of students and staff as a very important issue. Still, she noted, "students are amazingly resilient, they always inspire me." That having been said, it will be important to look for students who continue to be affected and need intervention, perhaps in the form of some counseling. The OUSD is currently looking at a tool that they might be able to use to help assess where students are and provide a data point. Right now, Seaton said, there is only the California Healthy Kids Survey, and it isn't enough. "I like to say, there are many COVID silver linings. As difficult as they year was to adjust to, there are many highlights in the ways we have learned how to cope that we can take with us. We know that students learn best when we aren't dealing with significant mental health issues. A little bit of anxiety is a good thing, a lot isn't."

Seaton hopes ways to assess students more regularly can be found and adopted. "We have literacy

assessments, but just in the past few years we've tried to address elementary school students with mental health issues." The board is currently looking at ways to expand counseling at elementary and middle school using additional funds from the state and potentially from the federal government. Seaton garnered universal praise from OUSD board members. Cara Hoxie said, "Dr. Seaton has been a transformative leader. Her ability to collaborate with teachers, staff, parents and community members has been the key to navigating this incredibly difficult past year. I am enormously grateful for all she has done for our district!"

Jason Kaune agreed that Seaton has been transformational. "Collaborating with our parents, she helped recreate our foundation as one of her top priorities. She earned confidence from our community to fund the rebuilding of our campuses and built new relationship with our city partners. Inspiring our educators, she accelerated Orinda's academic excellence, even as the state reduced our share of funding. She has a knack for hiring - 'getting the right people on the bus,' she calls it. During the pandemic crisis she steered us through uncertain waters. Orinda schools will benefit from her leadership for a generation."

Liz Daoust also found Seaton to have been an exceptional leader for OUSD the past five years. "She has an incredible gift for bringing people together and understanding the needs of all stakeholders. Our entire community has benefited from her vast teaching and administrative experience, visionary approach, and boundless positive energy.

"During all of her years in Orinda, but most especially this past extremely challenging pandemic year, she has gone above and beyond in her work with the singular goal of supporting all students, teachers, staff, and parents. She is the true definition of dedication and commitment, and we are extremely grateful for her service to our District. She will be deeply missed, but we wish her all the best in her retirement."

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