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## AUHSD president's reflections on where the district is and where it's heading

By Sharon K. Sobotta

With nine years under her belt as an Acalanes Union High School District Board member, Nancy Kendzierski is taking the reins as president for her third time and she's excited to keep the momentum going. Kendzierski says it's important to keep the district's steadfast student centered approach alive and well while focusing on academics, holistic support, parental and community partnerships and financial stability amidst economic uncertainties.

"(We) should continue to broaden and enhance (the district's) curriculum to reflect the complex world we live (in) and continue to provide significant support for student well-being," Kendzierski says.

Although COVID amplified the need to provide holistic support to students, Kendzierski acknowledges that stress has impacted high school students in the district for a long time. The board has taken note of that and supported and voted in favor of measures ranging from the most recent addition of wellness centers on all campuses to adjusted school calendars to block scheduling.

"We're a high performing district and our kids are under a lot of stress and lots of expectations,"

Kendzierski says. "When (students) think their choices are narrowed to only a few specific things, (it can be overwhelming). In fact there's a wide world out there and lots of ways to succeed. We try to help students deal with all the different pressures, we wanted to introduce more comprehensive support than just academic counseling; this ultimately led us to having wellness centers."

Kendzierski's children graduated from the school district in 2009 and 2016 respectively. When asked what inspires her to stay engaged with the board now that her own children are out of school, Kendzierski says it comes down to her strong belief in the power of public education.

"I really believe that public education is the cornerstone of a working democracy," she says. "The way that public schools work in this country is through each district. If you care about the larger world, it's important to work on that locally. Supporting our local schools is really the foundation (for our future)."

AUHSD includes Acalanes, Campolindo, and Miramonte high schools in the Lamorinda area and Los Lomas in Walnut Creek and is the home of more than 5,000 high school students. Along with Kendzierski, Kristin Connelly, Christopher Grove, Christopher Severson continue serving. Jennifer Chen joined in 2022 after the November election and Rebecca Joseph, a student at Los Lomas High was elected by her peers to be the student board member.

Kendzierski says because student voices are essential, it's fitting to have a student on the board. "Students are their own biggest advocates."

Although the student board member abstains from votes about such matters as personnel or budget, Kendzierski says the voice is also important. Outside of board membership Kendzierski wants the community to know about the power and persistence behind AUHSD students in advocating for themselves and each other.

"They advocate through clubs, through initiatives, through showing up and speaking in various ways in their extracurricular activities, in participating in school. They are asking for what they need and doing what they can to make it happen," she says. Last academic year, a number of AUHSD students presented snippets of work they had created and co-crafted on topics ranging from race and religion to embracing prongs of intersectional identities to parents and community members. Kendzierski says that's exactly the kind of thing that AUHSD students do. "Our students are amazing. And they are not sort of waiting. They are here. They are awake, alive and active partners."

Seventeen-year-old Gema Perez is a senior at Acalanes High, who could be a testament to what Kendzierski says the board is striving to accomplish in the AUHSD.

Perez is an engaged and successful student who also struggles with anxiety, but has been relieved to have resources and services at the wellness center available to her.

"The school is known for good grades and battling the pressure to do well enough can be very stressful,"

Perez says. "It's been really nice for me to be able to drop into the wellness center and be able to relax in a safe space. Mental health is just as important as physical health. I think having spaces like this takes away stigma and normalizes getting support."

Perez recalls losing a fellow student at AUHSD to suicide last year. "It was really hard because I had known that person from a young age. I think a lot of people don't know what others are going through because some people just have to put on a brave face for school," she says. "It was really hard not to see that person in class or in the hallways. I think the school stepped up its efforts after that to support us and it seems like there's more awareness of the level of anxiety the pressures of school can cause."

Perez is involved in a handful of extra-curricular activities including track and field and orchestra, and participates in a program through her church called 'rooted.' Having activities and support at school as well as ways to show up as her authentic self both inside and outside the classroom not only help her cope, but help her thrive. "If I can show up in all of the various spaces as me and talk about my challenges with mental health, then I can normalize it and help other people feel OK too."

How important is it to Perez and her peers that the AUHSD board factor in student stress and mental health into the decisions they are making? "Very," she says. "You don't feel like the school is ignoring you, you feel like your emotions are being validated and you feel a little like you belong."

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