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A New Superintendent for the Moraga School District

By Sophie Braccini



Bruce Burns Photo Sophie Braccini

It's probably not an easy task to step into the shoes of former Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer, who retired in June after ten years of service. But Bruce Burns, a man with a quite different demeanor, picked up the reins at the beginning of July with confidence. He takes over a district staffed with a talented group of teachers and administrators, but one that needs the impetus to move in new directions. Burns is ready to challenge the district and the community to participate in the elaboration of the strategic plan for the next 10 years of the Moraga School District.

Burns started teaching 5th and 6th grade in Stockton. As a young teacher he liked the multi-ethnic group he taught, but he felt that he could do more for the community if he directed his energy and passion to education administration. He went back to school, and then returned to Stockton as an Assistant Principal. "As an administrator you need a sense of innovation to make a difference. The motto 'if something worked yesterday it will work tomorrow' is not good enough for education, you need to look at new research and take risks."

When he became principal at Los Perales Elementary (LP) in 1996 he felt that he could implement the kind of relationships that would make a difference. "What was great at LP is that it was a new school," he said, "I could establish the kind of collaborative interactions that make for success." Burns believes that shared decision-making and the involvement of the community of parents, teachers and staff creates the right school structure.

"I certainly missed the diversity of Stockton when I moved to Moraga, but this district is small which means that the hierarchy is

more flat, you can get more done, it is easier to take risks and the community is very supportive," says Burns. Over time, LP became a unique environment with a very close-knit community of teachers and almost no turn-over. "It was a very collaborative atmosphere, we were given a blank slate, we shared decisions, and it was the staff that developed the school rules."

Burns' next challenge was Moraga's Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM), which had seen three principals in three years. "Mrs. (Catherine) Mikes (Burns' immediate predecessor at JM) had brought with her many great ideas that stayed after she left for health reasons, and we implemented them," said Burns. He enjoyed this innovative aspect of the school, as well as building the trust of staff. "After three years of changes, some mending had to be done," he said.

Burns probably would have stayed at JM for a few more years if an opportunity had not presented itself: the retirement of Schafer. "I love challenge, setting goals, and working toward them for the benefit of kids and education," says the new Superintendent.

The district boasts some of the best test scores in the state, but that is not enough for Burns. "I would like to see some improvement in the performance of our students," he says, "that does not mean better test scores, but improvements in the skills that are needed to succeed in our changing world; such as better communication and collaboration." Burns cites research which shows that students who are the most sought after in the work force are those who know how to relate to others, who want to contribute to society.

For the first year, Burns plans to learn and get to know all the members of the District as well as its constituency at large. Then he will work to identify the best possible process to gather community input for the district's next strategic plan. "I want to be able to get input from the parents, the students, the teachers, staff, the Town and Saint Mary's College," says Burns. He wants all stakeholders to share their values and principles so that, once adopted, the new plan has the buy-in and momentum necessary for its successful implementation.

As in most school districts, the budget situation is of great concern. "We are in deficit spending by \$600,000.," Burns states. "The school board made the decision to call on our reserve for the next two years; this is not a sustainable trend and other means will have to be found if the economy does not improve."

This fall a commission will study financial options, including the possibility of a parcel tax. "We've had to increase the class size in 3rd grade to 23 students," says Burns, "but with the support of our parent community, we were able to maintain most of our enrichment programs, including the arts, sports and the 7th grade "Z" period (an extra period at the end of the day so that 7th graders can opt

to take two electives)."

In his new office on School Street, it will be the first time in his career that Burns' day will not follow the rhythm of a school bell. It will also be the first time that he will not have daily interaction with students. "I already miss the people I worked with," said Burns, "but I will pay frequent visits to the school and plan to stay connected."

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