

MacDougall: Keeping the vision for Konocti Unified

Contributed by Dr. William MacDougall

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As the predictions of huge budget cuts loom, the Konocti Unified School District must continue its focus on providing superb programs that our parents and students consider valuable and desirable.

There are many ways to look at the upcoming years. One would be to cut things to the bone and deeper. We would need to eliminate programs such as music, art and other electives, eliminate after school activities and cut personnel, including site administrators and counseling services. We would need to cut teaching staff and raise class sizes.

This would be an obvious approach to cutting expenditures in order to balance a budget. We would have nothing to offer but the basic core subjects. When parents considering a move to Lake County compare the schools, we will be competing with our neighboring districts based solely upon test scores. In addition, if safety becomes tenuous and high interest, career-based programs become scarce, I believe we will lose clients. We will simply lose.

I prefer to approach these times as an opportunity to focus on what we can do better than anyone else. Maintaining class sizes as low as we can, providing an excellent performing arts program, emphasizing our career-tech programs, strengthening our programs for our gifted and academically talented, and providing a high-relationship, rigorous education for all students are investments that will pay for themselves. Our clients will be happy and provided with an excellent, well-rounded education. They will remain in the district and they will encourage others to come.

We must find ways to increase revenue and make each dollar go farther. Therefore, KUSD is forming two committees to address the upcoming financial projections.

The first committee, the Increasing Enrollment and Revenue Committee, is looking at methods to do just that. This committee will look into the areas of attendance, recruitment and retention of students. We are looking for experts in student attendance, instructional programs, grant writing, fundraising, marketing, labor market projections, real estate/housing, health care and community values/needs, parents and students.

The second committee, the Consolidation of Services Committee, is researching and proposing methods to decrease spending. This committee will review the possibility of consolidation of schools and other district operations so that KUSD can operate on a smaller budget. To do this, we will investigate collaborative partnerships with the county, other school districts, and the communities of Clearlake, Clearlake Oaks, Glenhaven and Lower Lake. We are looking for experts on county operations, representatives from each community, parents, facility, maintenance and grounds keeping experts, experts in transportation, food services, student support services, law enforcement, and school finance and site representatives.

If you know someone who is an expert in one or more of these areas, please call the district office at 994-6475 and give us his/her contact information. We want the committees to be of manageable size and to have specific focus. We anticipate the first meeting to be at the end of October and recommendations given to the KUSD board by February.

As we make this leap, our staff members must develop a relationship with each student. Staff members must know the student well enough to determine what strategies will make him or her succeed. This process will be done individually in the classroom and as professional learning communities.

An important thing that we can do as an educational community is to realize and appreciate the fact that everyone is working very hard and doing the best they can. The employees of KUSD and our community must join together to help one another, work together and be kind to one another. We may not be able to change the financial climate of the United States today, but we can create the climate in which we live and work. When we are all doing our part, we help the children of our community experience growth, safety and joy. If we make our community a place of respect, trust, consideration, tolerance, and compassion, then we can overcome the obstacles created by the financial crisis.

We have completed the first six weeks of school. Almost all classes are full to contract size or at the maximum allowable under class size reduction. Our support staff is also working right at capacity levels. The secretaries, custodians, librarians, food service providers, paraprofessionals, tech support, and maintenance/grounds personnel are all doing their very best to provide the highest level of service.

I have had the pleasure of visiting all of the schools, observed many classrooms, ridden several school buses and attended all of the Back-to-School Nights. One thing I can say, without reservation, KUSD has many fabulous employees who care deeply for our youth and our community. In fact, we exemplify what is best in our community.

Let me give you some examples.

The first day of school I rode a bus in the morning. As we pulled up at each stop, I saw children genuinely pleased to see their driver. The driver, in turn, welcomed each student and often called them by name. The parents also knew the driver by name. As I talked to the driver, I found that he had driven the same route for over four years and that he has known many of the students, their siblings and their families for at least that long. This long-term relationship is important, powerful, and positively impacts our community and our students' lives. His smile and welcome is one the first interactions each student has before they arrive at school.

During another bus ride, I observed a driver hesitate to leave a stop because a student was not there. She knew that student rarely missed school, but also that he had a very hard life. Seconds after conveying her concern to me, we saw a

head bob up and down in the distance. The child came up to the bus winded and crying. Apparently, he had not been woken up and ran out of the house without his homework or breakfast. The driver welcomed the child and told him that he had made the right decision to get on the bus and to come to school. She assured the child that things would be OK and that he would have breakfast at school. The child wiped the tears from his face and hugged the driver.

I have many stories of many classrooms, but the overriding aspect that impressed me was the constant praise given to the students when something is done correctly or appropriately. Our teachers consistently emphasize the positives and correct the inappropriate behavior by asking what should be done or giving specific directions.

In one classroom of first graders, the teacher has each student seated next to a partner in groups of four. She would say “make sure that your partner is ready” and they would quickly bring each other to attention. Then she would say “My darlings what …” or “My angels how …” or praise them saying “you are doing so well, my loves.” She meant these terms of endearment and you could tell that the students adored their teacher.

Later that afternoon, I also saw several teachers with their students in the lunchroom. One teacher was at the front of the table flipping through multiplication flash cards as the students ate their lunch. Another teacher was cutting students’ hamburgers in half so it was easier for them to eat and still another was using a press to slice whole oranges into eighths. I presented an eighth grade teacher with a sunflower one morning and she turned to her students and said, “See, what did I just tell you, you never know when something good is going to happen!”

These stories and many just like them happen every day in our classrooms, in our buses, in our cafeterias, in our offices and on our school yards.

On behalf of the employees of the Konocti Unified School District, I want to say that it is a honor pleasure to serve this community.

Dr. William R. MacDougall, Ed.D., is in his first year as Konocti Unified School District's superintendent. He plans to share these periodic updates with community members.

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