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New educational leaders help spur dynamic change in Sequoia district

REDWOOD CITY, Calif., Aug. 5, 2009 - When the Sequoia Union High School District held its annual Conference for Administrative Management Planning this week, the group dynamic was different than in past years.

"We welcomed several new administrators to our district this week," says Pat Gemma, Ed.D., superintendent of the Sequoia district. "These additions to our team reflect a rich diversity in terms of ethnicity and individual paths to their new roles."

Alvaro Calderon, the new assistant vice principal at Woodside High School, for example, is an immigrant from Mexico and one of the first in his family ever to go to college. A Sequoia High School graduate, Calderon was drawn to work with high school students after a stint with the Santa Clara County Probation Department. Calderon says he wants to be able to positively affect the lives of young people and help prevent any student from ever landing in juvenile hall.

Frank Wells, Ed.D., the new vice principal in charge of Redwood (Continuation) High School, faced myriad obstacles growing up in San Francisco's Hunter's Point projects but that didn't stop him from going to college and pursuing a career in education. His career path has taken some interesting turns, including a post as principal of one of the most troubled high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Other new leaders (hired to fill vacancies that were open before school ended in June) include Maureen Campbell, administrative vice principal at Woodside High School; Patricia Crespo, instructional vice principal at Sequoia High School; Mike Kuliga, administrative vice principal at Sequoia High School; and Lauren O'Leary, director of special education for the district.

"While all of these new administrators share a passion for working with high school students, each of them brings a unique background and perspective to the district," says Gemma.

According to the superintendent, the other key factor bringing change to the district's management team is the influx of younger educational leaders.

"For the first time ever, all four of the principals at our comprehensive high schools are forty or younger," he notes.

New to the helm are Bonnie Hansen, 39, principal of Sequoia High School, and Raul Zamora, 40, principal of Carlmont High School. (Previously, Hansen served as instructional vice principal at Sequoia, and Zamora was principal at Miramonte High School, Orinda.) They join current principals David Reilly, 36, who was permanently named principal of Woodside High School in 2008, and Matthew Zito, 39, who became principal of Menlo-Atherton High School in 2007.

"I anticipate the team's youth will be a further catalyst for the change we've initiated in the district," says Gemma. "Our vision is to engage and prepare students for success in a 21st century global society. Our district's rich blend of veteran educational leaders with these younger administrators is a great source of optimism as we plan for continuing success in the face of some serious challenges."

Another contributing factor to his optimism, he says, is the effort already under way to shift the mindset and culture of the district's leadership and staff at all levels. During this week's management conference,

the group studied "Mindset," a book by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck that describes how a "growth mindset" can contribute to success in teaching, parenting and business.

"The Sequoia district is dynamic. We continue to push for increased innovation and risk-taking - whether we're doing instructional planning, developing an expanded career-technical education program, or identifying ways to close the achievement gap," explains Gemma.

"We seek to nurture a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset," he says. "With a growth mindset, there are no limits - a person's ability to achieve success is based on the individual's own efforts and willingness to stretch and take risks.

"We recognize that shifting our culture means hiring growth-minded staff, nurturing growth-minded skills and behaviors, and recognizing and rewarding growth-minded activity."

This summer, the Sequoia district partnered with the Thrive Foundation for Youth (www.thrivefoundation.org) to develop new curriculum around the growth mindset concept. The new curriculum was integrated into COMPASS, the district's summer transition program for at-risk, incoming freshmen.

The collaboration with Thrive involved training teachers in effective ways to inspire at-risk students to believe in themselves and to believe in their ability to master instructional content. Inspired by the positive effect on students, participating teachers completed the summer session wanting more training in this new approach. Ongoing monitoring of the students will be conducted throughout their freshman year.

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