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*Superintendent*

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August 27, 2020

*Open Letter to the Murrieta Valley USD Community*

***Our shared responsibility to confront the issues of racism, systemic bias, inclusivity, diversity, equity, and tolerance***

Dear Murrieta Valley USD Families,

A racist group chat that occurred five years ago involving former Vista Murrieta High School (VMHS) students became public this summer. The horrendous and hateful images and language shocked, saddened, and disgusted me and our staff. Their words and ideas do not reflect our values as a school district.

In the wake of social media outcry over the group chat, recent alumni from our district came forward with a call to action petition signed by many current and former students, employees, and parents. Along with suggestions on how Murrieta Valley USD could be more culturally sensitive, and equity focused, one former student asked that the group chat incident be investigated. In the request, a former student alleged that there was administrative misconduct and a failure to act on a report of this racist chat.

Since becoming aware of the existence of this group chat, we have worked diligently to find out if we handled this incident appropriately at the time. We launched an extensive, objective investigation using the respected law firm of Best, Best & Krieger. Scores of confidential interviews with staff, parents, alumni, and students were conducted and volumes of emails and notes were examined. They diligently followed the threads of concern raised in these interviews but could not find definitive evidence to corroborate the allegations that we mishandled or dismissed this incident.

The findings of this two-month investigation were presented tonight, August 27, 2020 to the Board of Education. The public report is posted on the district web site. I encourage you to review it.

I realize these findings may not provide closure for some people and still leave unanswered questions for some of our families. While no specific actionable conduct was uncovered, we have engaged in a lot of soul searching about whether we have done enough to ensure that every student feels safe and supported at school.

This investigation confirmed that there is a perceived and, for some, a very real culture of insensitivity at VMHS, where inclusivity is not universally practiced or respected. Consistently, those interviewed said they felt marginalized and that their concerns about questionable behaviors or comments were too easily dismissed by school staff.

Vista Murrieta is a great school with 20% of the student body as transfers into VMHS. This is a high school of choice. In this investigation we have come to realize that while VMHS offers a supportive learning environment and a positive experience for most students, it has not done so for every student.

With sadness, we are learning of individual stories about how some of our former and current students have felt from the sting of racism, discrimination, indifference, and intolerance in their high school experiences.

I truly regret that any student or staff member, past or present, has felt that their legitimate concerns were minimized, disrespected, or ignored. You have my commitment that we are taking bold and decisive steps to change the culture at the school. I also take responsibility for not being more aware of this situation and the implicit bias displayed to students and staff.

As your Superintendent, I can assure you that we are listening. We are embracing the need for change and are prepared to engage with all stakeholders to achieve shared goals for inclusion, diversity, equity, and anti-racism awareness in a learning environment of mutual respect and support. We are determined to confront this problem openly and collaboratively in the months ahead.

We value the diverse voices of students, parents, and staff who showed the courage and concern to step forward and raise these important issues.

Change, regardless of how difficult it may be, will occur at VMHS and within all Murrieta Valley USD schools. We are gaining momentum in this effort. We have posted on our website a timeline showing how we are aggressively raising awareness about implicit bias, institutional and individual racism, and best practices for students and staff to report concerns. I encourage you to examine what we have done so far and join us in forging new pathways to progress.

It is up to each of us as individuals, and all of us as an institution, to promote equity and foster a campus culture that is free from intolerance, indifference, and systemic bias. We deserve a district-wide culture that acknowledges and embraces the diversity of all stakeholders and aggressively pursues justice and equity for all our students, parents, and staff.

I recognize that nothing I say now will instantly restore trust. We need to earn trust by the actions we take moving forward. As a district we must be consistent, transparent, and receptive to feedback. This has been a teachable moment for Murrieta Valley USD, and we are committed to learn from the past to shape a better future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrick Kelley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Patrick Kelley, Superintendent of Murrieta Valley USD