

MINUTES FROM THE MEETING OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE GRASS ROOTS VENICE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL FOR THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2006.

1. On Thursday, February 16, 2006, the **Educational Committee** of the **Grass Roots Venice Neighborhood Council** held its monthly meeting in the Community Room of the Venice Family Clinic located at 622 Rose Avenue, Venice, California 90291.

The attendees were:

1. Antoinette Reynolds,
2. Rick Selan,
3. Noel Weiss
4. Naomi Nightingale (Part of Meeting).

REVIEW OF MINUTES OF 1/26/06 MEETING

The minutes of the January 26th meeting were distributed and reviewed. The following changes were noted as appropriate:

1. Rick Selan objected to the use of the term "inaugural" in the first paragraph to describe the January 26th meeting. As per his grievance, Rick contends the first meeting was December 14, 2005;
2. Lauren Grossman was incorrectly referred to as Lauren Gross;
3. Rick Selan believed that instead of referring to the recent "problem" at Mark Twain, he spoke about what he considered to have been a "riot";
4. Rick Selan indicated that the number of citations issued to students was approximately 35-45;
5. The reference on page two to "CHE Exam" should read "CHSEE (California High School Exit Exam);
6. Rick Selan felt that the reference to "another participant" on page 3, paragraph 4, should identify himself as the person who made the comment;
7. Rick Selan felt that the reference in paragraph 6 on page 3 to "Naomi" should be changed to use the term "group" so it reads that the group put together a list of activities;

8. Following the last paragraph on page 4, the following should be added:

"Naomi stated she would notify committee members of the action taken by the "By-Laws Committee". As of the date of the meeting [2/16/06], no information has been received;

9. Page 5 - Add that as per GRVNC Website, the meeting of the Education Committee is to be the third Thursday of every month.

WORK OF THE COMMITTEE - NEED FOR PARTICIPANTS TO EXERCISE RESTRAINT IN THEIR EMAIL COMMUNICATIONS

As part of the "Public Comment" section of the meeting, Antoinette Reynolds expressed her concern that Rick Selan was continuing to send emails which contained personal attacks on members. Antoinette reiterated what she thought had been generally agreed and understood at the last meeting that personal attacks and inflammatory emails by Rick would cease - That she did not want to have the positive energy which could be generated through the Committee's work dissipated because of the negative energy reflected in personal attacks or inflammatory emails.

Antoinette then requested Rick to show more discretion in the tone and timing of his email communications, lest he risk losing people due to their choosing to cease listening to him.

My notes do not reflect any response by Rick to these remarks.

DISCUSSION OF THE BACKGROUND FACTS ABOUT THE ADMINISTRATION OF MARK TWAIN MIDDLE SCHOOL AND POSSIBLE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES WHICH CAN BE UTILIZED BY THE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL TO ASSIST IN DISSIPATING AND EVENTUALLY ELIMINATING THE PERSISTENT RACIAL TENSIONS WHICH CONTINUE TO PLAGUE THE SCHOOL

The balance of the meeting was devoted to (1) providing background facts concerning the administration of Mark Twain Middle School, and (2) a general discussion of how a short term and long term resolution to the problem of the racial tensions can be achieved, and the role the neighborhood council can play in that process. The purpose of the discussion was to provide information to others on the committee and to the community who may not be conversant with the history of Mark Twain Middle School and the persistent racial tensions among the students. Armed with this information, they would be better positioned to provide support, assistance and direction toward a truly meaningful resolution.

Current Administration:

In addition to the principal, there currently exist four coordinators, four counselors, and five people composed of the administrative staff. In addition, there is one officer and

eight noon-time aides who serve the student population.

The principal, Jeffrey Felz, is new. It appears that LAUSD assigns principals to the school who are near the end of their careers. This runs counter to the real need which is to have a principal possessed of leadership qualities who is able to listen, to collaborate, to draw upon human interactive skills, to convey a sense of optimism and whose goal is to permanently resolve racial tensions rather than simply continue to preside over their continuation.

The key administrators assigned to the school as principals and vice-principals do not appear to possess the kind of open-minded flexibility needed to successfully lead the school out of the difficulties arising from this persistent racial tension. This has created a dysfunctional administration. Antoinette and Rick, who are most familiar with the background facts, indicated that the problems of the racial tensions at Mark Twain Middle School cannot really be solved under the current leadership because Mr. Felz is possessed of an authoritarian mindset; and that such a mindset reflects an "institutional" problem within the LAUSD bureaucracy itself.

There appears to be a kind of "bunker" mentality at the school where any ideas of staff which differ from those of the school's administration are suppressed. People are, in effect, intimidated into silence when what is needed most is a clear and respectful dialogue and discussion on (1) the nature of the problem, (2) the cause of the problem, and (3) what is needed to effectively confront and ultimately resolve the problem.

The concern is that the school's current administration either has "racist" tendencies or, at a minimum, is possessed of a biased mindset.. Open discussion about the problem within the ranks of the administration is discouraged. New thoughts and ideas are unwelcome. People remain silent out of fear of retribution by the school's principal. As a result, the tensions among the students are mirrored by tensions which exist within the ranks of the school's administration. Needed advice and input is absent. This contributes to the perpetuation of the problem because a more open and honest dialogue among the administrators is needed; not just from a morale standpoint, but also because it is important that every administrator at the school come to understand and accept a common understanding as to why racial tensions persist and what is needed by way of a solution.

On a symbolic basis, the racial tensions are reflected in how the kids segregate themselves between "the tree" and "the table". The Latino students have taken to congregating around an old "tree", while the blacks stay near and around a "table". Anti-latino slogans have apparently been carved onto the tree.

Intervention Strategies:

At this point, Naomi Nightingale joined the meeting.

She indicated, and the group agreed, that a multi-tier approach was needed. First, there exists a need for immediate intervention of some kind which, on a short-term basis, can

serve to cool some of the immediate passions.

Operating on a parallel track can be the development and implementation of a longer-term strategy intended to provide coherence, predictability, stability, and a permanent resolution.

a. Short Term Strategies

It is believed there may be a core of around 50 kids who comprise the problem at Mark Twain Middle School.

Some sort of intervention strategy is needed immediately to mediate or manage the communication between the various groups impacted by the existence of these racial tensions. There was discussion about "LA Best" and "Beyond the Bell", two after-school programs. Perhaps one or the other could be sought out to develop a special program which would assist in providing some guidance and support with funding provided by the City.

In addition, Rick Selan also mentioned:

1. "World of Tolerance" (at Loyola Marymount) (Majorie White - Contact Person);
2. Avis Ridley Thomas - Who is experienced in the implementation of dispute resolution strategies and procedures, and approaches;
3. "Days of Dialogue" - A program put together by Michael Butler of Public Works, Inc., which involves setting aside one day each year where people from all sides can come together and discuss what ails their relationship.

As for who at the Council Office would assist, the role of Laurie Sale is not clear. Laurie ran the Educational Group at Bill Rosendahl's District 11 gathering of local neighborhood councils which occurred earlier in February. Laurie now, however, has been given a broader (paid) role in the office. Her work as an Arts and Education Advisor had been an unpaid (voluntary) position.

At the same time, a dialogue between the principal, Mr. Felz, and the community, through the neighborhood council, could be established. The purpose would be to inform Mr. Felz that the council is concerned and wishes to help in working through a solution.

In addition, Rick Selan suggested that Michael Butler of Public Works, Inc. be contacted to see whether he would be willing to devote time to setting up a public meeting or parent forum where the parents and the administration could attend on more than a once per year basis. The purpose of the meeting would be to try to generate a meaningful dialogue between the parents and the administration with the goal of airing grievances. This would assist in identifying some of the reasons for the racial tensions. That, in turn, would aid in the development of the kind of longer term strategies needed

to resolve the racial tensions.

b. Longer Term Approach

Any longer term solution must involve LAUSD. The Board Member who represents the area, Marlene Canter, needs to be challenged to lend her good offices to assist and provide direction in creating a long-term solution. If she or LAUSD is institutionally incapable of doing this, that must fact must also be documented.

In addition, the offices of Bill Rosendahl could also be engaged.

An effort needs to be undertaken whereby all involved can lend input and ideas toward an effective solution. Specifically, that means:

1. Parents
2. Community
3. Teachers/Faculty/Administration (LAUSD)
4. US Dept. of Education

In addition, consideration could also be given to involving the Office of Civil Rights within the US Department of Justice. It would have jurisdiction because the school district receives Title I (Federal) monies for many of the kids who attend Mark Twain Middle School.

Role of the Neighborhood Council

The Neighborhood Council could be an important catalyst leading to a positive change and the eventual resolution of this persistent problem of racial tensions at Mark Twain Middle School. As one example, it could provide an independent venue for the discussion of the issues and the problem and thus act as a kind of "clearing house of ideas". The hope and expectation here is that once the "issues" were identified, and validated, the community would have one or more concrete ideas around which to rally and focus, and parents and their kids would have the kind of support they need so people's negative feelings could be turned into a positive vision of what can be really accomplished.

As an aside, it was also pointed out that to the extent students were dropping out of Mark Twain, another goal might be to have them replaced by kids who live in the area. What is needed, however, is more information on the area's demographics.

The Neighborhood Council could act as a kind of *defacto* mediator or broker; taking the time to organize a dialogue between LAUSD (and specifically the office of Marlene Canter), the community, the teachers, the parents, and the students themselves. That would involve taking the time to independently develop information from all sides and then develop a strategy designed to facilitate dialogue, discussion, understanding, all eventually leading to a consensus on what steps can be taken over time to organize and implement the kind of successful programs which will be needed to break down the fear, hate, and hostility which casts a pall over the ability of the school to fulfill its mission of delivering quality public educational services to the students.

This could commence with a dialogue between Mr. Feltz, the principal, and the community, through the neighborhood council. The purpose would be to inform Mr. Feltz that the Neighborhood Council is concerned about the high degree of racial tension which exists at the school and that it wishes to help in working through a solution.

From there, as the problems become identified, Naomi suggested it would be worthwhile to try to involve one or more members of the Education Committee in a meeting with Marlene Canter or a designated member of her staff. The point of the meeting would be to deliver a message from the community to the "institution" (LAUSD) that the community needs, desires, and expects the school district to work with the community to develop and implement short-term and long term intervention strategies calculated to meaningfully identify the impediments and challenges which, to date, have burdened and blocked a resolution to the racial problems which have plagued Mark Twain Middle School.

In addition, the formation of a strong parent support group was also brought up. Such a group would empower parents with the knowledge of what is going on, and what they, the parents, can do to help their children deal with these challenges. It would also aid in facilitating ongoing dialogue and communication between the school's administration and the community.

This might, in turn, lead to the establishment of a "School Oversight Committee" composed of parents, teachers, administration, and members of the neighborhood council, and other concerned members of the community.

Rick again brought up the name of Michael Butler of Public Works, Inc. as someone who might be willing to assist. He could help organize a community forum and discussion group where all involved could attend and be heard. From those discussions perhaps some kind of "dispute resolution" mechanism or protocol could be created and implemented.

Rick gave Noel Weiss Michael Butler's phone number. Noel Weiss said he would try to contact Mr. Butler and inquire as to his interest. Rick also provided the phone number of the Union representative with a request that Noel Weiss contact that person.

[As an aside - Noel Weiss was able after several attempts to contact Michael Butler. He indicated that his schedule precluded immediate involvement at this time].

Naomi further indicated that any kind of sustained interaction with the students will involve a need for funding. This is where the office of Councilmember Rosendahl will come in. Perhaps there are one or more grants that the City could receive from the private sector to pay for the costs involved in effectuating a resolution.

The meeting was then adjourned at approximately 9:15 pm.

Minutes Taken by: Noel Weiss and submitted to the Committee Chairman - Naomi Nightingale on 3/20/06 with sincere apologies for the delay.