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La Honda School will keep principal

By Emily Wilson-Half Moon Bay Review

In response to a flood of criticism and outpouring of support for their principal by students, teachers, parents, and individuals, the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District board promised last week to keep at least a part-time principal at La Honda Elementary School.

A crowd filled the Russell Administrative Center in Pescadero on Thursday for a study session that was described as a discussion of the administrative structure of La Honda Elementary School, but focused on the fate of part-time Principal Melba Rhodes.

The board reassigned Rhodes last month to a teaching position for the next school year.

The study session preceded a second discussion later in the meeting, which did focus on the related issue of the administrative structure at La Honda Elementary, which has about 100 students.

Parents were shocked to find out that the popular Rhodes had been reassigned. Some parents claimed that school board trustees violated the Brown Act, which regulates the conduct of governing bodies of local agencies, by not reporting the reassignment of Rhodes after a closed session.

Some parents say they were originally told that getting rid of the principal was an economic issue. But Superintendent Bonnie McClung said that the board never made a decision to eliminate the principal's position and that the matter of Rhodes' position is a personnel issue, which is appropriate for discussion in closed session.

School board President Doug Woods opened last week's study session by apologizing to his colleagues.

"I could have done a lot better in what I said and how I said it," he said.

"Tonight we're here to listen," he told the group assembled for the study session.

Although asked to limit their remarks to staffing and not to discuss personnel issues, in testimonial after testimonial parents, students and teachers talked about Rhodes. They related stories of how she had helped a child with discipline problems, how she had turned a situation with a bully into a



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Question of the Week

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Yes

No

I don't think so since they removed the music stations I don't have cable TV

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friendship, and how she had helped children and parents with home schooling.

"I'm just here to tell everybody what you probably already know: Melba is La Honda Elementary School," said former school board trustee Judy Bullock.

Rhodes, who attended the meeting, defended herself in comments to the board.

"I haven't done anything wrong, other than maybe I haven't been the type of leader Bonnie envisioned I could be," Rhodes told the gathering.

"It's a shock I have to sit here and defend myself," said Rhodes, who added that she had asked for a written evaluation and a chance to try with a new superintendent, as McClung is retiring in June.

Mark Graff, who maintains a Web site about the issue, www.lahondaschools.org, organized a presentation with various community members who talked about what Rhodes does for the school. The group touched on the impact on teachers of having no principal and families who would pull their kids out of school if Rhodes weren't there. Some students also stepped into the fray in support of Rhodes.

"Without a principal, teachers work harder and don't have as much time to put into lessons," said fifth-grader Haley Strom. "Teachers will be tired and grouchy and we don't want that, do we?"

Cody Heiner, also in the fifth grade, agreed that teachers would be grouchy without a principal and added that kids who got out of hand couldn't be sent to the principal's office.

"I would like to help," he said. "How do you think I could do that?"

Rhodes' secretary, Angie Quinn, talked about how losing her boss, who is known for wearing "glad shoes" - her expression for keeping a positive attitude - would hurt the school and the district.

"She's given her heart to our school and made this the best little school in the whole wide world," Quinn said.

Graff gave school board members copies of a pamphlet called "The Worth of a Principal" and told them that along with wanting La Honda to have a principal and for Rhodes to be that principal, the community wants input into policy planning. Graff also asked the board to educate themselves on legal issues, specifically the Brown Act.

Jessica Abbe presented the board with a petition with 128 signatures asking that they keep Rhodes on.

Marilu Spigelman, a mother of three, spoke to the board while holding a baby in her arms.

"This is mind-boggling," she said. "With so many bad things happening in the

world, to have something messed up that wasn't messed up to begin with ... It seems like we're going backwards."

Many stayed for the later agenda item centering on the administrative structure at La Honda Elementary.

Calling the presentation the most effective he has heard in his tenure on the board, Trustee Chris Branchart said La Honda Elementary should have a principal. Other trustees agreed. They asked McClung to come back at the May meeting and tell them if that is possible.

Branchart noted that the board had not voted on any structural change to the administration at the school.

"The board cares very much about each of our schools and, believe it or not, we've even struggled to abide by the Brown Act," he said.

Some parents urged board members to schedule an emergency session to determine if Rhodes would remain as the principal.

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