

The following address was made to the Santa Monica-Malibu PTA Council on April 15, 2008. A condensed version was presented to the Santa Monica-Malibu Board of Education on April 17, 2008 with the statement, **“The SANTA MONICA-MALIBU Council of PTAs adopts Rebecca Kennerly’s statement dated today as its official position, and further authorizes her to speak to the Board of Education about this position and the need for grassroots efforts to create a culture of inclusion”**.

The Lou Barber report is a jam-packed document, filled with detail. However, in his report on it to the Board of Education on April 2, he really focused on his final recommendation to the district, #27 on page 79, “The District needs to create a culture of transparency and openness in dealing with all stakeholders”.

I believe it is important to look at this report in its entirety; acknowledging the many ways that SMMUSD serves its special education students well. With twice as many school psychologists than the state average, a higher than average number of administrators, Special Day class student to teacher ratios at nearly half of the state average, Speech and Language specialists at more than half the state average, and a general fund contribution to special ed at nearly double the state average, it would appear that Santa Monica-Malibu would be an ideal place to educate a child with special needs. Indeed, those numbers are exactly the type of numbers that we, here at PTA celebrate. We’ve never aspired to fund our students at the state average, and it’s clear from this report that our hard-fought local funds are making a tangible and significant contribution to special education as they should be. And, again on a positive note, this report is filled with appreciation for the difficult and excellent work being done every day by the staff and administration, but particularly the teachers, at our school sites. However, despite all of this good news, I find Lou Barber’s strong words in his report about “culture” extremely troubling.

I have wrestled long and hard about how PTA should respond. I have been lobbied strongly by many members of our communities with extremely varied and often conflicting points of view. And, I have engaged in considerable soul searching to try to figure out how we, but more to the point, how I have contributed to this culture.

I have long felt that something was wrong in our District. When I first started with PTA Council, we would hear occasional reports from our Special Ed District Advisory Committee Liaison; impassioned indictments and pleas for help. I had no idea what this could mean. This was not the district that I knew. When I asked questions, I was told, “there are just a few Special Ed parents who won’t be satisfied, no matter you do.” And I accepted that. I wanted to believe that. And I did no more. Time passed. I kept feeling something was wrong and I kept asking questions, but the answers were always the same. I wanted to believe to believe them. And each time, I did no more. I spoke to different people in our district leadership and each time their answers were so logical, so reasonable, and so clearly a plea to do no more. And I didn’t.

When the district agreed to the independent evaluation, I was hopeful that the district's confidence that the evaluation would provide exoneration was correct. But secretly, I believed that it might not. And as the days and months during which the audit was being conducted passed, I realized I had been horribly, and shamefully wrong. I started meeting with special ed parents both on the DAC and not. I participated in the selection process for the evaluator, and I attended most of the parent information meetings at which parents spoke of their experiences in our district with Lou Barber. And finally, I attended the April 3<sup>rd</sup> Board of Education meeting at which many parents spoke. If you simply add up the different parents that I, personally heard from at the various meetings and in private conversations over the last few months, it probably numbers over 100. That's not "a few". That constitutes nearly 10% of the Special Ed families in our district.

Why didn't I let myself believe this earlier? Why did it take an outside evaluation? Why didn't I push harder – keep asking questions. I am truly heartsick over my passivity – my willingness to accept the party line – my personal culpability in perpetuating this "culture". And it is clear that I am not alone in doing this.

Lou Barber's report talks extensively about parents. On my first read, I translated his use of the word "parent" into "Special Ed parent" – and his recommendations about creating a culture of transparency and openness as pertaining to that population. However, that reaction was simply another example of my perpetuating the culture. It's not those parents over there, or those children that this report refers to – it's us – it's me. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, at the Board of Education meeting, I heard from a population of parents and students in our district who said that feel like they don't have a home – that their voices are not been heard. But it's not just the Board of Education and district leadership that needs to hear and respect these voices. It is all of us.

The foundation of this report rests on the fact that California, and indeed the entire country, has a codified standard for special education, but doesn't provide adequate funding to support the services necessary for that education. PTA understands that culture. We are used to hearing from our leaders the need for closing the achievement gap, for working hard to supplement inadequate state funds to try to provide a better learning experience for all students. This culture carries with it an expectation to look beyond our own children, and intolerance for failing to advocate equitably for all. We know this culture. We live in this culture. We are attracted to service in the PTA because we agree with it. And if I were to ask each PTA members from across our district, "what have you done this year to help provide a better learning experience for a child with fewer opportunities than your own?", I am proud to know that each of us would be able to cite a dozen or more specific examples of incomparable service– from passing our latest funding measure, to tireless fundraising to provide resources for teachers aids and reading and math specialists. Our good work saves lives.

However, if I were to ask, "what have you done this year to help include a child with special needs," the question could be very different. I know that it is different for me. Our special ed department, either by accident or by design, is seen as separate from the rest of the school, and I have heard from numerous parents across the district, that when a

child with special needs is “mainstreamed” into a general ed classroom, it is the general ed parents, along with teachers, staff and administration who can contribute to that child and his or her family feeling like “the other”.

PTA Council agrees, that inclusion has to be absolute. That we cannot tolerate anything less than a sincere and comprehensive commitment to inclusion at all levels; among students with special needs, and indeed any of our children and families who still feel like they are on the “outside”. We must find it in ourselves. We must demand nothing less than that from our leaders. And, if only for their own survival as adults, we must teach that to our children.

Studies show that students diagnoses of autism have increased to one in every 166 children born. That means that when our typical children are adults, the number of special needs adults will be at record levels. Our children must know how to respect and collaborate with others from across every spectrum; and we can only teach them how to do that by building a culture of respect and inclusion, now. However, we cannot do that simply by issuing a proclamation.

PTA Council provides us with a strong forum for collaboration, and one of our officers, reminded me of an article we had both received regarding the National PTA’s award this year for Outstanding Advocacy Award. One of the primary issues upon which the recipient advocates is Special Education. Its Council President confided to me that they commenced their extremely aggressive plan when they found their district in a similar position as we find ourselves. It is common when needs are so much greater than resources that partners polarize, factions develop and hostility sets in. The San Ramon Valley Council of PTAs combated that with a plan that honors differences, welcomes all, and encourages communication. Their plan includes a PTA Council Special Education Committee, with a parent representative from each school site. The committee meets monthly with the Superintendent and the Director of Special Ed. In addition, it hosts an annual conference with a keynote speaker, parent education and break-out study sessions. In addition, they host monthly parent education workshops.

I’ve spoken with Superintendent Talarico and Special Education District Advisory Chair, Kenneth Haker about emulating a similar program similar for our district, and have both expressed interest and pledged support. I have proposed to PTA that we immediately commence work with the Superintendent, SEDAC and our own PTA leaders to develop a PTA Council Special Education Committee plan to present at our May PTA Council meeting. I am determined to move quickly with the hopes of putting something into place in our district in the fall.

A new culture must start at the top, with ensuring that our leaders truly believe in the concepts of compassion and inclusion for students with special needs. We must all be vigilant to ensure that clear consequences are in place for leaders who have not demonstrated a commitment to those principals. But just as importantly, a culture must start from the bottom. From a movement of parents; general ed, special ed, parents of English Language learners, ethnically diverse students, and parents of disadvantaged

students, when we all speak with one voice to say that a climate of intolerance will not be tolerated. Change is usually difficult, and the status quo rarely is eager to step aside, but when it comes to inclusion and tolerance for our most vulnerable students, we must be the agent of change. And when our parents pull together and work collaboratively with staff, administration and our communities, mountains move. Cultures change.

And , finally, to the Special Ed parents in our district, I would like to say – don't trust us. PTA Council has not been a good friend or advocate for you in the past. Don't trust me, or any of us, simply on our words. Judge us by our actions. When you see general ed parents inviting special ed kids home to play, when you see middle school students invite special needs classmates to eat lunch with them, when you see general ed parents asking teachers how they can help mainstream the special needs children into their own child's class rather than complain about those students, and when you see parents making it clear to administrators at their school sites and at the central office that nothing short of a fundamental climate of inclusion will be tolerated – and when you see these things start to feel like the norm rather than the exception, then maybe we will have started to earn your trust. And hopefully, together, we all can heal.

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