

By Amy Sylvestri

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Superintendent Cindy Cathey and the San Leandro school board members sat down at the Main Library Tuesday night and invited the public to share questions and concerns about San Leandro's public schools.

Parents and teachers lobbed dozens of questions, many focused on what one teacher called the "atmosphere of disrespect" at Bancroft Middle School. Bancroft became the focus of the discussion, taking up over half the meeting.

"Whenever you are talking about kids, people are passionate," said Morgan Mack-Rose, school board president. Mack-Rose acted as moderator, running around the room with the microphone.

Bancroft teacher Dave D'Antonio was the first to broach the subject of behavior at the middle school and the topic dominated the night,

"The bar at Bancroft regarding student language, behavior, and dress is set extremely low," said D'Antonio. "Bancroft and John Muir (the city's other middle school) are like night and day, and unfortunately, Bancroft is night."

D'Antonio said that students still have opportunities to excel at the school, but some changes needed to be made.

Cathey told the crowd that it was one of her main goals to achieve "systemwide coherence" at all of San Leandro's schools – that students would receive the same education and participate in the same programs at any elementary school or middle school – but that they "aren't there yet" despite their efforts.

One mother of a fifth grader about to enter Bancroft told an anecdote about getting some coffee with a friend and a young boy in the shop overhearing her daughter's plans to attend Bancroft. He came over to her to say that wasn't a good idea.

“He came over and said ‘You don’t want to go there. There are fights all the time,’” said the mother.

So she toured John Muir and was impressed at the atmosphere, but wasn’t impressed when the tour pointed out all the programs that were shutting down due to budget cuts.

“We went to the computer lab and they said ‘Yeah, that’s probably going to be cut. And the library will be cut and this will be probably be cut,’ It was frustrating.”

The woman said she was considering sending her child to school in Castro Valley instead.

Mack-Rose acknowledged that times are tough and that Bancroft could benefit from more programs and there have been fights in the halls, but added “Bancroft is not Sing Sing prison.”

Mack-Rose also said that people have even asked her why her children remain in San Leandro schools.

“People ask me how can I stay,” said Mack-Rose, who has been on the school board since 2008. She said it is because her daughter feels safe at school and enjoys her classes.

“Would she get something different in Pleasanton? Maybe,” said Mack-Rose. “But I think she is getting more preparation for real life and it’s good to experience a more diverse group of people.”

Mack-Rose then got the biggest laugh of the night when she asked the room if there were any more comments, then clarified, “Anything positive?”

Cathey said that her now-grown daughter was educated in Oakland public schools and she had the same concerns about her safety once she was out of elementary school, but her daughter did well.

“I was worried about her, but I could not have been more wrong. She thrived,” said Cathey. “Give it a go, there’s so many great things going on in our schools right now that don’t get enough attention. Yes there are issues to work on, but I’m listening.”

Other topics included dress code, graduation requirements, and programs for advanced students.

Cathey and the school board will host another open forum at the Main Library on Saturday, May 5 from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.