

# School Board Report

By Jill Hult

At the District 47J School Board meeting held on August 08, 2007, the Board accepted resignations from Jeanne Drake, Jessica Street-er, and Cindy Baker and in turn introduced new staff members to the District. VHS Principal, Mr. Underwood, welcomed Brad Baker as the new Assistant football coach, Social Studies, Personal Finance, and World Geography teacher. Dr. Ken Cox, 47J Superintendent, also welcomed Carol Moore as the new Special Education Director and School Psychologist.

WGS Principal Aaron Miller read a statement of apology to the board and public. The letter has been included in this issue.

Dr. Cox asked for volunteers to serve on the Policy Review and Negotiations committees, and each board member volunteered to act as liaisons to committees such as Curriculum, Technology, Safety, Health and Wellness, StEP, and TAG.

The Board heard a presentation by Police Chief Matt Workman regarding the speed limit reduction request made to ODOT for the business district, a change from 25 miles per hour to 20 miles per hour, and how that would affect the current speed limits in the school zone. ODOT informed the City that the speed would not be reduced in the business district unless the School installs flashing lights in the school zone for a temporary speed reduction of 20 miles per hour during predetermined times of heavy school

traffic and to 25 miles per hour when not flashing. Currently the school zone speed is 20 miles an hour all day. The reason for the flashing lights is the gap between the business district and the school zone which is a 25 mile per hour zone. ODOT's concern is speed changes for motorists from 20 miles an hour to 25 miles per hour and then back to 20 miles per hour in just a few short blocks. The Board is reviewing this information including the cost, if any, to the District.

The results of the dust samples taken by Micro Lab Northwest from the basement of WGS are back and are within acceptable limits but could improve with regular cleaning and additional ventilation. Dust samples will be taken twice a year for testing. Based on these results, it is anticipated that Mrs. Holce's music classes will be moved back to the basement. Music class is forty five minutes long and students attend music twice a week and every other Friday. Further discussion is needed to determine if the art room will also be utilized this year.

The Board approved using \$7,000 from the District's Capital Reserve Funds to replace some non-functioning and worn blinds in WGS. They also approved funds to convert the District's policies to an online format. An audit of the policies would be conducted by OSBA for updates and rewrites so they are current and relevant to the district. The audit will cost \$1,500. By having the policies online they become searchable and easily accessible via the Internet to administrators, staff, board members, and the public. Cost to convert and place the policies on the district website is \$3,495. Dr. Cox informed the board that there are funds in the budget earmarked for professional services that could be used to cover this expense.

## To the Vernonia Community: The Power of a Single Decision

Many of you know that I was cited for possession of marijuana during a recent vacation. Although words do little to resolve this situation, let me take this opportunity to tell you how deeply sorry I am.

I made a serious mistake – one that has affected many, many people. I have let down my family, my students, my staff, my co-workers, this wonderful community and myself.

Several people expressed a desire for me to resign. Many more, however, have asked me to address the situation and continue my work here in Vernonia. Although it could be easier to give up and move on, I have chosen to stay. Taking responsibility for my actions and demonstrating that people learn from their mistakes is one of the most important things we teach our children -- and this is what I plan to do.

While I am the principal of an elementary school, I am also human. When students come into my office because they have made mistakes, erred in judgment or broken a rule, we talk a great deal about responsibility. "Yes. You made a mistake. You can't go back and change that, but you can take responsibility for the problem, try to make up for it, move on and learn from your mistake so that it doesn't happen again."

It is now time for me to take my own advice. I will work for as long as it takes to restore your trust in me. You need to know that I plan to be the same hard-working, kid-focused individual who has served you for the past two years. You have my word – and my deepest commitment to make things right.

I plan to begin the process of healing the wounds I have caused my family and the District, and get back to the job at hand: educating the youth of Vernonia, a job that I love!

While the School Board cannot legally discuss the sanctions they adopted, I can. My discipline includes being evaluated by a licensed professional in the drug rehabilitation field, following a prescribed treatment plan, and being regularly and/or randomly drug-tested to ensure that I am living up to the agreement. A merit raise that I had earned has been revoked. If I do not live up to these obligations I will no longer be employed by the District. Our superintendent and school board have made this very clear, and I will not disappoint them. You can also be assured this mistake will not happen again.

Besides apologizing for my error in judgment, I would also like to thank the dozens of people who have called my family and me with messages of support. You have no idea how helpful your kind words have been as we work through this difficult time. Again, I apologize for the impact my actions have had on our community. I will do what needs to be done to help mend the rift I have caused.

Sincerely,

Aaron Miller

By Dr. Kenneth Cox, Vernonia School District Superintendent

Each day we all face decisions, large and small. Most are relatively inconsequential. But occasionally, when a seemingly small decision comes along, we fail to see how it can impact our lives – and the lives of many others.

In early July, Aaron Miller chose to take some marijuana and a pipe on vacation.

This decision has forever changed his life.

On the evening of July 6, Mr. Miller was confronted by a sheriff's deputy on night duty. As a result, he once again faced a decision, "Do I lie or tell the truth?" At a time when he recognized that a great deal could be at stake he chose to tell the truth, despite the consequences.

But it was not this decision that brought a firestorm of media and controversy to our community. It was mine.

After meeting with Mr. Miller and the school board chair, I made a decision to retain him as principal of our elementary school. I did not make that decision lightly, or without consulting others concerning the legal implications of my actions. I decided to retain someone who was willing to tell the truth and learn from his mistake, even though it could cost him his career.

That decision led to other decisions regarding how to discipline someone who, after working for two years with students, staff, and parents to develop strong relationships, now faced confusion, doubt, disappointment, and in some cases anger from some of those same people. What Mr. Miller did was wrong, not only according to Oregon laws, but according to the standards many of us hold in this community.

In accordance with Vernonia School District Policy GBEC - Employer and Employee Responsibility Regarding Drugs and Alcohol, I have addressed this situation with a series of consequences that I and the school board deem to be appropriate. Mr. Miller will face mandatory random drug testing upon his return to work, as well as be required to successfully complete a substance abuse program. He has also suffered a significant decrease in salary, which will impact his earnings for as long as he is employed by the district. On a more personal note, Mr. Miller has shared with me some of the steps he is taking to rebuild some of the trust and respect he has lost.

Other decisions have been and are being made regarding how Mr. Miller, myself, and other administrators will address this issue with students and staff. Throughout the district we will constantly emphasize the importance of staying away from drugs. As part of this focus, Mr. Miller will make himself available to meet with all students in the district to answer questions and share the consequences he has faced as a result of one bad decision.

Because of his position of responsibility in our community Mr. Miller's decision had far greater impact than he could have imagined. Subsequent decisions, my decision to retain him on staff and his decision to not resign, seem to have divided our community.

One decision can make a world of difference, as these events have shown. Each of us, as a member of our community, has an opportunity to choose how we will move forward. I do not ask that you approve of these decisions. It is your personal right to not agree with them, nor perhaps even accept them. As with all moral decisions, no matter what I or Mr. Miller had decided, someone would have been disappointed.

What I do ask, above all, is this: That we seek to move forward with open minds and hearts for the sake of our students. So far, I've met with many members of our community on both sides of the issue. The invitation is still open to stop by the Vernonia School District office so we can discuss your concerns. I promise I will listen, and when it is within my ability to do so, I will seek to address your concerns.

It is my hope and prayer that those of you who do not agree with what has transpired will not seek to further divide our community. We cannot change what has happened, but we can change what will happen, and by working together we can make a better future for the Vernonia community.