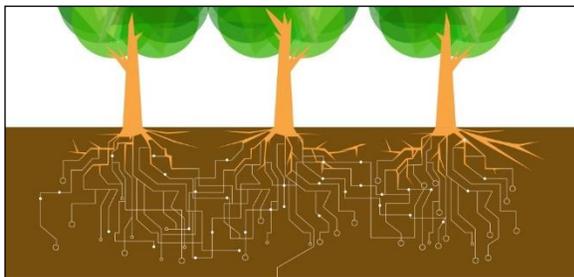


Strength in Connections

By Barb Dill-Varga, Ed.D, Superintendent

Many years ago, when I was in elementary school, I spent a summer in upstate New York with my Aunt Therese, who was an artist who loved drawing trees. That summer she helped me move beyond drawing simplistic brown and green “mushroom trees” to sketching trees that reflected the true detail seen in veined leaves and multi-colored, textured bark. I trace my love of trees back to that summer.

Fast forward to 1988, when my husband and I went on a guided tour of Muir Woods near San Francisco. I was astounded by the coastal redwoods, towering 200–300 feet above our heads. Naively, I mentioned to the docent that their roots must be pretty deep “to keep those trees from falling over.” I learned something from him that day that I have never forgotten. Those towering majestic giants have fairly shallow roots. Interestingly, they horizontally reach underground quite a long way and wrap around the roots of neighboring redwood trees. Together these trees endure storm and wind and stay tall and erect for centuries because they band together and hold each other up.



People in a school district, like trees, band together and hold each other up.

Recently, a district colleague and fellow tree lover suggested I read *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* by Peter Wohlleben. Wohlleben writes: “Trees connect with each other through root systems. They are a social network. They share nutrients. They communicate chemically. A tree is not a forest. On its own, it cannot survive for it cannot

establish a consistent local climate to combat wind and weather. Together trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores water, and creates humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live a very long time. To get to this point, the community must remain intact no matter what. If every tree were looking out for itself, then quite a few would never reach old age. Regular fatalities would cause gaps in the tree canopy, allowing storms to get in or heat to dry out roots. Every tree would suffer.” Wohlleben argues that these trees exist because they connect, they communicate with each other, and they mutually care for each other.

For me, this is instructive and even inspiring! In August, I shared this analogy at our opening day Welcome Back Breakfast for all staff. Our small community has a natural inclination to be connected. Many of our employees (and their parents and some of their grandparents) are products of our schools. Their children attend our schools. Some have spouses who work in our district. We have goals that connect us and enable us to thrive. We often work in teams related to our responsibilities. Our practices include communicating, mentoring the young, weathering together the storms of life, connecting our youth with support services when needed, and never giving up on them. We celebrate together. We remember together. It is undeniable that we are good at connections.

In Carmel Unified, we are reaffirming our compelling purpose to know “every student by name and by need.” To accomplish that, I believe we need to maximize the benefits of our natural connectedness by being intentional and designing learning opportunities that promote community. I have asked staff to find more opportunities for articulation, from preschool through grade 12 and beyond. I also want us to find ways to design learning opportunities which connect students to careers and local industries. I want us to identify potential community

connections and partners that can support us in this work.

Last year, our district focused on our educational vision to help guide our master facilities planning process. One of the design directives we identified was an acknowledgement that we are more than just a school district concerned with producing “lifelong learners,” a phrase that is probably in 95% of school district mission statements in the U.S. Instead, Carmel Unified also cares about helping students become life-wide learners and life-deep learners.

“We meet the needs of every student by taking advantage of our inherent connectedness.”

Life-wide learning relates to this notion of connectedness. How can we create learning experiences for our students that connect subjects and disciplines? How can we have them work to solve meaningful problems that they care about? How can we find natural partners outside of the school walls to underscore the relevance of these learning experiences? How can we help students dig down deep into their passions and also into key issues about what it means to be human and to be good stewards of the environment and of each other?

My last challenge for staff this August was to “consider welcoming or even seeking unanticipated connections and to be open to their own new dendrites that will be grown.” Certainly the business world has discovered the value of incubator spaces that bring young, seemingly unrelated, entrepreneurs together in a room to work and to converse. They have realized the value in the possible connections they may make to aid in the development of viable solutions and products. So it will be in education, if we are open to it. I am asking staff to find time to eat lunch with a colleague from a different department that they don’t really know well. I am also encouraging them to develop virtual PLNs (professional learning networks) and to find other opportunities for teaming by attending conferences together or by working together to present or to publish their findings.

It is no accident that the dendritic brain cells we will grow through this interaction do look like intertwining tree roots. The word “dendrite” actually does come from the Greek word for “treelike.”

As Superintendent, I am also committing to finding ways to listen more intentionally to innovative ideas from classroom teachers and from students. I have put out a call for teachers to join a teacher advisory council to meet with me quarterly. I already have a community advisory council that supplies me with this kind of feedback. I hope to also add one for student voice and engagement, too. And of course, I am open to suggestions from you, our parents.

My last words on this subject are a challenge for all of us, and I once again turn to my redwoods for inspiration. There is one redwood that is thought to be the tallest standing tree, and it happens to be in Northern California. It is named *Hyperion* which means “high one.” Standing 380 feet, it first was “born” 800 years ago, probably about the time of the signing of the Magna Carta. Imagine that! It towers over the forest, and yet is an integral part of the survival of the entire forest.



I, for one, would like our school district to be a national leader demonstrating how we meet the needs of every student by taking advantage of our inherent connectedness. We can lead in this way. We can be *Hyperion*. Our roots in the small community are so intertwined, interwoven, and important to our survival and can help us stand tall. And yet, I know we cannot exist as a single tall tree. We are members of a forest and by holding hands with our educational and community partners and parents, we can increase the chances that our students will thrive and carry on the legacy.

New Faces: New Connections

Connecting with many of you in the coming months are some of the following new employees!

“Deputy Gross will be working alongside our staff to educate our students and their families on the dangers of smoking, vaping, and drug/alcohol use.”

Mrs. Elisa Tacconi is the new Teaching Principal at Captain Cooper Elementary School in Big Sur. Elisa served for three years as the Assistant Director for Monterey Bay Charter School under the supervision of Monterey County Office of Education. Prior to that she served for three years as principal of Bay View Academy Charter School, and before that, she served for three years as Principal/teacher/coach at John Muir School, a Title I Distinguished School in Ashland, Oregon. Elisa has her Masters in Educational Leadership from Southern Oregon University. Her initial BA in Physical Education was from UC Davis, followed by her teaching credential program at Cal State University in Chico.

Dr. Steve Gonzalez is our new district Director of Special Education. He has a doctorate in Educational Leadership from UC Davis-CSU Fresno Joint Doctorate Program, as well as a doctorate from Chapman University in School Psychology. Prior to acquiring his two doctorate degrees, he was awarded a Masters in Educational Psychology from Chapman University. His undergrad degree is from CSU, Northridge in Music Therapy. Steven’s career experience is extensive and includes serving most recently as Director of Pupil Services for Selma Unified School District where he had worked since 2010. In addition to that, he continues to serve as a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support/Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) trainer for the California Technical Assistance Center on PBIS, providing leadership and technical expertise for various

teams in those areas. Before his role at Selma Unified, he served as a SELPA Coordinator II for the Fresno County Office of Education and prior to that was a school psychologist at Hanford Elementary School District in Hanford, CA. Steven’s vitae also lists more than 40 refereed presentations and workshops he has delivered on topics in his field.

Deputy Kevin Gross is our new District School Resource Officer. He has been with the Monterey County Sheriff’s Office for ten years and knows our community well.

Some of the recent national and local safety concerns prompted us to investigate the feasibility of adding a District School Resource Officer (SRO) to our team. We applied for a grant from the Department of Justice and were awarded two years of funding to cover this position. We partnered with the Monterey County Sheriff’s Office to interview and hire Deputy Kevin Gross to assume this role. While he will be based at the high school, his role is to be a resource for all sites.

“He will greatly enhance our capacity to keep our schools safe.”

Deputy Gross will help us in two major ways. First, he will greatly enhance our capacity to keep our schools safe by working with us to improve our protocols and practices during emergency situations and to provide onsite coordination with outside law enforcement agencies should we need their assistance. The county has also conducted some physical site safety assessments for us, and we will be working to include some of those recommendations in the future. Secondly, Deputy Gross will be working alongside our staff to educate our students and their families on the dangers of smoking, vaping, drug and alcohol use. We all need to work together to create a safe environment for our youth and to help them engage in safe practices.

Connecting to Our Other New Employees!

Certificated

District: Deborah Taylor (RN), Jennifer Martin (Teacher on Special Assignment)
River: Corinne Bonyng
Tularcitos: Bradford Caton Avilla, Jacqueline Roberts
CCDC: Natalie Taggart
CMS: Igor Fedotov, Heather Roman, Lindsay Schutzler
CHS: Mia Baglietto, Michael Brewer, Don Freitas, Lillian Owens, Andrea Smith

Classified

District: Michelle Mahaney, Olivia Doherty
MOT: Michael McElheney, David Rudolph, Carlos Ayala, Christopher Correll
River: Kirk Abbott, Caunsery Rasmussen, Stacey Meheen, Brittany Schicketanz, Deonna Jeffries
Tularcitos: Mary Grace Cesario, Renee Maschmeyer
Cooper: Ruby Way
CCDC: Tori Tomlin, Guadalupe Martinez, Brooke Moranda
CMS: Amanda Baird, Adam Rodriguez, Michaela Kuenster
CHS: Erin Borges, Victoria Deckelmann, Cassandra Hanson, Cassandra Price, Kasey Silva

Making Connections: When you have a question, to whom do you go for an answer?

I am fortunate to work with a talented group of administrators at the district office and at each site. We each have different sets of responsibilities, as well as defined individual skill sets. Because we are a small school district, some of us wear multiple hats, but we know that through teamwork we can maintain our commitment toward educational excellence. With your support and positive cooperation, we can successfully meet the needs of our CUSD children.

I am often asked by parents and community members, “If I have a question or concern what should I do?” The best place to start is with the teacher because he or she knows your child and is closest to the situation. Sometimes there are questions that can’t be answered by the teacher, or there are issues that need the involvement of an administrator. My advice would be to start with the counselor, then the building administrator, to provide assistance.

Our Carmel High School principal has

“If I have a question or concern what should I do? The best place to start is with the teacher.”

delegated certain areas to his two assistant principals aligned to their talents and skills and [here is a link to that chart which should help you know which person to contact](#). At Carmel Middle School, start with the teacher and/or counselor and then the assistant principal or principal after that, if needed. If you need additional help, then please do contact the District Office. This past year we made some slight adjustments to our District Office organization chart. [Here is a link to that chart to help you know who the right person is at the District Office](#). We want to be of help to you and your students. Please know that our partnership with you is very important!

Connecting with the Community: Community Advisory Council

Last year, I formed a Community Advisory Council (CAC) to provide us with a network of perspectives representing our 600 square mile school district. We met three times and touched on the following topics: communication protocols, safety and security, the new California dashboard of student achievement, and an educational vision to inform our master facilities planning process. Year Two, this group will fulfill the role of a Facilities Master

Planning committee (FMPC) as we work with our architectural firm on a plan to take our district into the future. This group is currently made up of current and past parents from all sites; alumni; students; CUSD employees; business, government, and nonprofit owners and officials; and representative citizens. Our first meeting date will be October 1.

Connecting to Future Needs: Master Facilities Planning Process

It is important for every school district to have a Master Facilities Plan (MFP) that guides the decisions to be made about maintaining and renovating existing facilities, as well as planning, designing, and constructing new facilities to make sure that future student needs are met.

“Most districts talk about lifelong learners, but we also want our students to be life-wide and life-deep learners.”

Last year we took some time to engage in a conversation with some stakeholder groups about what teaching and learning should look like in the future. We worked with David Jakes, a former educator now working with educational institutions (K-12 and higher ed) on the intentional design of future focused learning spaces. He listened to us and returned to us a set of “Design Directives” that give voice to what he heard us valuing. We want to keep these design directives in mind as we begin working with our architectural firm on our MFP. It was clear that there are three core foundations our CUSD community seeks to fulfill:

- We care about the needs of the Whole Child.
- We believe in Human and Environmental Stewardship.
- We believe in enhancing the Health and Wellness of the CUSD community.

In addition, the following Design Directives emerged in reference to teaching and learning in our district:

- We want our students to be lifelong, life-wide, and life-deep learners.
- We believe their educational experiences should be connected, experiential, and in motion.

Most districts talk about *lifelong* learners, but that seems to keep a narrow focus on the two-dimensional linear nature of schooling from preschool through grade 12. While at a minimum we seek to help our students grow and mature, moving through the curriculum until they graduate from Carmel High, we are hoping to accomplish something more. We want students to see how interconnected learning is, moving across disciplines, between and across classrooms, grades, and sites. We want them to have opportunities to make connections with organizations and institutions beyond our boundaries that relate to their learning experiences as they explore deeply into areas of their passion, skill, and aptitude, and think about careers they might eventually develop. We want them to identify global problems for which they might find solutions. We want them to be prepared to be the nation’s —or the world’s — future leaders. We have some examples of this occurring now (e.g., 4th graders leading the charge to ban plastic straws in Carmel-by-the-Sea), but we want to keep this part of our vision front and center as we talk about the learning spaces we need to support this challenging work.

We have three core foundations:

- *The needs of the whole child*
- *Human and environmental stewardship*
- *Health and wellness*

Our FMPC will meet with our architectural firm on five Monday nights: October 1, October 29, December 3, February 4, and March 25. Each site will also soon be forming a school site committee to provide input on the needs of a

particular school site and in the future, the site committee will meet jointly with our FMPC for a town hall meeting to review and look at proposed plans. These plans will also be posted for parents and community to view and comment on as priorities are identified. The plan will be reviewed by the Board of Education in the spring of 2019 as decisions are made about next steps.

Residency Protocol

Carmel Unified School District is one of approximately 60 districts in California that receives most of its funding from local property taxes. Except for Pacific Grove which is also a Community Funded district, all other districts in Monterey County receive most of their funding from the state using a formula that increases that funding based on the number of students they have enrolled and who attend on a daily basis. Because we do not receive our funding as most districts do, we must ensure that students attending our schools are actually the children of our residents. This is how we demonstrate good financial stewardship for our taxpayers and why we have a process to check and double check residency.

“We need partnerships with area businesses and professional environments.”

In the past, we have found a number of families who have fraudulently enrolled their children in our district schools. When we discover them, we advise them to enroll in the school district in which they actually reside. This has been a difficult, time-consuming process, but one that it is important. This year we have begun using two software applications to help us with this time intensive process. CLEAR and BATCH, products of Thomson Reuters, enable us to search publicly available records to ascertain whether families reside in our district. I want to thank you for your patience as we have been working to implement these new tools as quickly and smoothly as possible.

Connections: Careers and Post-Secondary Opportunities

My request for parents

Carmel Unified does an amazing job at preparing students for college. The latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse gives us actual information on student enrollments. For example, we know that for the graduating class of 2017, 88% of our students enrolled in either 2- or 4-year colleges or universities the first year after graduation. We want to work on having current high school students have some exposure to areas of career interest *before* they enroll in college, so they make the best use of college coursework and tuition dollars. To do that, we need partnerships with area businesses and professional environments.

“For the graduating class of 2017, 88% of our students enrolled in either 2- or 4-year colleges or universities the first year after graduation.”

If you are a business owner or professional who would be willing to partner with us for a job shadow, career site visit or possible internship, please consider connecting with us in this way. [You may use this link to provide us with some initial contact information.](#) I will be organizing a Career Task Force to begin the conversation with our business partners so we better understand the local employment opportunities for our youth and the entry level job skills that are needed. If you would be willing to serve on that task force, please use the above link to forward your information to us. This is just another way in which our natural tendency to be connected in our communities can benefit our students in the future!

Connections to Our Alumni

Is it enough that we are able to have our students enroll in the college of their choice? No, we want our graduates to be successful at college and in their careers to follow. We are interested in hearing from our alumni about how well they feel they have been prepared and what suggestions they have for us to help current students be ready for life after high school. One more request I have for parents is to consider connecting us with your son or daughter who has graduated and can share with us the degree to which they felt prepared for their post-secondary environment, but more importantly, whether they were able to find employment that is satisfying and makes use of their talent and potential. We want to know what we could have done differently to help more students find their path. I invite you to send me anecdotes or information directly to my email (bdillvarga@carmelunified.org) and if your son or daughter would be willing to talk with me, please provide me with their contact information.



they embrace a message of making healthy choices. Students learn that they do not need drugs and alcohol to meet life's challenges, and that they are perfect the way they are. You'll see students wearing purple wristbands embossed

with various commitments (example: "I commit to drive safe AND sober.")

The initiative was rolled out to students during Powder Puff week which culminated in a dance to provide a fun, safe outlet after the Friday afternoon football game. The district office is also looking into reviving a *Safe Homes* directory that

was voluntarily created by parents who would pledge not to host parties in their homes where illegal substances would be present. Please consider making this commitment when asked and joining with your fellow parents to help us help your students make wise choices.

And finally, I would like to share some important links with you:

- [My Superintendent Goals for 18-19](#)
- [Our District goals/LCAP goals](#)

Links to last year's #WeAreCarmelUnified

- [August, 2017](#) - Focus on Carmelo
- [October, 2017](#) - Salute to our Bus Drivers
- [February, 2018](#) - Environmental Stewardship
- [April, 2018](#) - Focus on School Safety

Connections: It Takes a Village to Keep our Children Safe— *Purple Power*

Keeping our children safe is a top priority in our district and we cannot do that without the assistance of our parents and community members. Adding a School Resource Officer who will provide education to our youth on harmful activities and the dangers of using illegal substances (tobacco, vaping, drugs, prescription pills, etc.) is a good first step, but it is what transpires after school and on weekends that is difficult for school officials to address.

Thankfully, the Padre Parents in conjunction with many high school students and teachers are promoting the *Going Purple* movement. *Going Purple* gives students motivation and support as