

INSTALLMENT 1

VERDE MAGAZINE: We've heard from other sources how demanding it is to be an administrator, especially in a place like Palo Alto. In your experience, would you say that this has turned out to be true? And does being in Palo Alto compound that stress?

KIM DIORIO: I would say yes to both of your questions. ... It's definitely a demanding job that requires a lot of your time. You're constantly putting out fires, solving problems and trying to support teachers so that they can do great work in the classroom. ... It's not something that anyone can just do. It helps to have background and training before you step into the role. I think the other part that's hard is, especially as a site leader, you really feel like you're on call 24/7 because there could be an emergency or crisis or something big can go wrong at any time — and it does. It often does. So a lot of times that eats into your personal time — your nights and/or weekends. From what I hear from my friends who are administrators in other districts, it sounds like the pressure and stress is magnified in Palo Alto. I think there are a number of reasons for that. From what most people tell me, it seems a little less stressful in other districts than it is here. I think Palo Alto is a particularly challenging community and it's notorious for being a tough district for administrators. It has that reputation throughout the state.

VERDE: Why do you think that that is?

DIORIO: A lot of different reasons. I think we have a very highly educated, highly involved parent community that, 95 percent of the time, is very supportive of the schools and the professionals who work in schools. I do think there are a few parents, and I would call them a vocal minority, that feel that they have expertise in education and want to see changes made.And I think that makes it a challenge. I believe everybody thinks back to their own experience as a student and comes into the

situation with their own children with that bias. Sometimes that can be a good thing to help support kids and help support students. And sometimes that can also be a detriment. ... I've worked in other high achieving districts and there's a similar pattern. People who are highly educated want what is best for their children, as do all parents. I think here, they have more resources and more time to devote to really focus in on exactly what that means. And sometimes, I believe they think because they were once a student, they have an expertise parallel to professional educators. That can be a challenge.

VERDE: Which districts were you working in previously?

DIORIO: I was in Fairfield County, Connecticut, a smaller district called Weston public schools. ... they have very highly involved parents and a highly educated parent community. I also did my internship before working professionally in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, and that's another affluent community in the Philadelphia suburbs. I've noticed that there's definitely a pattern when you're dealing with these populations. It's a different set of challenges than if you are in a low-income district or a district with a lot of English language learners.

VERDE: Would you say there's anything different about the challenges you faced in Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) than the ones you dealt with previously in your career?

DIORIO: I think the mental health issues are a little more magnified here. In my opinion, it is reflective of the culture of Silicon Valley. I think there are mental health issues in all school districts — don't get me wrong — but I do think the thing in the Silicon Valley culture where so many of the adults are in different work environment permeates into the home. ... I think a lot of people moved to Palo Alto because of the schools and the excellent reputation with the schools and wanting what's best for their children. Districts like that have a high demand for real estate, people compete to move in and be a part of the school system, and I feel there's a competitiveness that naturally just comes out

from living here. The feeling of community kind of goes away. There is a little bit of a 'every man for himself mentality' in a community like Palo Alto because I think your highly educated, professional parents understand that in the business world, to be ambitious requires looking out for yourself. And so I think there's a tendency to be very egocentric and really focus on doing what's best for you and for your family and your particular child without really looking at the greater good and the impact on the greater system or community.

VERDE: Would you say these factors that are present in Palo Alto are absent, or less conspicuous, in other districts that you worked in?

DIORIO: My time in Weston was also very challenging. Our superintendent committed suicide when I was working there as a counselor. There are a lot of similarities between the two districts in terms of the kind of impact a tragedy has on the community, both short term and long term. What are the ripple effects when you have those types of tragic events that really impact everyone? I think the two are actually really similar from what I experienced. But again, that was so long ago and things have changed, so I'm not sure it's fair to really compare the two now. I know when I first came to Palo Alto I felt like this was a more caring place ... a little less stressful environment than Connecticut at the time. It was less demanding. People just seemed happier, and I feel like that's eroded since 2005. I see Palo Alto being much more like the east coast school districts that I was more familiar with in terms of the culture shifting. And I believe a lot of it stems from extreme anxiety around college admissions. I believe that's the huge piece to all of this in all these high performing school districts.

VERDE: Which demands do you think you have faced in PAUSD that were the most difficult?

DIORIO: Certainly the suicides from a few years ago were the hardest — personally and professionally. For me, personally, it triggered my experience with my former superintendent back in

Connecticut. It brought up a lot of grief that I was feeling then. There's nothing like being the person that the police call to tell. No training program prepares you for that. No experience really prepares you for that. When you get the news that one of your students just died and that you have to be there, and that you need to make contact with the parents, and the family [on behalf of the school]. And then you need to then lead the school through all the next steps, and it happens so fast. [As] you know, I have a counseling background, so it was good to have that to fall back on. I have a lot of experience with different types of crises before. I had a lot of training in how to respond to those critical incidents. But being the person that has to kind of be the spokesperson for the school or the face of the school during those tragic times was really hard. There was a lot of anger, concern, worry and blame being thrown at me and at the school. I think sometimes people forget that we're all human. We all have our own stories, our own experiences and we're all just trying to work in the best interest of kids. We're really on the same team. I think there's some posttraumatic stress that comes with that. It's always waiting for the text message or the phone call that something's going to happen. I just remember my husband was always trying to get me to put my phone down right out in the aftermath of that. I remember saying, "I can't. We're hospitalizing kids, and I need to know what's going on." I have to be available for when the next one occurs. That kind of thinking and stress, really, you are not prepared for it. Nothing can prepare anyone for that. I won't miss that — that's for sure — because it's hard, it's really hard.