

SRVEA CONTINUES EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

BY CLAIRE CHU

In its most recent years, the San Ramon Valley Education Association (SRVEA) has sat on the brink of a strike. It has never come to fruition, but this year was the closest ever.

BIRTH, BEGINNING AND BACKGROUND

The SRVEA consists of teachers, counselors, nurses, school psychologists, teacher-librarians and speech pathologists throughout the San Ramon Valley Unified School District (SRVUSD). SRVEA was founded in the 20th century when the first batch of unions began, and after years of negotiations with the SRVUSD management team, SRVEA is still making efforts to push for improved school climates.

“We are committed to advocating for a quality public education for all children,” SRVEA president Ann Katzborg said. “That is why we are faced with the hard choice of a possible strike because we will do anything to ensure that our students receive the best because they deserve the best.”

Although SRVUSD receives less funding than most California schools, this reality is true if the only consideration is the total monetary amount. According to Anthony Peña, an SRVEA co-chair and math teacher at Monte Vista, every school in the state receives the same amount of standard funding, but the amount of supplemental grants varies.

“One of the reasons [SRVUSD] is considered lower funded is because it has a smaller population of students who need additional services,” he said.

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California allots added expenditures to schools where socioeconomically disadvantaged students, fostered youth or English learners are prevalent as these kids need more support.

“Since we get less additional funding, it may seem like SRVUSD is receiving less funding if you just look at raw numbers,” Peña said. “We tried to push district management away from talking about funding in a way that suggests we receive less standard funds because it’s not fair and disingenuous, but this hasn’t been successful.”

The issues SRVEA is advocating for now are the ones they have long supported — higher salaries, smaller class sizes, more nurses and additional counselors on campuses.

“Studies have been done for decades about the importance of class sizes,” said Jennie Drummond, an SRVEA co-chair of communications and Monte Vista art teacher. “We’re running into an issue where students are feeling disconnected from their campus. The easiest way to combat that is by having an adult they know there to care about them.”

In addition to decreasing class sizes, teachers have been rallying for funding directly to classrooms. There has been a hesitation to do so, but the continual urge brings hope to teachers.

“SRVEA has tried to use its power to push for funding to go to classrooms,” Peña said. “We want to make sure the classroom is a place teachers are supported and students can get the attention they need.”

As negotiations continue between district management and the union, Drummond explains her thoughts on the current state.

“It’s definitely frustrating that we’ve made little progress as a district and are still at the same point,” Drummond said. “We’re trying to get to a point where our priority is our students. We would love to see consistent proof of that from SRVUSD as a whole as well.”

STRUGGLES AND SUPPOSED STRIKE

For SRVEA, a cooperative work environment with SRVUSD management appears to be the most challenging obstacle.

“The collaboration we’ve seen in the past couple of years has been very new,” Drummond said. “It’s a lot of both sides wanting everything, but I have hope that we can go back to a place where we’re more collaborative and not constantly at odds.”

For example, educators did not feel that they

could give adequate input regarding the Personalized Learning Initiative (PLI) that began two years ago. As students were able to advance courses through online classes, teachers noticed students’ lack of understanding that they wished could have been eliminated from the start.

“A huge reason students are struggling to properly learn material is that teachers’ voices weren’t valued in the communication about PLI, which misled the students,” Peña said.



Along with #ForOurStudents, SRVEA reinforced its message. This year was our

As teachers, they aim to provide the most optimal direction for students in order to maximize learning and alleviate stress.

“Students often won’t choose the optimal learning path, but will choose the optimal college and job path,” Peña said. “That’s their reality, but we know that. Because we know that, we should be careful about what institutions and new policies we allow.”

However, as members on the district board, their goal is to stand by their economic projections as they affect the money the district receives. Without such provisions, schools are unable to provide for their students.

Drummond understands the need to consider financial gains, but she takes note of the flaws as well.

“Their projections have been consistently off by tens of millions of dollars,” Drummond said. “They underestimate their projections, so they end up getting more money and don’t spend it on kids. That is frustrating because education isn’t something people should do for profit.”

CLASSROOM CHALLENGES

As a result of these pressing conflicts, new policies and negotiations take place. They begin with both parties discussing their intended goals. Afterwards, parties begin convening possible agreements; if no agreement is reached, it lands as an impasse. A mediator from the state intervenes to settle the impasse.

If there is still no agreement, then one member from each party — district management, the union and the state — funnel the fact-finding process.

Following this, the district offers a contract it believes aligns with the needs of all three parties. If this is taken and agreed on all sides, the case is settled. If not, the union can strike.

On March 10 at 5:30 a.m., SRVEA and SRVUSD were able to reach a tentative agreement, so no strike was necessary. Although a strike did not occur, the union was one step away from doing so — the closest it has come in the past decade.

Enclosed in the tentative agreement, the two sides settled on a cap on elementary class sizes and psychologist caseloads, according to Peña. They also created a ballot measure for additional funding from the state. Currently, they disagree on allocation of those funds, but more discussion will come soon.

Since California schools closed the week of March 16 due to coronavirus, teachers and management are relieved they were able to reach a decision.

“Luckily, in the week leading up to the school closures, we were able to resolve our contract negotiation,” Peña said. “We ratified our decision the first week we were out of school as a unionship, so thankfully, we were able to do that because that session was the last attempt to negotiate before a strike.”

Going forward, the hope for educators is that such collaboration can continue to improve.

“Because we were able to talk about the things we wanted to push for, we ended up not having to strike,” Peña said. “Striking is the last option we wanted, but if that’s what it takes to lower class sizes, we’ll do what we can to serve our students.”

Teachers are now speculating what the relationship between SRVEA and district management will look like with the school closure. It could divert the collaboration back to the pre-existing state. As Peña indicated, a growing concern over the last four years has been the erosion of educators’ role in the decision process when it comes to larger issues.

“My worry is losing faith in our educational system and knowing that there are people who work in the education sector who don’t have our student’s best interests,” Drummond said. “Seeing those people view students as dollar signs is very disillusionary.”

COMMUNICATION IN THE COMMUNITY

To bring further discussion to challenges in and out of the classroom, SRVEA organizes town halls at schools throughout the district as well as other forms of communication.

“The district office can click a button and email everybody at once, but we can’t do that as they will not give us access,” Drummond said. “That means we have to get creative with our community email sign up, website, social media and town halls to be as active as we can.”

In order to improve interactions with the community, Peña believes the union should receive an equal platform to that of district management in order to prevent skewed perspectives.

“To my mind, if management is allowed to use an all-district email to send out information to every parent, the union should be able to do the same as well,” he said. “I would like to see restrictions on their end or a match for our end, either way having the same platforms.”

New barriers continue to hinder schools and learning environments, and educators envision a never-ending battle for students.

“Public education has an uphill climb as it loses funding and priority,” Peña said. “That’s where we come in as a union — fighting for what we do with the money we have, even if we have a flawed model at the state level.”

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PHOTO BY NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
repeated this slogan during walkouts to
one step away from a strike.



PHOTO BY SAN RAMON VALLEY EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Monte Vista staff gathers to support the bargaining team as it began fact-finding on March 9.