



El Dorado County Office of Education

6767 Green Valley Road
Placerville, CA 95667

Contact: Vicki L. Barber, Ed.D.
530-295-2229
530-642-1832 fax

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SCHNELL SCHOOL – RECOVERING

Two days after the tragic shooting of Schnell Elementary School's Principal, Sam LaCara, school resumed in an attempt to return to the routine of teaching and learning. What was not routine, however, was the myriad of additional support staff on campus for both children and adults. At least thirty-five counselors, psychologists, and therapists had been mobilized county-wide from other local districts, the El Dorado County Office of Education, El Dorado County Mental Health, the faith community and other local agencies. A four month old golden retriever by the name of Claire helped students calm down so that they could work through their grief, anger, and fear with the support of the therapists. Claire went classroom to classroom with Julie Gibson of Assistance Dogs of the Sierras and Betsy Christ, Executive Director of Special Services for the El Dorado County Office of Education. According to Christ, kids hugged Claire, petted her, and talked to her about Mr. LaCara. Claire provided a considerable amount of comfort to the kids and staff alike.

The Placerville School District leadership team, including Superintendent Dr. Nancy Lynch and Donna Bazett, Director of Special Programs/District Psychologist, worked to prepare statements for teachers to read to their students Friday morning at each school in the district acknowledging the feelings students may experience. Students were given an opportunity to talk about their memories of Mr. LaCara and to ask questions, although teachers and staff acknowledged that they may not have all the answers. Students were told that counselors were available in each pod if they needed more support than the classroom was able to offer.

As children discussed their feelings and what they could do, some wanted to draw pictures of

Mr. LaCara or to make cards for his family. One student drew a picture of a skyline with a large star in the background. He told the group, "This star is Mr. LaCara and he is now the Principal of the stars." Another child drew a picture of two people holding hands and a dog was with them. The student shared, "The two people are my grandma and Mr. LaCara. He is with her in Heaven along with his dog, which also passed away." The student was sure they would all be friends because they were all "so nice". Some children asked questions about Mr. John and drew pictures for his daughter. The classes busied themselves with classroom routines, but returned to grief from time to time.

Parent concerns were addressed with small groups facilitated by Robert Bloom, County Mental Health Crisis Worker, and Robert Stromberg, Director, Special Education Support Services (El Dorado County Office of Education). What began with one parent became a group of ten, with parents leaving as they became more comfortable throughout the discussion. Estella Castro, Psychologist from the Buckeye Union School District, and Betty Connolly, Special Services (El Dorado County Office of Education), facilitated small groups for Spanish speaking parents. Numerous topics were discussed with the parent groups, including: how to know if a child's reactions are normal, what death means to kids, and when a parent should seek professional help for their child. Parents talked about what they were seeing at home in their children and were provided with specific suggestions to help their child deal with grief or fear and that it is okay to acknowledge that their child is feeling afraid or sad and that we don't always have the answers about why bad things happen.

Even as the reading, writing, and arithmetic resumed, it is anticipated that there will be an ongoing need for support resources. According to Lisa Laird, Psychologist with the El Dorado County Office of Education, who was present at Schnell last Friday, the entire campus breathed a sigh of relief at the end of the day. This was the first step in recovering.