

SCHOOL MATTERS

Cohn-Vargas leaving Palo Alto

Becki Cohn-Vargas, who has overseen many curriculum adoptions, developed curriculum for teachers and championed equity and identity safety, is leaving the Palo Alto Unified School District this Friday. Her new job is superintendent of the Luther Burbank School District in San Jose. “The district’s been around for 100 years, a one-school school district. It’s a working class neighborhood, an unincorporated section of San Jose, in



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between a lot of places you’ve heard about,” she said. Luther Burbank has 575 students, a five-member school board, and a difficult reputation. Its budget this year was completed three weeks late, and only with the help of the Santa Clara County Department of Education. But she’s looking forward to the challenge. “In my new district, I will be ‘it.’ I’ll be the district office,” she said.

“I’m a systems thinker,” Cohn-Vargas said “and that’s why I wanted to be a superintendent.” Cohn-Vargas is known in the district

for her advocacy for the English Learners and Voluntary Transfer Program students, “We have to really look at why there are certain parts of our school population who are not doing well,” she said, and because her new district is small, she can look at the whole picture — how the pieces fit together. In her 10 years of service in Palo Alto, Cohn-Vargas’ title has been director of elementary education (curriculum and instruction and educational development). She has been in charge of new teacher training, and training teachers new to the district, overseeing mentoring of and supervising ‘about 20’ people throughout the district who do everything from coaching new teachers to teach staff development classes.

Cohn Vargas’ real passion, however, is equity. “Identity safety is making room for everyone at the table,” Eight years ago, she initiated Community Conversations, which presented workshops and speakers to combat racial prejudice, and the Not in our Town/Not in our Schools project, which she worked on with Elaine Hahn and Jean Hamilton. Cohn-Vargas is particularly proud of how that project turned out, because it is now a student-run project of both high schools, the subject of a film, that grew out of what she thought would be a one-time event that was held in response to a hate crime in the East Bay “They (the students) decided that it would be ongoing,” she said.

“She’s been the conscience of the district,” said Superintendent Kevin Skelly. “It’s going to be hard to replace that.” He may not have to look very far, since Cohn-Vargas has made many friends who are as devoted to equity, opportunity and identity safety as she is. “It’s like I have a whole army of people who have said ‘I’ll help you ... In this community, the PTA is ready to step up, and has a lot of ideas,” Cohn-Vargas said. “She’s done a lot, and she’s learned a lot,” Skelly said. “I’m looking forward to seeing her at the yearly meeting of Santa Clara County school superintendents.

School Matters is happy to hear your feedback. Please e-mail any comments to schoolmatters@paloaltopta.org to reach Preeva Tramiel, who is writing the column this year.