

With Mixed Feelings, Neil Schmidt Leaves Live Oak District

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel Staff Writer

It is with mixed feelings that Neil Schmidt, popular superintendent of the Live Oak Elementary School District for the past three years, has resigned effective July 1.

Schmidt has been lauded for helping to pull together splits in the three-school district, using strict discipline in drastically improving attendance and working toward better academic and behavior standards. He has accepted the superintendency of the Fillmore Unified School District near Ventura.

Upon arriving in Live Oak in 1979, Schmidt was faced with the aftermath of an unsuccessful recall attempt of two school board members. He maintains his leadership style, "which tends to be very direct and not passive," helped in mending that split.

He is quick to give credit to the past and present school board for being the "heart of the organization" and providing him with not only plenty of direction, but also much-needed leeway.

"The board encouraged me to ask hard questions and raise different issues," Schmidt says. "They put aside their personal differences for the benefit of students. I would love to see some government organizations do the same for their constituency."

The result has been something that not many school districts could truthfully maintain — complete confidence between

the school board and the superintendent. Improving attendance was just one area where that confidence came into play. Schmidt was given free reign to reduce absenteeism, which had become a very serious problem in the district.

"We simply put our foot down and held both the parents and students accountable," he explains. "Students are now required to make up unexcused days by coming in after school and even coming to school on Saturdays."

A teacher has hence been hired to teach "Saturday school," and the results have been impressive.

There's also a much greater pride of being a part of the Live Oak School District, according to consensus from administrators, teachers and parents.

This has been achieved, in part, says Schmidt, by "physically cleaning up the schools" by making them more attractive and articulating more to the community, keeping parents involved in what was happening.

"You have to be visible, available and willing to take stands on issues, as well as be accountable to those stands," Schmidt says.

He is the first to admit, however, there is always room for improvement.

For example, Live Oak allocates only 1 percent of its budget to staff development although more than 80 percent of the budget going toward salaries. "Yet we very rarely upgrade personnel when we don't have the budget for professional growth in staff development," he adds.

Schmidt would like to solve this dilem-

ma, but it is nearly impossible in this penny-pinching, budget-cutting time hitting all school districts. He simply described the upcoming fiscal year as "one of the worst ever," in terms of anticipated revenues.

The Live Oak district, like many others, are faced with not being able to offer employees any salary increases — the first time such a possibility has existed. The school board and district administrators are also looking at elimination of 75 percent of its annual maintenance budget.

This dim outlook, however, is not the reason Schmidt is leaving. He reiterated all school districts are being hit hard.

Schmidt says a "combination of factors" prompted his decision. The Fillmore Unified School District is a larger, kindergarten through 12th grade district. It has some 3,000 students, of which 50 percent are Mexican-American.

Schmidt is looking forward to working in the larger, unified district, as well as the opportunity to work in a multi-cultural community. Before coming to Live Oak, he was principal for 4½ years of the Merced City School District, a district with a similar makeup.

His replacement is anticipated to be named in July from an expected 50 applicants. A professional paper screening committee has already been hired to narrow the field to eight, with the school board and a parent-employee advisory group following up with interviews. The school board will make the final decision.

