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Education

Controversial teacher leaving John Burroughs

By Angela Hokanson

BURBANK — The John Burroughs High School teacher whose production of “Romeo and Juliet,” ignited criticism as well as support from the local community this spring is leaving the Burbank Unified School District and will be teaching at a charter high school in Van Nuys come fall.

Scott Bailey, who had taught drama and English at Burroughs High for nine years, submitted his resignation at the end of June. He has taken a post at Charter High School of the Arts – Multimedia and Performing, which is also known as CHAMPS, where he'll be teaching English and will also be involved in the theater program, he said.

The new position was appealing, Bailey said, in part because the charter school's principal seems to embrace the arts. Bailey's working relationship with Burroughs Principal Emilio Urioste has been strained for some time now, in part over artistic choices like what kind of theater was appropriate for teens, he said.

“It was just time for me to go,” he said.

The new position also includes a 5% raise, he said.

In April, Urioste informed Bailey that he would be teaching only English — not drama as well, as he had been doing — at the school any longer, Bailey said.

In response, the Burbank Teachers Assn. filed a grievance against Urioste on Bailey's behalf saying that the reassignment had been capricious.

Urioste could not be reached for comment.

The decision to switch Bailey's teaching assignment falls under the school principal's purview, Burbank school officials said. And that decision was one that some board of education members said they were comfortable with.

“I'm not going to second-guess our principals, because they are there every single day,” said Dave Kemp, the school board's vice president. “They see the big picture,” he said.

Both Kemp and school board member Debbie Kukta said that they could not discuss the specifics behind Bailey's reassignment because it was a personnel issue.

Both stated that Bailey's departure would be a loss to the school district.

“I'm disappointed he will be leaving the district,” Kukta said.

Bailey's reassignment away from drama classes at the school came after his mid-March

school production of "Romeo and Juliet," which drew some sharp criticism from parents and community members for several of its elements.

Some parents were concerned about what they considered to be the overly sexualized nature of the play — phallic imagery of swords, and a kissing scene between Romeo and Juliet, who were played by two girls, Bailey said. Another mother was concerned about the French maid costumes chosen for students who played servants, he said.

Mike Delbarian, whose son was in the play, was particularly offended by a scene in which he says actors took off plastic long-nose masks, set them on the floor and pretended to be masturbating the masks.

"It was just unbelievable," he said. "It's not 'Romeo and Juliet.'"

But some parents and drama students jumped to Bailey's defense when his role as drama instructor was taken away. A group of parents and students spoke out in support of Bailey at a board of education meeting earlier this spring.

Madison DiNapoli, the 17-year-old who played Romeo in the play, was at that school board meeting to show her support for Bailey, whom she considers an amazing teacher.

The play wasn't overly sexual, in her estimation. If there was sexual innuendo that's because that's the way it was written by Shakespeare, she said.

"It's read by freshmen all over the country," she said about the play.

The decision to cast a girl as Romeo was not made to be intentionally provocative, she said, but rather because she showed herself to be the strongest choice for the part. Madison plans to study theater at Cal State Northridge in the fall.

Jenna Tamimi, 18, who played a nurse in "Romeo and Juliet," said that Bailey would be greatly missed.

"I think it's a huge loss for the students at John Burroughs. Not just for the theater program, but also for the English Department," she said.

While Bailey said the controversy over "Romeo and Juliet," might have sparked Urioste's decision to remove him from his role in theater at the school, it also wasn't the first time the two educators had been at odds over plays.

Earlier in the year, Bailey and Urioste had butted heads over whether it would be appropriate for the students to put on a play called "The Laramie Project," which is based on the true story of the slaying of a gay University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard.

Bailey suggested that students perform that show, but Urioste rejected the idea, Bailey said. A group of students went on to direct that show in their free time and put it on at the Colony Theatre in May.

"He's had a problem with me for a long time," Bailey said.

Bailey's soon-to-be principal at CHAMPS, Norman Isaacs, said he saw the school's production of "Romeo and Juliet," and thought it was entirely appropriate.

He said Bailey seemed like the kind of educator who was willing to take risks and motivate students.

"Teaching is acting, and getting kids involved," he said.