

Menlo Park defends child care program - City defends childcare program

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Claims of improper conduct at the Menlo Children's Center by a former teacher are either being dealt with by staff or cannot be corroborated by any witnesses, city staff told parents Tuesday night.

In a special question-and-answer session, Community Services Director Barbara George assured roughly 20 parents that the city is taking seriously a widely-circulated e-mail from former recreation leader Nick Ross, who worked in the after-school and summer day camp program for about three years.

Ross alleges in the e-mail that a teacher threw a chair in the direction of a child and that another teacher snatched a ball from a girl's hands, punted it across the yard and yelled at her to get ready for air band rehearsal.

Ross also said he saw staff members doing "copious" amounts of text messaging instead of keeping a close eye on the children and that they talked more among themselves than with the children. Ross resigned from the center two weeks ago.

George responded Tuesday by telling the parents that one staff member was reprimanded and now has a personnel case because of the repeated text messaging.

She also said all of the staff members go through positive discipline training three times per year, including one four-day session at the start of summer camp. Regarding the ball and chair incidents, she said no one at the center saw them take place.

"We realize that we are on a trial period with all of you," George told the parents. "We take these responsibilities very seriously."

She also said Ross never approached her about the problems, but did at one time ask her about the possibility of creating a full-time position for him. He only discussed the recent allegations with her after he sent the e-mail and she called him into her office. Ross has declined to disclose the source of the e-mail list.

The parents, many of whom received the Aug. 24 e-mail, pressed George for more staff accountability. They asked whether the recreation leaders go through an evaluation process during the year and some said they'd be willing to pay more if it meant better care for their children.

George said one challenge of running the after-school and summer program is that all but three staff members are part-time and limited to 1,000 working hours per year. This also means the city, under state law, cannot conduct periodic evaluations of the teachers.

One parent, who preferred not to be named, said she was shocked to read about Ross' e-mail in Tuesday's Daily News.

"This is was very alarming to us," the parent said. "I think I speak for all of the parents in this room."

Another parent, Kirsten Keith, praised Ross and said he was a "real asset" to the program.

"I got to know (Ross) over the years and he did a great job," Keith said. "He's really interested in being with the kids."

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