

THE PINER PROSPECTOR

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Piner High School Varsity Girls Softball Team Is Packed with Power, Confidence Heading into Postseason

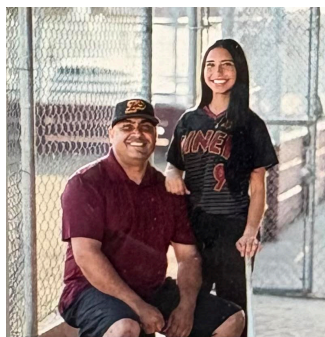
By Eva Rodriguez

The **Piner High School Varsity Girls Softball** team is poised for the playoffs after a 10-0 league record and a 13-6 non league record during the 2025-2026 softball season.

"This year there is a possibility" for a run in the playoffs, which start in two weeks, said Head Coach **Misael Membrilla**.

A recent 20-1 win against **Saint Vincent de Paul High School** on April 30 suggests that the Piner team has plenty of offensive firepower and pitching prowess.

The team struck quickly in the first inning after loading the bases. First, Junior **Mialynn Membrilla (#99)** knocked in three runs with a double. Then with two more runners on base, Junior and pitcher **Cambria Weerts (#92)** hit another double.



Piner Softball Coach Misael Membrilla and Mialynn Membrilla.

Later, **Eva Rodriguez (#6)**, a freshman, hit her first ever high school home run knocking in two more runs. A single by freshman **Alyssa Burr (#44)** extended the lead to 10-0 in the top of the second inning. Ms. Weerts earned the win, scattering four hits and one run over five innings and striking out seven and walking one.

In spite of those standout performances, the coach prefers to downplay the idea that the team's success was led by any standout players or leaders.

"There aren't any individual stars," he said. "I would consider the whole team to be stars. They all have talent in their own ways."

The coach said the toughest teams the girls will face in the post season will be **Montgomery High School** and **Ukiah High School**. Piner beat Montgomery 11-5 and beat Ukiah 6-5 during the season. The team needs to beat Montgomery and Ukiah once more this season to earn a spot in the playoffs.

Players, including **Leena Mae Prak (#25)**, a freshman, and **Camilla Parra (#24)**, a sophomore, said the team thrived by constantly trying to improve and encouraging one another and cheering for each other constantly.

"My favorite memory with the team is us huddling together after we win a game and congratulating one another," Ms. Prak said. "Our cheering and little pep talks make our team stronger."

The players said the team works hard to stay confident and learn from its mistakes.

"After a mistake in a game I pick my head up and tell myself I'll get the next one and move on." Mialynn Membrilla (#99), a junior said. "The way we support each other is to cheer each other on, and not let another teammate get down on themselves."

The girls put a lot of emphasis on their favorite hype songs when they come up to the plate.

"My hype song is 'I'll make a man out of you,' by Donny Osmond and it's from the movie Mulan and my go to song is "My Reflection" also in the movie Mulan," Ms. Prak said.

The younger players such as Ms. Prak and Ms. Parra said they learned a lot from more experienced players who showed the importance of sticking together, not beating themselves up after an error, and just enjoying the game.

"My favorite memory with the team I have so far is our **Elsie and Santa Rosa** games because they are the most fun ones and our doubleheaders against **Healdsburg** because even though we were tired we kept our spirits up and played to the fullest," said Ms. Parra.

The player and coach described the team's chemistry more as a family than a team.

"On the field it's about trust and communication, and off the field it's about representing the team the right way," Coach Membrilla said.

"You can be a great player, but if you don't connect with your teammates, it doesn't translate into wins," he said.

"When I make the roster I look at consistency, attitude, and who gives us the best chance as a team—not just stats," he said. "It's not always about who's the most talented, it's about who's reliable and works well with others on the field."

"During close games it builds up a lot of pressure for each and every player but I remind them to slow the game down—focus on one pitch, one play at a time. We talk a lot about confidence. Pressure doesn't go away, you just learn how to handle it together."

The coach said his typical practice is fast-paced warm-ups, drills, situational work, and always ending with something competitive.

"I keep them motivated by keeping practices fun but challenging. Energy is everything."

"I encourage everyone to be a leader in their own way, whether it's being vocal or leading by example. Leadership isn't just captains but it's every player holding themselves and each other accountable."

Piner High School STEM Coordinator Kurt Kruger Says District Budget Cuts May Put a Damper on the 2026-2027 School Year

By Evelyn Sanchez

For **Kurt Kruger**, Piner High School's long standing science teacher and coordinator of the school's popular **Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)** program, the 2026-2027 school year is shaping up to be a pivotal year in his future given the effects of cuts in courses and programs at Piner and across the district.

"I have been at Piner my entire career, 36 plus years," Mr. Kruger said. "When I started in 1989, I was the youngest staff member. At 65, I now may be the oldest. I am the senior staff member with 36 plus years at Piner."

Although Mr. Kruger has reached retirement age, he said he's never thought of retirement as a date.

"I have always said I will retire when I stop having fun and enjoying kids," he said.

However, with the district budget cuts causing many programs to be cut back, that outlook may change for Mr. Kruger and other teachers.

"Next year will be a telling year," he said. "Depending on what happens next year with cuts and district priorities (survival), it may make me think about retirement. If I am not allowed to do what we have worked so hard to develop and implement, it would certainly put a damper on my joy as a teacher."



Space Science Teacher Kurt Kruger

In addition to being the STEM coordinator at Piner, Mr. Kruger also founded and directs the SPARQ Center and teaches Space Science, GIS, and Earth Science. He graduated from University of California at Davis with a B.A. in Biological Science. He also earned his teaching credential from Sonoma State University.

The SPARQ Center is a state-of-the-art STEM facility located at Piner High School in Santa Rosa, California. Opening in 2014, the 5,000-square-foot SPARQ center is designed to provide hands-on research opportunities for students and serves as a unique community resource.

The center houses several specialized labs and tools that support Piner's Geospatial Technology Pathway and Science Department. Beyond serving high school students, the SPARQ Center is an active community hub. It hosts school tours. Indeed, since 2016, the center has hosted thousands of elementary and middle school field trips.

Regardless of the budget challenges, Mr. Kruger's passion for the science field keeps him motivated.

"I stay inspired by doing what I love," he said. " Also, the SPARQ center is very much a creative outlet for me. I really enjoy building it out and making it better. So much I still want to do with the SPARQ center. But, it does take time and resources."

Mr. Kruger said there are about 75 students in Space Science and GIS, and in the STEM Google Classroom there are about 421.

"There are so many opportunities for students in the STEM fields," he said. "Especially women. And men too. California is the Tech/STEM center of the world. Lots of good paying jobs if you have the education, skills, and drive."

He noted that Piner's STEM programs "are designed to help students stand out. As we say, if you apply to college, there are 1,000 other kids with good grades. The ones that get in are the students who have gone above and beyond showing what experiences they have that separates them from every other student with good grades."

He said participation in STEM allows students to "become a candidate not just a number on an application."

He said that goes for scholarships too.

Beyond that, Mr. Kruger said everyone knows that surviving in Sonoma County requires a good job with a good salary.

"If you want to stay here you need to have sufficient resources to be able to live and raise a family. A good education in STEM will give you those resources."

Asked where students could go if the program was to be cut next year, he said "in my mind, nowhere" because Piner makes the program unique due to all the staff, teacher, students, and all the work they all put to make it fun and unique.

"Programs are only effective if someone owns, develops, nourishes, and runs them," he said. "At Piner we have an amazing staff that does just this."

"I really do feel like I continue to make a difference in students' lives and as long as I feel that I will keep on trying to help and inspire."

Piner's Beloved French Teacher Madame Cecil Is Mourning the Loss of French Next Year as She Transitions to Teaching English

By Alexandria Hicks

For **Piner High School's** beloved French Teacher **Madame Maureen Cecil**, who next year will transition to teaching English due to district wide budget cuts that eliminated courses and selections, the 2026-2027 school year will be a year of coping with loss.

"I will miss everything - students learning about a completely different language that is not always heard but that influences how we use the English language (about 55% of the English language is derived from or taken directly from French)" she said.



Madame Maureen Cecil

"I will miss talking about food and holidays and how these things can sometimes be so different from what we experience here in the U.S.," she said.

"I will also miss taking students to France and opening their eyes to how exciting international travel can be. I will miss the spontaneous conversations with students in the hallways. Often students who I have never taught will ask me questions about how to say things in French."

Madame Cecil said that so far she has been on a roller coaster of emotions about the transition and loss of her French classes.

"Initially I was in shock, thinking how can they suddenly stop offering French 1? Which is effectively ending the French program."

For the last 10 years, Madame Cecil has taught 2 classes of French 1 at Piner. This year she started with 63 students between the two sections of French 1.

"After the initial shock, it hit me very hard and I was very sad, grieving for the program I have built here at Piner over the last 15 years. I have poured my heart and soul into creating a program that would be fun and interesting for students."

During her time at Piner, Madame Cecil has taken 5 different student groups to France to allow them to experience "this completely different country, culture and just the international travel really opens minds to the opportunities and possibilities. To not have that in my life anymore makes me sad."

In the meantime, Madame Cecil has been working on completing her National Board certification, a certification designating highly effective teaching.

"I have been discouraged about finishing that even though I only have one more part to do."

As she comes to terms with the changes, she finds herself "thinking about how I can adjust French activities to teaching English. I have taught English in the past so it will not be a complete unknown, but it will also be a lot of work to change from one discipline to another."

Asked what she's looking forward to about teaching English, she said she's not sure yet.

"I am trepidatious about the whole change. Ultimately I will be fine, I enjoy teaching language and high school students and that will not change."

Asked about her favorite books to teach, she said she loves teaching "**Le Petit Prince**" (**The Little Prince**) by the French writer **Antoine Saint Exupery** and the "**Petit Nicolas**" (**Little Nicolas**) series of books written by **Rene Goscinny** and illustrated by **Jean-Jacques Sempe** in French.

“They are both well known in France and are easier in some ways to understand,” Madame Cecil said. “The Little Prince is a very deep book that students can really get into. It covers everything from growing up to falling in love to wondering about our place in the world and universe.”

Madame Cecil has been teaching at Piner for 15 years.

“When I started, I was teaching 3 sections of French, then left for a year due to declining enrollment and taught at Maria Carrillo for one year. I was lucky enough to return to Piner - it really is my home!”

Madame Cecil said although she has mostly taught French over the years she has also taught 9th & 10th grade English, Life Skills and briefly Film Studies.

Before becoming a teacher, she was a substitute teacher and went to almost every school in the district at some point.

“I was at Montgomery High School in a long term substitute position when I decided I wanted to become a French teacher. I have also taught French at Maria Carrillo High School for one year.”

For her teacher training program, Madame Cecil did her observations at **Santa Rosa High School** and **Santa Rosa Middle School**.

Before she even completed her student teaching, she was hired at Piner as an intern.

She earned her teaching credential at **Sonoma State University**, where she also earned her bachelor’s degree in French. She started her college adventure at Santa Rosa Junior College earning her associate degree in Liberal Arts.

In addition, Madame Cecil also has a master’s in the Humanities with an emphasis on Art History from **Dominican University**.

Madame Cecil grew up in Petaluma and attended **Petaluma High School**, graduating in 1996.

“I had an amazing French teacher, Madame Wadsworth, who inspired a love of all things French in me,” she said.

“I was fortunate enough to travel with her as a high school student and stay with a French family as well as discover Paris. That class and trip changed my life and I still have friends I made in that class and who I see on a regular basis.”

As such, she knows first hand what Piner students will miss next year.

Vice Principal Ryan Partika Looks Back Gratefully on His Time at Piner Cut Short by Unfortunate District Wide Budget Cuts

By Sophia Rodriguez and Yaretzy Sedano

As **Ryan Partika** looks back on the 2025-2026 school year and the disappointing end of his time at **Piner High School** due to district wide budget cuts, he has many great memories and experiences that have prepared him well for the next chapter in his professional life.

“Piner is an amazing place and everyone should be very proud of what they helped build here,” Mr. Partika said.

“I really enjoyed connecting with staff, teachers and students,” he said. “Some of the high points for me revolved around gatherings. The staff truly enjoys time spent with each other and you can feel the warmth.”

“Another exciting time for me was being at our sports playoffs games in soccer and basketball,” he said.



Vice Principal Ryan Partika

“Our students had such fight and spirit in them and no matter the outcome, they ended the game with poise and class.”

Mr. Partika said what he will miss most about Piner is his “daily check-ins with students. I greatly appreciate the time spent with our students, they have a lot of character and heart.”

“Some even would come up to me for life advice, which I always got a kick out of,” he said. “But even the day to day hellos, good mornings and how are you doing, I always appreciated it as well.”

From his colleagues including **Principal Andrea Correia**, and **Vice Principals Gualalupe Perez** and **Norma Vasquez**, Mr. Partika said he “learned a lot about leading a successful and healthy school. These are lessons I will take with me into the future.”

Asked for his best advice on how Piner should meet the budget cuts and challenges of becoming a 7 to 12 school next year, Mr. Partika said “I always advise during such times, as things in the world and district get crazier, we counteract it by increasing our togetherness and support for each other. Constantly check in on others, because you might not know how all of this is affecting them.”

Moreover, as a former middle school principal, Mr. Partika urged Piner to welcome the new 7th and 8th grade students with open arms.

“The more mentorship and cross pollination they can get with our high school students the better,” he said. This would have to be done in a measured way, but our high schoolers know how to move through the turbulent middle school years and come out the other end healthy, caring and focused on the future.”

While Mr. Partika would like to come back to Piner some day, he said he loves “the role of leadership and being there for others on a personal and systems level, which means my

journey will most likely take me elsewhere. I will continue to live in Santa Rosa and be a part of the community though.

Piner's Ex-Badminton Coach Ed Weber Is Back After Three Years Serving as Assistant Principal at Santa Rosa High (Update)

By Gian Almorado, Marcos Espinoza and Gael Paramo

Ed Weber is back as a math teacher and the coach of **Piner High School's Badminton Team**, after three years serving as assistant principal of **Santa Rosa High School**.

Mr. Weber is a veteran of Piner, having served over 20 years here, and taught tennis a little over 15 years. He was also the athletic director of the school.



Badminton Coach Ed Weber in action.



According to Mr. Weber, students played a significant role in his return after the departure of the previous coach, Biology teacher **Mike Converse**, who coached the team for three years.

He said that a great number of athletes approached him asking who their coach would be. They asked him whether he was going to be the coach. Returning to campus Mr. Weber chose to resume the role.

"I felt like getting back into the coach business and realized that the badminton club needed a coach," he said.

So far, 22 students have joined the team. In previous years, the program had between 35 and 40 players, but Weber said the team may grow as more students become interested. Some tennis players are also expected to join, which could help strengthen the team.

Piner will compete in a division with five schools. Each team plays the other three times during the spring season, which means the team could have up to 15 matches. This gives players multiple chances to compete and improve throughout the season.

The team will need to raise money for equipment, which can cost as much as \$400. Fundraising and donations will help cover these costs.

Mr. Weber will also be working with assistant coach **Gabe Castro**, a former Piner badminton player who competed under him about eight years ago and has since graduated.

Mr. Weber said he has been playing badminton since he was young, mostly for fun, but his experience in tennis helped him understand the competitive side of the sport. "You can do singles and doubles, and the tactics are similar," he said.

He believes badminton gives students a chance to challenge themselves. "If you want to find out what you are made of and who you are, then play badminton," Mr. Weber said.

Interest in Piner Girls Wrestling Gains Ground at Recent Meeting

Piner High School will have its first ever Girls Wrestling team next year thanks to the dedicated work of Head Coach **Doug Erickson** and his wife **Cynthia Erickson** who already coach the boys team.

Coach Erickson said this year's lone Piner girl wrestler **Alina Phillips**, who was a standout on the boys team, will be captain of the girls team. She will be joined by about five or six athletes who pledged their interest at a recent sign up meeting.

Ms. Phillips, a sophomore in the 120 pound class, placed 5th at the North Bay League tournament this season. She was the one and only girl to qualify for divisional matches.

The coach declined to name the other athletes because pledges of interest are not the same as commitments.

TO SUBMIT A TIP ABOUT AN EVENT THAT THE PINER PROSPECTOR SHOULD COVER, PLEASE EMAIL JOURNALISM TEACHER DAN LONKEVICH AT DLONKEVICH@SRCS.K12.CA.US

<p>REPORTERS/EDITORS Gian Almorado Sam Bautista Xavier Coello Jacky Cruz Raul Diaz Marcos Espinoza Jordyn Gregg Alex Hicks Adan Lopez</p>	<p>Angel Mondragon Aylin Montiel Anahi Moreno Gael Paramo Eva Rodriguez Rossie Rodriguez Sophia Rodriguez Evelyn Sanchez Yaretzy Sedano Inoke Seviua</p>	 The logo for Piner Prospectors is rendered in a dark red color. It features a central illustration of a prospector wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a jacket, standing next to a wheelbarrow. To the right of the prospector is a shield divided into four quadrants: the top-left contains three interlocking rings, the top-right contains a pickaxe, the bottom-left contains a dog's head, and the bottom-right contains a pine tree. Above the shield, the word "Piner" is written in a bold, serif font. Below the shield, a banner curves across with the word "PROSPECTORS" written in a serif font.
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