

STATE OF THE SCHOOLS
2008-2009

Tom Selinske
President
Governing Board
Pasadena Unified School District

I want to thank and acknowledge our students, especially Kari and Marissa, for sharing their stories with us.

Thanks, Superintendent Diaz, for the introduction and thanks for your great leadership of the district. As you heard, I came to this role aware of the needs, aware of the opportunities and challenges to support greater student success in our district. As I thought about why I got involved in the first place, I observed a convergence of factors that I believe has the ability to lead to transformational change within PUSD.

Let me share with you what I see. I see a community who has struggled for decades with diminishing resources as evidenced in our continual budget cuts over the last decade. While California funds our schools at a level that is 46th in the nation, I see the hundreds of parents, staff and community volunteers who got involved in the budget protest this year. I see a community that is coming together with a realization that it takes all of us to support all of our children, from community leaders to parents and civic organizations.

I see growing partnerships like “My Masterpieces,” a supplemental K-6 art curriculum, which engages community partners like The Huntington by adopting all of our first grade students across the district, the Armory Center and Norton Simon Museum by adopting

all of our fifth grade classrooms, and the City of Pasadena's Cultural Nexus strategic plans goal by providing public arts walks for all second graders. I see other great resources in our community that need to be better aligned and coordinated. I see a growing awareness that we need our young people to succeed to be prepared with technical skills to run our cities and businesses and non-profits and get the skills they need to lead happy and productive lives.

Before I get into more of our story from last year, I want to thank our Immediate Past Board President Esteban Lizardo who has offered guidance and shared experiences as I began my role as a Board member.

I want to thank my family for all of their support in being able to allow me time to serve in this role: my wife Janet, son Paul, and daughter Claire. Throughout our family's experience in PUSD, we've had the pleasure of knowing outstanding teachers, administrators and staff. The Longfellow team has a special place in our memories and we're excited to have Claire currently enrolled at Eliot.

This year has been one of promise, preparation and progress -- a year where the district has taken bold action. We want to see if we have the answer to some of the nation's most vexing educational challenges. I want to describe to you the actions we are taking to deal with these challenges.

As PUSD began the 2007-08 school year, there was an air of PROMISE -- promise about the immediate and long-term prospects for improving the quality of public education in Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre. We had just hired a highly-respected Superintendent with a track record of success.

The community had elected three new Board members, Renatta Cooper, Bob Harrison, and myself. All of us were eager to

contribute our experiences as professionals and civic leaders on behalf of our students. And we learned from the wisdom and experience of veteran Board members Mike Babcock, Ed Honowitz, Esteban Lizardo, and Scott Phelps.

The Board and the Superintendent pledged to work as a cohesive leadership team to renew our focus on student achievement and improve service to schools and the public.

While there was an atmosphere of optimism and hope for the future, there was also a sense of urgency. Over time, the community had communicated that they expected more of our schools, and by 2007, the demand for change had swelled to a low roar.

Our students, parents, business and civic leaders wanted assurance that PUSD would move beyond the fits and starts of the past to demonstrate authentic, sustained and visible improvement in the education of our children. Simply put, our community wanted assurance that we could rebuild our credibility as an institution.

Recognizing the rich resources of the Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre, PUSD leadership understood that we couldn't obtain the community's full support until we came to grips with the internal state of the District, and made a commitment to fix what wasn't working.

And so we entered the PREPARATION stage. The early part of 2007 was a period of listening and learning. We looked at student performance data to identify which students were not attaining success. We visited classrooms to determine whether all students were receiving the high-quality instruction they deserve.

To hear from our stakeholders first hand, we held conversations with the community and we met with our counterparts in City, County and school government.

With this feedback from the community and with the leadership of Superintendent Diaz, we moved forward with several steps. We took the management audit off the shelf and implemented the recommendations. We also commissioned reports to obtain a frank and honest assessment of our strengths and weaknesses as an organization. Those included an additional cost savings audit, a stakeholder survey, and an architectural assessment of our facilities.

As we compiled all of the information we received from these evaluations, we realized that in order to move forward, we had to confront several critical issues: the academic performance of our secondary students, the achievement gap between student sub-groups, the efficiency and structure of the District Office, the condition of our school facilities, and the health of our relationships with parents and the community.

So, in March of 2007, the Board approved the Approach to Excellence, a blueprint for action that outlined a work plan that focused on seven key priorities:

- Student Achievement
- Accountability
- Communications
- Human Capacity
- System Capacity
- Guiding Coalitions
- Strategic Planning

We defined specific tasks to quickly address each priority area. We had to make some tough decisions, however, which included eliminating positions at the District Office.

Additionally, we established a new academic program that required staff to reapply at John Muir High School. In continuing, we established a new grade configuration policy for all PUSD campuses.

As a Board, we focused on providing strong leadership and effective governance for the District. The Board participated in several training programs to improve our decision-making processes and protocols. We began restructuring our agendas to align with district priorities, to improve governance, accountability and transparency. This is a work in progress where we can continually improve.

We established indicators for measuring the District's performance on our key priorities, and we monitored and evaluated our progress.

In short, we embraced our responsibility to be accountable to our students, our staff, and the public. As a result, 2007 was a year of significant PROGRESS.

Because our time is limited, I can only cover some of the accomplishments made over the past year. I do have to pause and recognize the hard work, skill, and professionalism of the PUSD staff. This year was one of tremendous change and uncertainty for many of our employees, yet they were able to keep the District stable, develop new programs and initiatives, and continue to improve student performance overall. They deserve our applause.

In the area of student achievement there were two major initiatives: one at John Muir and one with our middle schools.

First we launched the Reinvention of John Muir High School. This is a comprehensive vision and plan for improving student performance which will generate a more robust academic program and strengthen the school community.

- At John Muir we established four small learning academies – Freshman Success Academy; Business and Entrepreneurship; Arts, Media and Entertainment; and Engineering and Environmental Science
- We also hired new leadership and assembled a stellar team of teachers and support staff
- At John Muir, we modified facilities to support the new academy structure, with improved safety/security and upgraded technology. We realized there were needs as basic as telephones that work. We said we would fix the phones at Muir and we did!

The second initiative was the Excellent Middle Schools Plan to provide a high-quality and equitable educational experience for all 6th through 8th graders. This plan included:

- Eight months of research to develop a framework for a new middle school structure
- We engaged the community with more than 450 parents, students, teachers, administrators, and community members. One result was a revision to the staff plan to include a parent involvement component
- Phase 1 implementation is beginning this school year, with 90-minute periods in core English Language Arts and Math Instruction. There will be an advisory period for all students, and professional development and collaboration time for teachers.

These initiatives support the ongoing work to improve academic achievement at all schools this year. We also wanted to answer the

question, “What does accountability look like?” Part of our answer was, “Say what we’re going to do, do what we say.”

- We established targets for improving the quality of our schools and our District, based on federal, state and local measures of excellence.
- We measured areas including academic progress, readiness for college, graduation rates, organizational effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction. And we established a growth target for each area. This accountability system will ensure that PUSD is continuously improving.

I’m pleased to say that as we look back over the past year, we can say that we delivered on some key promises:

- We said we would continue the trend of overall improvement in our API and we posted gains for the sixth year.
- We said we would target the achievement gap to improve the performance of specific student groups and we saw significant improvement at several schools.
- We said we would be good stewards of taxpayer dollars, and we submitted a balanced budget, on time, even without a State budget.
- We said we would provide more effective and efficient service to students, parents and the public, and we restructured the District Office with fewer executives and reduced expenditures.
- We said we would upgrade and repair our aging campuses, and we developed a district Facilities Master Plan focused on equity for all schools.

- We said we would expedite teacher hiring so that schools could start the year fully staffed, and on September 5, teachers were in their classrooms ready to greet their students!
- Again, we said we would fix the phones at Muir, and we did!

This is accountability at work. Getting the job done day after day and instilling confidence by being dependable.

As we've become more consistent, our relationships with our local partners have also improved. As a result of joint meetings held with the City Councils of Pasadena and Sierra Madre, the Altadena Town Council, and Pasadena City College, we have established growing partnerships to support student achievement.

Our mayors and town council chair have indicated that we are beginning of a new era of cooperation and collaboration, and we are anticipating more opportunities to create community coalitions to leverage resources to meet the needs of our students.

Joint projects include improvement of student safety, more enrichment activities, and expansion of college and career opportunities, and they are now underway.

Another critical action the board took this year is to place Measure TT on the Ballot. We worked to provide a thoughtful roadmap for ensuring we have modernized, safe, energy efficient schools with adequate technology for our students.

Yet, we need a funding source to make that happen. That is why we placed Measure TT on the ballot in November. Without Measure TT, our schools, like Eliot which is over 75 years old, will not meet the basic needs of our students. Surrounding communities like Arcadia, El Monte, Los Angeles, La Canada, San Marino and

South Pasadena all have passed two or more bonds in the last 15 years, while Pasadena has passed one bond in the last 40 years.

Measure TT will ensure that our students are safe, ensure that our campuses support modern educational and technology needs, and leverage resources to expand partnerships to increase after-school programming and community facilities. You will have the opportunity to support Measure TT to help us achieve these goals.

While it is important to celebrate our progress, our improvement efforts are not slowing down.

Our students cannot afford to wait another year for improved instruction, support and services. These are all necessary for their academic success.

Strategic thinking was embedded in the priorities that guided our work this year. However, we recognize the need for an ongoing strategic planning process that will allow all stakeholders to define the future for PUSD.

We need to develop policies that reflect the values of this community – the values of equity, higher expectations, and excellence.

We need to provide the same stellar educational experience to every student who walks into a PUSD classroom, regardless of their individual circumstances or the school they attend.

We need to ask: “What should it mean to be a PUSD graduate?” I think it means attaining the skills needed to achieve personal goals. For a student, I think it means attending the college of their choice and pursuing the career of their dreams.

Each of us sitting here tonight needs to discover our personal role in improving student achievement. We must identify a way to

contribute our time, talent, or treasure to support a student's success.

You may join Lake Avenue Church and Earthlink in contributing materials and supplies to help teachers meet classroom needs.

You may be like Ramon Miramontes and Tecumseh Shackelford at Muir, who serve as mentors, sharing their life experiences with students.

You may follow the City of Pasadena in providing internship opportunities for students looking for a career path.

You may make a donation to support the implementation of new initiatives, like the Pasadena Community Foundation who funded professional development for Muir teachers or the Webster Foundation who funded additional teachers for our Excellent Middle Schools program.

You may volunteer to help out with classroom tasks like copying and organizing information to take home, like Amy Hanes, Vicky AbiSaber and Evelyn Adams, parents at Webster.

Like Dawn O'Keefe, a parent at Blair, you may encourage parents to educate themselves about District initiatives and get involved in school site activities and leadership.

You may advocate for state budget changes to provide more resources for students, like parents Joan Goulding from Don Benito Elementary, Haley Karish at Willard, and Nora Schneir from Longfellow.

Together, these individuals, organizations and agencies are changing the conversation at PUSD by asking, "What can WE do?"

William Butler Yeats said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” This is our task as trailblazers for the youth of Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre – to light a fire.

The PUSD leadership team is optimistic, we have a bold vision for students and schools, we are striving for excellence and we expect the best from each other and ourselves.

Working together, I know we will not only reach but exceed those expectations, and our students will benefit from our determination and commitment.

As we look back over this year of Planning, Progress and Preparation, I can only imagine all that we will accomplish in 2008-09 --- and I look forward to the journey.

Thank you!