



Pasadena Unified School District

**2020 State of the District
Patrick Cahalan
Board of Education President**

April 30, 2020

Greetings and best wishes to stay healthy to our PUSD families, citizens of Altadena, Pasadena, and Sierra Madre, our local Altadena Town Council, Pasadena City Council, Sierra Madre City Council, and other local representatives.

These are extraordinary times.

When I began the first iteration of planning for this State of the Schools, my intention was to talk about the children of the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD), their instruction, and the involvement of the parent community at a gathering of our community. The considerable investment of our parent community, primarily through PTA, School Site Councils, and participation in district advisory boards, is deserving of an event and a recognition worthy of its contribution. While this is still the case, the changes that our District, our State, and our country have experienced since March have been unlike anything else in the last century. The focus of this State of the Schools must, therefore, be focused on our response to the coronavirus pandemic and PUSD's role in leading our community's return to normal times.

As always, the mission of this District is to provide an education for the children enrolled in this district and to support them and their families. You should know that in all of our discussions about the future, budgets, and changing service models, we remain dedicated to our District's adopted mission: to provide a caring, engaging, and challenging education to every child, every day.

On March 12, the PUSD Board of Education approved a resolution granting Superintendent Brian McDonald emergency authority to make decisions necessary to rapidly respond in order to protect our students, staff, and families from the COVID-19 pandemic. Circumstances quickly evolved that week and the Board's prompt action enabled Superintendent McDonald to announce on March 13 that students would be dismissed, school facilities would be physically closed, and PUSD teachers and administrators would provide remote learning and service.

As we all do our part to keep our community safe by honoring "Safer at Home" directives, PUSD has taken thoughtful and effective steps to meet the varying needs of our students. These include establishing a food distribution program for our students and their families, developing and implementing an innovative distance learning framework, distributing devices to elementary students, acquiring more internet wireless hot spots to help bridge the digital divide, and coordinating services with the City of Pasadena and our community partners --- all while meeting the needs of our employees.

District administrators and staff have been doing all of this while simultaneously managing the complex logistics of changing the way we do business in virtually every way, a daunting task for one of the largest employers in the City of Pasadena. There have been many shifts, from normal business operations such as handling internal paperwork and processing paychecks to creating new ways to ensure that our communications with parents reach everyone in the community, including those with limited or no digital connectivity.

Every decision and action has been guided by our mission and developed through a lens of equity. Our commitment is to serving the needs of all of our students, and we believe that one of PUSD's greatest strengths is the diversity of our students.

The District's response has used the same four "Cs" that guide our District's goals for graduates from PUSD schools: critical thinking, creative problem-solving, clear communication, and collaboration.

The physical closure of the schools has dramatically changed our ability to connect with parents, which in turn has impacted our ability to conduct parent meetings and individualized educational plans and provide services to our students who have previously relied on in-person support. Those among you who run your own businesses can appreciate the complexity of altering your service model while dealing with the substantial upheaval in the world around us.

In truth, few of these have occurred seamlessly. PUSD has had its own struggles. After PUSD received a report about the possible COVID-19 exposure of an employee, the District suspended meal service for one day as a precaution. The Superintendent and Food Services staff were able not only to arrange to resume that meal service after an interruption of only one day but also partnered with the City to expand meal service to weekends.

While we have had difficulties, we have also been continuously raising our own expectations of what we can accomplish.

I need to take a moment to recognize how heartened I am by the willingness and commitment of all PUSD employees to serve during the last two months. Our labor partners in CSEA, UTP, the Teamsters, and APSA have been struggling with changes to their working day, challenges with providing services without sufficient resources, and the same universal uncertainty and stress that all Americans are feeling during this pandemic. Some of our teachers have been making changes to their working day while simultaneously dealing with uncertainties about the future. I am proud of the way the members of our organization have responded in these circumstances. The leadership team has been working nearly around the clock, seven days a week. While nearly everyone in the District workforce deserves a named recognition, most particularly those in Food Services, it is impossible to name all of them here.

However, I would truly be remiss if I did not in particular call out PUSD Health Director Ann Rector, Food Services Director Liz Powell, and Curriculum and Instruction Director Helen Hill for their efforts. They have taken a job that is complex under normal circumstances and delivered, even while the earth metaphorically continues to shift under their feet.

We still have substantial challenges to overcome in order to ensure we accomplish our mission. More challenges are becoming apparent as time passes and the duration of the pandemic remains unknown.

Many of these challenges require actions at the state or federal level, and decisions made there will have a profound impact on the decisions we will need to make here on the ground at PUSD.

Governor Newsom has begun to communicate his plan for the next stage of this pandemic. It is abundantly clear that public education is front and center in the governor's plan. Because public schools are a cornerstone of our economy and our communities and vital services are channeled through our campuses, public schools will lead the way as we return to normal times.

Presently, it is also clear that the state will not be returning to any semblance of pre-pandemic normal until a vaccine is developed, tested, and widely available. This is a process that will require several months, certainly in the best of circumstances well past the start date of the 2020-2021 academic year and likely not until some time in mid-to-late 2021. There are many issues that need to be resolved to go from "shelter-in-place" to less restrictive measures in 2021.

These are heavy lifts for state governments under present circumstances. They will not roll out entirely all at once. In turn, that means our movement from "shelter in place" to "less restrictive environment" as a school district will likely be in stages, the timing of which will be outside our local control and at the discretion of the state as support becomes available and prioritized.

At this point, we cannot provide a set schedule detailing when we can reasonably provide in-person instruction, even in a physical-distancing model that reduces contact.

All of this comes at a time when state revenues for the present year are predicted to decline dramatically.

The State of California's yearly revenue stream is highly dependent upon income taxes, particularly capital gains taxes, which are extremely susceptible to economic downturns. While the state has been very proactive about putting funds aside for just this sort of rainy day, most of those funds are in an account that is not dedicated to education. It is unclear how much of that funding, if any, will be dedicated to education.

While Proposition 98 was originally intended to be a "floor" for educational spending in California, it has in effect become a "ceiling", and in the previous notable economic downturns since Prop 98 went into effect, such as the dot-com bust and the financial crisis of 2007, the response of previous state legislatures, historically, has frankly been to balance the budget at the expense of public education.

This is an enormous amount of fiscal uncertainty the Board of Education will have to address, with very limited information.

To provide context to local citizens: if the state does little to shore up K-12 education funding, our district is likely looking at a loss of revenue in the next two years that will exceed the revenue we get from Measure J. In addition, if the state does not take steps to provide some relief to local school districts for our contributions to state pension funds, our cost increases for that alone, in those upcoming two years, will more than offset the last two years' early payments the state made to the pension fund to provide relief to districts during better economic conditions.

We are facing the possibility of not only having to do much more in the way of providing services but to do it with far less money than we had even in our last two years, where we had to make very difficult decisions regarding cuts and school closures.

How likely that is to occur is an area of speculation. The federal government has authorized enormous expenditures to address the pandemic in excess of \$2 trillion, and Congress passed an additional \$470 billion package aimed primarily at additional small businesses relief, with additional funds for hospitals and testing. There was little specific funding for public education in either of the first two COVID-19 legislative packages, however, and signs point to no quick resolution for the next round of funding if any.

Congressional Democratic leaders and the President insist that they are working on additional funding for states and cities, but little in the way of hard details have yet emerged.

These are challenging times for us all and will continue to be challenging for the foreseeable future.

Rest assured that in spite of these challenges, the Board, the Superintendent, and District staff are committed to serving the children of PUSD to the best of their ability.

Patrick Cahalan
President, Board of Education
Pasadena Unified School District