

# A new superintendent

BY PETER DREIER

**W**ITH a new superintendent — Edwin Diaz, superintendent of the Gilroy Unified School District — about to take office, PUSD is at a critical turning point. Many people are justifiably angry about many aspects of PUSD. Because there was little public involvement in the search process, rumors have been floating around about the school board's decision-making process. Skepticism is good, but cynicism is self-defeating. It is now time to suspend such cynicism and rally behind Superintendent Diaz and help build a grass-roots community movement to support our public schools around the twin goals of equity and excellence. In other words, let's learn from the past, but focus on the future.

In recent years, I have been critical of many things about PUSD. But I also know that there are many good things happening at our schools.

The district hasn't been very good at telling its success stories.

There's also a small but loud group of PUSD-bashers who spread misleading rumors about our public schools. There are also some opinion-leaders in our communities (including some elected officials and real estate agents) who don't know much about the schools but nevertheless spread misperceptions about them.

When things don't seem to be working well, there's a lot of finger-pointing. Some people assume the worst — that PUSD's problems are due to some kind of conspiracy or cabal among a small group of decision-makers. But people often confuse conspiracy with incompetence or inertia. Let's be frank. For more than a year, PUSD was without a full-time superintendent — or

was actively engaged in the work of the district.

The PUSD ship has lacked a captain, and the school board members, for different reasons, took too long to decide whether and when to replace him. As a result, there was much confusion at PUSD headquarters. A lot of things that should have happened fell between the cracks. When things don't happen, many people assume there's a conspiracy — or at least that the failure to make a decision was intentional.

In truth, the lack of leadership from the previous superintendent meant that many critical decisions were not made or were made hastily and without adequate information, without weighing all the options and without enough public input. Until the current interim superintendent took over a month ago, there was no one providing any direction for the top administrative staff and principals. There was nobody to deal with the ordinary day-to-day matters that, if left unattended, become serious problems.

Most of the current PUSD board members are well-intentioned. Their inability to function as a governing body was due, in large measure, to their lack of confidence in Dr. Percy Clark, and Clark's inability to gain their trust around a vision for the district. As a result, most school board members micromanaged in order to make sure things got done and to respond to the concerns of parents, teachers and others. Because of this every-man-for-himself attitude, it was difficult to get a stable four- (out of seven) vote majority to move in one direction.

The fact that the superintendent was missing in action for so long (long before the interim took over) meant that the school board members, who are part-time, were not getting the information they needed to make key decisions

tive whom they trusted to implement their decisions.

This exacerbated the board's dysfunctional dynamic. One consequence is that there's been very little communication between the board and the larger community (including PUSD parents) over a range of issues, including the superintendent search process, because there has been no one at PUSD headquarters responsible for public communication and outreach. (That department was disbanded in the last round of budget cuts.)

In such a vacuum, rumors and suspicions take the place of information.

That's the bad news. Here's the good news — at least potentially. Assuming that Diaz is skilled in management, communication and collaboration, we can expect that the board members will unite behind the new superintendent. The board will give him some broad guidelines around policy and direction, allow him to get to know the district and the three communities, listen to all the stakeholders (parents, teachers, principals, elected officials, the teachers' union, community groups, local clergy, business, local institutions and various parent groups), and come up with a short-term and long-term game plan for the district.

Hopefully, the board will limit its squabbling and finger-pointing and get behind Diaz in this endeavor.

Regardless of what people think about individual school board members, or how the search process was conducted (admittedly, on the advice of the search firm, it was not a public process), let's hope they have picked a strong leader who will help bring some stability and vision to PUSD and its board.

A new superintendent, even a highly skilled one, is not a savior. Let's remember that California still ranks 44th in the country in per-student

# *and PUSD's future*

**Skepticism is good, but cynicism is self-defeating. It is now time to suspend such cynicism and rally behind Superintendent Diaz and help build a grassroots community movement to support our public schools around the twin goals of equity and excellence. In other words, let's learn from the past, but focus on the future.**

mula for distributing public education funding handicaps districts like PUSD. No matter how you slice it, PUSD lacks adequate funds to do the job we expect. This is a systemic problem — one that needs to get fixed in Sacramento — not a problem of local mismanagement. (That doesn't mean that PUSD can't be better managed — only that there's no magic budget bullet.)

Moreover, skyrocketing housing costs have been steadily pushing low-income families out of Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre, exacerbating PUSD's budget problems. When students leave the district, PUSD loses over \$5,000 per student, but the fixed costs of running the district don't decline.

But a new superintendent can help build on the positive things that have been happening in the district, rally the community behind its schools, and restore the trust and confidence of the general public and the many stakeholders who are critical to improving our public schools.

Goal number one: Superintendent Diaz must make the PUSD budget much more transparent. Some people suspect the budget favors some schools over others. Some people think millions of dollars are being wasted or even hidden. Some people think there's too much "fat" in the central office. Without a clear, transparent budget that is accessible to all, these suspicions and rumors will persist.

Another top priority should be to meet with all the key stakeholders and to begin to

bring the entire community — including the municipal governments, business community and key institutions — behind a vision for PUSD.

As Richard Kahlenberg noted in his recent report sponsored by the Pasadena Education Foundation, "One Pasadena: Tapping the Community's Resources to Strengthen the Public Schools," PUSD's potential is unfulfilled because too many key stakeholders ignore PUSD and/or treat it like a second-class citizen. This must change. Diaz must develop a good working relationship with the public officials in our three communities, the leaders of local educational institutions (such as Caltech, PCC, Pacific Oaks), the major employers and the major arts and cultural institutions (such as Huntington Library, Art Center, Pasadena Playhouse) to build strong ongoing partnerships with our public schools.

Superintendent Diaz must also work closely with community and parent groups to make sure that their voices are heard and that they are part of all major decisions. The PTAs, Invest in Kids, APPLE, OneLA, Pasadena Education Network and other groups are critical to the future of our public schools.

Besides the budget, there are lots of issues facing PUSD: recruitment and retention of teachers; building on the district's improvement in test scores while also narrowing the achievement gap among students; dealing with the special concerns of English-language learners; reducing the drop-out rate and helping stu-

dents, especially low-income students, who are not performing to their full potential; expanding the arts, music, physical education and other areas that are often the first things cut during budget crises; continuing to improve the facilities, including the schools, athletic fields and playgrounds; finding ways to help parents help their kids with homework and other assignments; attracting more students, especially those now in pre-K, into public schools; developing a system of first-rate after-school programs and summer programs for all students who need and want them; and many others.

Diaz arrives at the early stage of a new round of elections for the PUSD board, mayor and City Council. It is the responsibility of all PUSD supporters to make sure that each candidate for these offices make improving PUSD — and forging more collaboration and cooperation between PUSD and the city of Pasadena (as well as Altadena and Sierra Madre) — a top priority. We should not let candidates get away with vague statements about how important it is to have a top-notch school system. We should ask them, specifically, what they intend to do to bring that about — and hold them accountable once they are elected.

PUSD, in other words, is now at an important turning point. It has been making progress for several years, but there is much more to do to guarantee that it fulfills its potential. Let's put cynicism, conspiracy theories and finger-pointing aside and pull together around a common vision of investing in our children by providing them with the public schools they deserve — and that our communities need to thrive.

Peter Dreier, a parent of two PUSD students, teaches political science at Occidental College and is a member of the board of the Pasadena Educational Foundation.