



State of the Schools

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Pasadena Unified School District**

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Thank you, students, for your outstanding performance and Mallika Sheshadri for your inspiring words. Let's give our student leaders another round of applause.

Good evening, everyone, and thank you for joining us for the annual State of Schools event. I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all of our guests and dignitaries for being here tonight, and a special thank you to our host, Principal Dr. Eric Barba, and the entire Pasadena High School team for welcoming us to this amazing campus.

This past year, we faced challenges, and we also witnessed the incredible resilience of our community. We set clear goals for every student to read by third grade, for every student to demonstrate grade-level proficiency in math, and for every student to graduate, college and career-ready. We foster both the academic and social-emotional growth of our students. Despite fiscal challenges, the unwavering dedication of our employees, students, and families enabled us to continue to grow in these academic areas.

We also started this school year implementing a fiscal stabilization plan, the first step towards achieving fiscal health for PUSD. Due to declining enrollment, we knew the financial road ahead would continue to be difficult, so we took action early by analyzing our budget and forming the Superintendent's Budget Advisory committee with the goal of ensuring long-term financial solvency and a vision for the future. Our strategic plan "Imagine 2028" will allow us to reimagine the evolution of PUSD: a district where students receive an education that prepares them to compete with peers from private schools in the region.

This school year has been marked by exceptional student achievements. Our graduating high school class includes at least two National Merit Scholarship finalists. At Pasadena High School senior Matteo Paz won first place and \$250,000 in the national Science Talent Search, the country's oldest science and math competition for high school seniors. He designed machine-learning algorithms to analyze 200 billion entries of full-sky data into a catalog of hidden rare stars and galaxies.

Our students have also excelled in athletics, completed internships through our College and Career Academies, and reached proficiency in English and world languages. Our district's arts programs are thriving, with students performing in plays and musicals across the city.

Our schools continue to receive statewide recognition and honors. Altadena Arts Magnet, Field Elementary, and Sierra Madre Elementary schools were named California Distinguished schools, one of the highest honors a school can receive. Rose City High School was named a model continuation high school. From 2022 to 2024, John Muir High School had a 21% acceptance rate to UCLA, more than double the state average of 10%. The rate puts Muir ahead of some of the most prestigious schools in the state, and reflects the resilience, talent, and hard work of both the students and educators. Marshall Fundamental girls' tennis team won the CIF-Southern Section Division 5 championship, marking the first girls' tennis CIF title in the school's history. Even through the losses they experienced, students from Blair kept training and completed the L.A. Marathon.

Despite these accomplishments, the unexpected struck: the horrific Eaton Fire. This fire directly impacted nearly half of our employees and ten thousand of our fourteen thousand students. It indirectly touched every member of the PUSD family.

The fire tested our infrastructure, systems, and community spirit, and also revealed our extraordinary ability to come together, adapt, and rise.

In the early days of the fire, our focus was clear: reopen schools, restore normalcy, and rebuild our communities. We worked tirelessly to do just that. Our facilities division quickly assessed damage and ensured campus safety, while our custodial teams thoroughly cleaned classrooms, outdoor areas, playgrounds, and sports equipment to remove ash and debris. We had 1500 workers on the ground within the first few days.

We also leaned into the safety protocols refined during the pandemic. Hospital-grade air filters were already in every classroom, and we continue replacing them on a regular schedule. We monitor weather, wind, and air quality daily, and adjust outdoor activities as needed. Before any school reopened, professional remediation experts tested all facilities. Those results are publicly posted.

Late last week, we learned that the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health conducted soil testing in Altadena and Pasadena. Some results near schools showed elevated lead levels.

In response, we are now working closely with the Pasadena Public Health Department, which is reviewing the findings and developing school-specific guidance. We are also seeking similar direction from the County for schools outside Pasadena. At the same time, we are proactively contracting with an environmental consultant to conduct additional soil testing at all campuses that may have been affected by windborne ash and debris. Our testing will mirror the sampling done at nearby residences.

There are no plans to close schools at this time. With public health guidance, we will determine whether to adjust outdoor play or field use. Remediation may include more testing, targeted cleaning, and other protective measures.

These steps build on our earlier work to ensure campuses are safe and ready. We have followed expert recommendations and remain in regular contact with health officials. This is part of our ongoing commitment to student and staff safety.

We know we're not alone. School districts across California have had to navigate similar challenges. That is why we are urging our state and county partners to create clear, consistent guidance that helps school communities move forward with confidence.

The impact of the fire reached far beyond bricks and mortar. From the beginning, this was never only about rebuilding schools. It is about restoring the heart of our community. Our schools are the place where futures are shaped, connections are formed, and neighborhoods unite. And while the fire caused significant damage, the foundation of what makes our schools essential has remained strong. We are thankful to our labor partners and leaders from UTP, PACTE, CSEA, Teamsters, and APSA who showed up to support instruction, ensure high-quality learning environments, and lead our District and schools.

But even as our sense of purpose held strong, the path forward was anything but easy. We've faced some tough budgetary challenges this year. Even before the fire, PUSD, like many districts across California, was dealing with a structural deficit caused by declining enrollment, rising costs, and long-term underfunding. The aftermath of the fire only intensified these financial pressures.

Amid these challenges, we had to take difficult steps to ensure the long-term financial stability of our district. One of the hardest actions we had to take was reducing staff to our agreed-upon ratios. These were not decisions we made lightly. We deeply understand the personal impact they have, and it was with heavy hearts that we moved forward. Every step we took was guided by a commitment to the district's long-term stability.

However, we did not face these challenges alone. Our community has been a constant source of support, and thanks to the continued generosity of Pasadena voters, we've had the essential resources to keep moving forward.

Measure O, passed in November 2020, and Measure R passed in November 2024. This gives us the opportunity to modernize our campuses to be state-of-the-art facilities – upgrading classrooms and labs, improving access to STEAM and college and career education, and repairing aging infrastructure. These 1.4 billion dollar bond measures are a monumental step forward for PUSD. It enables us to reinvest in our facilities and better prepare our students for the future.

Likewise, Measure EE, our first parcel tax and Measure J sales tax provide critical operating funds that help stabilize our day-to-day finances. Together, they will contribute over \$15 million annually to support staff, student programs, and classroom services. These local investments will make a tremendous difference, especially in a year when we have faced so many unforeseen hurdles. Without this community support, our ability to respond and recover would have been severely compromised.

To protect the long-term sustainability of our schools, we implemented a series of strategic steps.

We also prioritized the preservation of our core programs – such as dual immersion, International Baccalaureate programs, and Advanced Placement courses, college and career academies, athletics, and arts education. In addition to core, we will continue to ensure there are supplemental services for English Learners, Foster youth, and Students with IEPs as well as expanded learning and after-school programs for all. And we didn't forget the mental health and social-emotional support our students need, especially as they continue healing from the pandemic and now the trauma of the fire.

One of the most important steps was the redesign of the Teacher on Special Assignment role, focusing on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. This redesign allowed us to create 25 new positions, funded

through federal relief and fire recovery dollars, giving impacted employees the opportunity to reapply and continue serving students.

We know this work affects everyone, and we are committed to keeping all communities informed and involved. Every student in Pasadena deserves safe, modern, and motivating spaces to learn.

As we look ahead, we do so with humility, gratitude, and resolve. We will continue advocating for increased state and federal funding. We will continue safeguarding the high standards of education that define PUSD. And above all, we will remain focused on what we do best: providing an excellent education to every child who walks through our doors.

In closing, I'd like to take a special moment to express my deep gratitude to our first responders during the fire. Your bravery and swift action helped prevent an even greater tragedy. Thank you.

I'd like to thank the Pasadena Educational Foundation for their extraordinary partnership and compassion in response to the fire. They quickly responded and disbursed more than \$1 million in support that provided vital relief to our students, families, and staff.

I also want to extend my sincere thanks to my entire Superintendent's Leadership Team and our Board of Education for their unwavering support and leadership: President Jennifer Hall Lee, Vice President Tina Fredericks, Clerk Dr. Yarma Velázquez, and Board Members Kimberly Kenne, Michelle Richardson Bailey, Scott Harden, and Patrice Marshall McKenzie. Your leadership has helped steady our ship through one of the most difficult years in our district's history. Thank you.

To our families, teachers, employees, and students – thank you! Because of you, we continue to rise.

It is now my pleasure to introduce the President of the Board, Ms. Jennifer Hall Lee, who will deliver the 2025 State of Schools address. Elected to the PUSD Board of Education in 2020, Jennifer has been a dedicated advocate for her community for many years. From 2014 to 2020, she served three terms on the Altadena Town Council, where she re-established the Altadena Town Council Education Committee to strengthen connections between the community and PUSD schools in Altadena. She's also been a passionate supporter of Eliot Arts Magnet Academy, chairing the school's first annual fund and spearheading numerous community-driven events. She is a co-creator of the annual Women's History Event in PUSD.

Beyond her local contributions, Jennifer is a writer and former visual effects editor for feature films, with a deep interest in film production and independent documentaries. She is also a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts, the National Women's Political Caucus of Greater Pasadena, and a board member of the United Nations Association, Pasadena chapter.

Please join me in welcoming Jennifer Hall Lee, someone who understands the power of community engagement and is deeply committed to ensuring our students receive the best education possible.