



## **State of the Schools**

**Jennifer Hall Lee  
President, Board of Education  
Pasadena Unified School District**

**April 15, 2025**

Good evening, and thank you, Dr. Blanco, for those inspiring words. Before I begin, I want to thank our distinguished guests for being here with us tonight. Your presence is a testament to the strength of this community and the shared value we place on public education.

I also want to extend my sincere thanks to Principal Dr. Eric Barba and the Pasadena High School community for welcoming us to your wonderful school. And thank you to Superintendent Blanco, her senior leadership team, our Communications team, KLRN, and of course, the students who joined us this evening. You are the reason we are here.

In keeping with the Pasadena City Charter, which requires the Board President to present a State of the Schools address each year by May, I'm here tonight to update you on the district's progress, our plans for the future, and the financial state of our schools.

Before we reflect on the year, I want to share something personal. Earlier this year, I was forced to evacuate my home because of the Eaton Fire. My family and I left not knowing what we would return to. Our home was spared, but more than 70 of our friends and neighbors lost theirs.

In that moment, the fragility of what we've built together became so clear. Schools, neighborhoods, and communities. They are strong, but they are not invincible. What keeps them going is our shared care and commitment.

In the aftermath of the fire, we quickly focused on the safety and well-being of our students, employees, and families. PUSD worked tirelessly to reopen schools safely, strengthen protocols, provide targeted support, and offer counseling to those processing the trauma.

Now, as Dr. Blanco mentioned, with elevated lead levels found in soil near some Altadena and Pasadena schools, we're expanding those safety efforts. We are coordinating with public health agencies, launching additional soil testing, and preparing site-specific guidance. While schools remain open, we are ready to adjust outdoor activities if needed. Our work continues and is grounded in expert advice and driven by our commitment to a safe learning environment for all.

In the face of such adversity, our community's strength and resilience were truly tested. It reaffirmed why we work so hard to support one another, especially when times are tough. And it is precisely this spirit that brings me here this evening. I believe deeply in public education. As an advocate and a parent of a PUSD graduate now at UC Berkeley, I've witnessed firsthand the impact of investing in our students. And as someone who has dedicated myself to creating schools where every student, regardless of background or ability, can thrive, I know that together, we can build a future where every child has the support and opportunities they need to succeed.

And tonight, I want to celebrate just how far we've come.

This year, students had the opportunity to participate in the second All-Star Musical, *Hadestown: Teen Edition*, presented with the Pasadena Playhouse. PUSD's arts education continues to provide district-wide opportunities that showcase the artistry of our students and the skills of our teachers and administrators. These opportunities include instrumental and choral festivals, visual arts exhibits, and an All-Star Band, all of which help our students explore and express their creativity.

PUSD students are thriving. Our graduation rate is now 88 percent in 2023-24, and we're seeing real gains in preparing students for life beyond high school. Seventy percent of students are completing career technical education pathways, and nearly half are completing the rigorous A through G coursework required for college eligibility. These numbers matter. They represent lives being transformed. Futures are being shaped by the power of opportunity.

From the earliest grades, our students are part of programs that spark curiosity and confidence. Our dual language immersion programs in Spanish, Mandarin, Armenian, and French don't just teach language. They build bridges. They create empathy. They prepare students to thrive in a global society.

Our International Baccalaureate and Early College programs challenge students with rigorous academics while giving them the chance to earn college credit while still in high school. At our College and Career Academies, students explore fields like health, law, business, engineering, and the arts. They gain real-world experience and discover their passions.

Creativity flourishes in our arts magnet schools, where students study music, dance, theater, visual, and media arts. Programs like AVID offer academic support, college tours, and mentoring, especially for students who may be the first in their families to attend college.

And our students aren't just learning. They are leading. The Student Think Tank, now in its fifth year, is a powerful example of what student voice can look like. These students meet regularly, attend Board meetings, and provide insight on issues affecting both our schools and the broader Southern California region. They are researchers. They're problem-solvers. They're advocates. This year, they also organized a youth conference, bringing together peers, educators, and community leaders to address pressing issues and foster collaborative solutions.

I also want to take a moment to speak to something that is especially close to my heart — inclusion, also known as 'rightful presence.' It's not just a value, it's a practice. Our special education programs reflect a deep belief that all students deserve access to the support and resources they need to thrive. Our teachers and specialists work closely with families to ensure students with disabilities are seen, respected, and empowered with the tools they need to succeed. We believe every child belongs.

And belonging also means feeling safe. That's why, thanks to Measure O, we've made major strides in campus safety. We've installed new front-entry security systems at nine campuses, with more on the

way. These systems allow staff to see and speak with visitors before granting access, making schools more secure without disrupting daily operations.

We've also replaced locksets at 23 campuses and are upgrading surveillance cameras at 13 more.

Facility improvements are happening across the district. This year alone, we've renovated restrooms and fields at Willard Elementary, upgraded softball facilities at Marshall Fundamental, repaired playgrounds and fencing at Sierra Madre Elementary, and beautified Pasadena High School. Major renovations are also underway at John Muir High, Longfellow Elementary, and Madison Elementary.

For PUSD, rebuilding and renovating isn't just about restoring infrastructure, as Dr. Blanco touched on, it is about honoring who we are. Take Eliot Arts Magnet, for example. Its historic campus was severely damaged in the fire, but its spirit wasn't. In January, I authored the Board resolution to restore Eliot's original architecture and stature. We affirmed our commitment to preserving its distinct character. A symbol of art, creativity, and legacy. Schools are more than buildings; they are the heart of our neighborhoods. This important work ensures the story of public education in Pasadena continues, with strength and integrity.

We are also looking at how to care for the people who care for our students. With over half of our employees unable to afford housing in the communities they serve, we are transforming the former Roosevelt Elementary site into workforce housing. These homes, ranging from one to four bedrooms, will allow teachers and staff to live and work in the same neighborhood. This strengthens relationships, and it builds stability across our schools.

Of course, all of this work must be backed by responsible financial planning. The District's combined General Fund revenues come from the State, the Federal Government, and local sources. The State provides these funds through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which has two main sources of revenue: property taxes and State Aid. For the 2024-2025 school year, the district's LCFF allocation was approximately \$193 million. These funds come to the District in two forms: base grants, which are used for general operations, and supplemental and concentration grants, which are targeted for specific student populations such as Foster Youth, English Learners, and students qualifying for low socio-economic status. These supplemental and concentration grant funds must be used to supplement the general education program and ensure that all students have the resources they need to succeed.

Like many California school districts, we are facing serious fiscal challenges, and we had to make tough choices in budgeting.

For the 2025/26 school year, we've made more than \$12 million dollars in ongoing reductions, including central office restructuring and staffing adjustments. These were not easy choices. But they were necessary to preserve classroom instruction, maintain reserves, and continue essential programs in literacy, math, wellness, and college and career readiness.

Following the Eaton Fire, we also consulted with the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, the Los Angeles County Office of Education, and the State Board of Education. Their recommendations affirmed the path we're on and positioned us to pursue state-level disaster relief.

Because of these decisions, PUSD received a Positive Certification from the County on each of our financial reports.

We are still in a serious situation.

We're grateful for the Governor's trailer bill before the state legislature that supports our district in the recovery from the Eaton Fire. But state revenues are tightening. Our district's enrollment continues to decline each year. Costs continue to rise in areas like employee benefits, utilities, and special education. And with the expiration of one-time pandemic relief funds, we've had to make tough decisions to align our spending with our ongoing revenue.

Thanks to the passage of Measure J and Measure EE, we've reduced our deficit by 10 million dollars and protected vital student programs. We remain committed to making every dollar count.

As we move forward, we will engage our community to help guide our decisions.

Our community has shown up for our schools time and time again. The passage of Measure R in November, which secured \$900 million dollars in local funds for school upgrades, was a clear statement. Our students deserve safe, modern, innovative learning environments. And we will deliver.

In a time of uncertainty both locally and nationally, PUSD remains steady. We are driven by a clear purpose and a deep belief in our students. We're building a school system that reflects the potential of our students and our highest values as a community. Students aren't just being prepared for the future, they are shaping it.

Thank you for believing in them. Thank you for believing in public education. And thank you for being here tonight. Good night, and be safe.

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