

Fresno Unified finds its way out of the woods

By Walt Buster and Pete Weber

We clearly remember the dismal conditions at Fresno Unified in 2004. The board had removed Superintendent Santiago Woods with a \$400,000 buyout contract; the Fresno County Office of Education had taken control from the FUSD board because the district was on the verge of insolvency; and, worst of all, the district was academically bankrupt: More than 40 percent of FUSD schools were ranked in the bottom 10 percent in California.

With the current controversy surrounding the district, it's appropriate to evaluate the performance of FUSD, specifically since Mike Hanson became superintendent in 2005. We encourage everyone to do their grading based on personal experience and the progress report we are providing. Grading, we believe, must be based on comparative data rather than perceptions and rumors.

Varsity and junior varsity boys water polo teams warm up for practice on Aug. 10 at the new Hoover High School swimming complex which includes a handicapped access ramp. SILVIA FLORES sflores@fresnobee.com

Academics – Consistent progress has been made on every measure of performance. English proficiency rates have almost doubled since 2004, from 21 percent to 40 percent; in just the last five years, graduation rates have increased from 69.2 percent to 81.8 percent. We have a long way to go, but the progress made is commendable. FUSD works in partnership with Long Beach and other benchmark districts that have agreed to share and adopt best practices.



Finances – FUSD was literally bankrupt in 2004, and the state was considering a takeover of the district. Arts programs had been cut, counselors had been eliminated and library hours had been reduced. All of those programs were restored, and today FUSD is ranked among the most fiscally sound school districts in California.

Technology – In 2005, the state's Fiscal Crisis Management Team declared technology at FUSD to be the worst of any major urban school district in California. Today, FUSD is seen as a technology leader. Every class in every school is wireless, and computers have been made available to 40,000 students.

Career Technical Education – Few urban school districts are offering the range of options available at FUSD. CART and Duncan Polytechnic are doing excellent work. FUSD has opened the first entrepreneurship high school in the nation. The district is working to develop an inclusive career education technology model for traditional trades.

Parental and community engagement – Parent University has enrolled more than 20,000 parents. Business, civic and nonprofit organizations have been engaged. Example: FUSD and nonprofit Reading and Beyond are partnering to work with families in ZIP code 93701 to ensure all children graduate prepared for college or living-wage jobs.

Facilities – After years of waiting, children in southwest Fresno finally have the Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School they need and deserve. The new Vang Pao Elementary School serves children in southeast Fresno. Every high school has had major modernization projects. Portable classrooms in elementary schools have been replaced by permanent state-of-the-art structures. Are we done? Of course not. Most schools in California were built 50 to 70 years ago. Fresno is no exception.

Accountability and transparency – FUSD has voluntarily adopted an accountability model endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education because it provides data beyond traditional test scores. Information requiring board action is

posted 12 days in advance instead of the minimal 72 hours required by law. Superintendent Hanson and some of his staff experimented with the Cyber Dust app last year and discontinued the experiment after three weeks, concluding that anything that causes speculation of wrongdoing or lack of transparency is undesirable.

Controversy – The lease-leaseback process used for the construction of the Gaston Middle School is the principal source of district controversy. While lease-leaseback contracts totaling billions of dollars have been used in California, an appellate court ruled that use of a lease-leaseback contract in this instance was outside the bounds intended by law. The U.S. attorney’s office is investigating the transaction, presumably to determine if this was the result of differing interpretations of the laws governing these contracts or if improprieties were committed. This is a serious issue. We urge everyone to withhold judgment until the investigation is complete. Due process is a central tenet of our democracy.

Much progress has been made in FUSD since 2005, and much more is needed. The stakes are high. Now is the time for district and community leaders who care deeply about the youth of Fresno to sit down together and find productive ways forward.

Walt Buster, Ed.D., is a former superintendent of schools for Clovis Unified and served pro bono as interim superintendent of Fresno Unified from July to December 2004. At that time he asked civic activist Pete Weber to lead a task force that produced a [turnaround plan for FUSD](#). Google “Choosing our Future FUSD.”