

Casey Lamonski and Larry Moore: Fresno Unified needs a reality check, not a reality show

By Casey Lamonski and Larry Moore

This month, Fresno Unified School District Superintendent Michael Hanson is under evaluation by the school board and the federal grand jury.

For a community, it is important to ask a critical question: Is Fresno Unified better off now than it was just a year ago? Or how about a decade ago?

Recent op-eds have harkened back to the bad old days and attempt to claim that Fresno Unified has made tremendous strides of progress since then.

But what do the facts show?

Let's start off with the good: This year, Fresno Unified opened up the nation's first entrepreneurial high school – the Patiño School of Entrepreneurship – marking a new era in the district's education strategy. The district is also in firm financial footing due, in part, to funds from Prop. 30.

But it is imperative to realize, amid those highlights, looming scandal and federal investigations, that Fresno Unified's academic progress has regressed over the past decade. And it has regressed badly.

When Hanson arrived in 2005, Fresno Unified had a base API of 644, placing the district in the middle ranking of California districts of roughly the same size and demographics.

Fresno Unified had the third-worst language arts and math proficiency among similar districts that year, too.

Six years later – the latest full set of data from the state of California – Fresno Unified dropped from having middle-of-the-pack API scores to dead last among like-sized districts.

And our math and language arts proficiency? Second-to-last.

Even benchmarks for schools have fallen tremendously. In 2004-2005, two-thirds of Fresno Unified schools met their benchmarks for performance. In 2012-2013, that number dropped to 17 percent, marking a 59 percent decline in schools meeting their target over the course of eight years.

So what happened between Hanson's arrival and now? While other districts' performance skyrocketed, Fresno Unified stalled.

This is the ever-expanding canyon referred to as “the achievement gap.”

We need to look no further than other Fresno County schools to see how Fresno Unified fails to measure up.

In each of the three key racial demographics – white, Hispanic and African American – the gap between Fresno Unified performance and that of Sanger and Clovis schools grows larger over time.

In the course of seven years (2007 to 2013), the gap between Fresno Unified and Sanger Unified's white students swelled from 57 points to 78 points.

The Hispanic achievement gap between Fresno and Sanger is even greater at 101 points.

The starkest achievement gap, however, is with African American students. Sanger's African American students outscored Fresno Unified's African American students by 156 points.

Even inside Fresno Unified, little-to-no progress has been made to close the racial achievement gap. The gap between Fresno Unified whites and Hispanics was 106 points in 2013. And for six years, to 2013, Fresno Unified whites kept a consistent 149-point edge over their African American classmates.

Shiny objects and beautiful facilities are not signs of real success, as a certain Bay Area NFL franchise can attest. Cringeworthy performance outweighs great facilities.

Slipping performance is not Hanson's fault alone. It's the fault of our school board for relying on blind faith and failing to ask basic questions.

The Bee's Oct. 15 editorial discussed how the school board "abdicated its role" to district administrators. The board mindset is: If you don't put in the effort to try to fix the problem, you won't have to own the failure.

But this school board does own this failure. It is the ultimate authority and duty to ask tough questions of the superintendent and his subordinates.

And instead of admitting that progress is slow or nonexistent, and attempting to remedy it, the superintendent has opted to blame others for Fresno Unified's shortcomings.

None was more flagrant than Hanson's blindside of our community college Chancellor Bill Stewart and his colleagues for their college completion rate.

In the 12 years Fresno Unified has to mold and prepare students for college and careers, only 2.36 percent graduate "college ready," district statistics report. And no Valley school district sends more unprepared students to State Center Community College District colleges than Fresno Unified, Stewart said.

Stewart and his team are terrific educators. They are not magicians. Expecting them to clean up a mess created by Fresno Unified in a mere two years is beyond delusional.

In short: people who run multimillion-dollar glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

This is a reality check, not a reality show. And while federal investigations are serious business, failing to prepare our kids is a far graver danger for our future.

And if we are not better off now than we were just a year ago or a decade ago, it's time to begin cleaning house at Fresno Unified.

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