

Hoist the Main Sail!
aka State of the ETUSD

Back in January of 2014 I was given the honor and the challenge of becoming the superintendent of the El Tejon Unified School District (ETUSD). The district was facing many challenges including financial instability, declining student enrollment, inconsistent leadership, and, if not negative, at least a “not positive” perception from many in the community.

If you attended any of the board meetings during my first year and a half you probably heard me use the saying, “we have to get this boat floating before we can raise the sails.” The first goal was to establish financial stability. ETUSD was hit with what I refer to as the “Perfect Storm”: drastic reduction in state funding and a severe decline in student enrollment. This “Perfect Storm” devastated the district. The results were drastic cutbacks in the budget which resulted in layoffs including both certificated teachers and maintenance personnel. It was easy to see the effects of teacher layoffs. Class sizes increased, combination classes became necessary, and good teachers were lost. Other effects weren’t so noticeable in the beginning. The declining condition of the facilities doesn’t show immediately but over the last couple of years we realized that our school facilities no longer meet the standards that we want for our community and students.

ETUSD’s budget outlook during the 2013/14 school year was bleak at best. The state requires that a school district the size of ETUSD keep in reserves at least 4% of their budget. The budget projections that we were faced with in February of 2014 were to cut another approximate \$450,000 in 2014 and further reductions in the 2014/15 school budget or we would not meet our reserve requirement for the 2014/15 school year and we would have a negative reserve in 2015/16. This would have resulted in ETUSD’s finances being taken over by the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. Since that dreadful news in February of 2014, the district has rolled up its sleeves and began a collaborative effort between the administration, teachers, Board and all other employees to relook at the way we do business. With the hiring of a talented new business manager, Sarah Morris, every aspect of the district’s budget was examined. The district began to do business in a more efficient way. Costs saving strategies were put into place, funding strategies were implemented and many employees took on more for little or no compensation to “get this boat to float”.

ETUSD met the financial stability challenge and I believe we have come out stronger than we could have thought was possible. Not only did the budget projections go from negative to positive but the district has begun to bring back teachers and maintenance personnel. We have begun to expand our educational programs with the opening of Condor Academy (an independent study school for all grade levels), starting a Law Enforcement Academy, adding a full time Art teacher and bringing back Drama Productions to Frazier Mountain High School (FMHS). El Tejon Middle School (ETS) added an exploratory sixth period, in which several elective courses are offered yearly, and saw the return of after school athletics. All schools have expanded their technology, with the purchase of approximately 100 Chromebooks in 2015/16 and another approximate 100 Chromebooks this year. Schools are making plans to further expand their ability to enhance the students’ educational experience.

During this same time the district has seen some outstanding growth in our academic performance. The state of California adopted new academic standards. The district has been working on implementing these new standards in our classrooms. During the first two years of testing ETUSD has seen significant improvement in our test scores. District wide we are performing equal to or above the scores of other districts and/or schools in our area. California has a new way of reporting the performance of the schools in California. You may examine how ETUSD's schools performed by looking at the California Dashboard website

The district has also begun to upgrade our facilities. The roofs at FMHS had many leaks. The district was somewhat lucky that for the past several years California has been in a drought. Just last year the district was able to temporarily "patch" the roofs at the high school. If this temporary solution hadn't been accomplished, this past winter would have been disastrous. The patches worked, but due to the heavy rains and windy conditions new leaks have appeared and have needed to be repaired. FMHS's stadium was in desperate need of new grass. Thanks to the leadership of then FMHS football coach Marc Sandal, many other volunteers, and a generous donation from MountainSide Disposal, the field was completely re-turfed. ETS has also seen some improvements in their facilities with the painting of the lower outside walls, repairing roofs that were leaking and major repairs of the irrigation lines on the playground. ETS was also able to add a first class softball field to its playground thanks to the project leadership of Charles Stewart and community members that volunteered their time. Funding for the project was provided by a generous donation from National Cement. Frazier Park School (FPS) saw improvements in the resurfacing of the asphalt play area and the painting of the portable classroom buildings. Plans are being finalized for the removal of the portable classrooms at FPS and the building of a new classroom wing to replace the old portables.

The "boat is floating, we have raised the main mast, hoisted the sail and we are beginning to catch some wind."

During this time the community has been very supportive. I remember during one of the first interviews with the Mountain Enterprise I made a statement that to provide a first class education for the students of our community we must be "ALL IN" for our students. Over the past three years I have seen many community members and businesses have this "ALL IN" attitude for the students. The district still has many challenges ahead of us but with a "CAN DO" attitude and an "ALL IN" spirit I am confident that ETUSD will continue to move forward in its efforts to provide a first class education to the students it serves.