

Succeeding Against the Tide

By Neil Hufnagel, Superintendent

As the superintendent of Fowler Public Schools, I am as excited as ever with the opportunities for success and growth this new school year brings. Two years ago, in my first year in this role, I wrote a series of articles about being the best by any standard in our service to our kids, their families, and our community. I am excited and confident to take up that challenge again this year in partnership with our dedicated staff, caring parents, and supportive community.

However, it is also worth acknowledging that we do so in extremely challenging times. We toil against the tide of our long recessed state economy with little relief in sight. This is true in our households, in our businesses, and in our schools. These continued financial challenges can certainly take their toll on our pocketbooks, but perhaps just as damaging is the toll it can take on us emotionally. It becomes very easy to focus on what we don't have or what we cannot do, diminishing our optimism and chances for success. This is as true in our school district as it is in our families.

Certainly we have had to tighten our belts as a district and do some things differently. Elsewhere in this newsletter there are updates on some of the program reductions and other operational adjustments we are making in response to the economic realities we face. But if that is all we focus on, our chances for succeeding in becoming the best by any standard are diminished. While acknowledging that which is reduced or cut, we must also recognize what is preserved and improved. Every decision we make to reduce or eliminate a program or service allows us to preserve or grow another in its place. Our list of quality programs, services, and opportunities that we are preserving in the face of the difficult fiscal challenges is long, and is a reason to be confident and optimistic as we start this new school year.

While reducing the overall size of our teaching staff, through a retire/rehire process with two of our veteran teachers, we have preserved the jobs of and service we get from our young new teachers. While reducing the number of sections taught in the middle and high school, we have preserved all of the core academic courses and all but one of the elective courses offered our students. We continue to offer a wide range of elective opportunities through a semester scheduling process and alternate year course offerings that rivals the opportunities at much larger schools. While slightly reducing the aide time at the elementary and middle school level, we are preserving over one full teaching position and over 60 hours a week of instructional aide support dedicated to assisting struggling students. While reducing an afternoon bus run, we are preserving daily transportation service to all of our students and families on reasonably and safely populated buses. While asking parents to partner with us to provide transportation for some athletic events and increasing pay to participate fees, we are preserving the opportunity for students to participate in all of the sports and teams they have been able to in the past and also defray the costs for athletics drawn from our general fund. While challenged by aging facilities we are preserving and improving them through a community supported sinking fund and substantial volunteer efforts.

It is a credit to our board, previous administration, employee groups, and community that we are reasonably positioned to meet the continued challenges we face both in terms of finances and effort. As indicated above, we continue to protect and improve the programs and opportunities for our students in the face of an outward economic tide. I remain confident that we at Fowler Public Schools can be the best by any standard. We as a district owe it to our community to do so. As a community, we owe it to our kids as well. I look forward to partnering with you once again this year to make that happen. Best wishes for a great 2009-2010 school year!