

SEQUOIA UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
**A Conversation with Superintendent Gemma
on Plans & Challenges for 2009-10**

August 26, 2009

Q: It's the start of a new school year in what continues to be a significantly challenging time. How are you feeling?

A: I'm feeling good, especially from the standpoint of all that we've been able to accomplish, particularly during the past six months when the challenges have been significant. We've named two quality leaders for Carlmont and Sequoia high schools and other strong, capable administrators. We're starting the new year with 44 new teachers who are eager and energetic, and they're all highly qualified [under the No Child Left Behind standard]. They're joining faculties with some of the best teachers in the state.

I'm feeling good about the excitement across the district with the new facilities we've just completed. The new performing arts centers at Menlo-Atherton and Carlmont are wonderful – real assets to both students and the community. Sequoia has an incredible new biotech lab, and Woodside is launching a new Green Academy in the school's new science and engineering wing. Our facilities and cutting-edge programs are among the best anywhere.

I'm feeling good that, even with the budget reductions that have been required, we have managed to keep cuts away from the classroom. With that said, I confess to some anxiety about the effect of the reductions we've been forced to make. I'll remain mindful of this in the weeks and months ahead, particularly at the district office, where we shouldered the greatest percentage of cuts.

I'm also mindful of our students and their families who are also dealing with the effects of the struggling economy. There are uncertainties about the affordability of college. Some students will have parents or guardians who are looking for work. I'll continue staying current on student concerns and activities. I visit our schools throughout the year, keep in close touch with principals on an ongoing basis, and I meet once a month with more than a dozen students from our schools.

Q: What would you identify as the most significant challenges ahead in 09-10?

A: Probably our greatest challenge is determining how we are going to make additional required budget reductions without compromising our academic and enrichment programs and without any further loss of jobs. First, this will require that we gain consensus internally on the problem to solve and, then, to work together to make the required reductions. This fall, all of our labor contracts are up for renewal, and achieving this consensus will be central to those negotiations and a strengthened collaboration with our employees.

There's also the challenge of employing the right degree of fiscal prudence in an era when you can't bet on the future. We don't know what's still to come. The Sequoia district has successfully managed an appropriate reserve, but we need to be prudent about spending our reserve too quickly, particularly because we know the state hasn't yet turned the corner and we believe more revenue losses to schools are likely.

We're also challenged in our ability to provide the necessary support for low-performing students, given more than 10 percent in funding cuts from the state this year alone. Our focus is firmly fixed on lessening the achievement gap and increasing graduation rates, but we face continuing challenges. We continue to be challenged to find ways to maintain the

top-quality college-preparatory environment in our schools while finding more effective and efficient ways to support students who are struggling academically.

Finally, we're challenged in achieving our goal of maturing our career technical education program. We're challenged to infuse 21st century career technical education opportunities into the standard curriculum for all students. At the same time, some of our career technical education partners have also been adversely affected by the economy.

Q: How will the Sequoia district meet the challenges ahead?

A: We'll continue fostering increased collaboration with our staff, and we'll continue our positive dialogue with our unions. We'll work to help ensure that the financial hardships we face are shared equally among us all, as opposed to falling on the shoulders of a few. At the same time, we're engaged in a process of strategic abandonment – abandoning non-essential programs and budget items while focusing on the preservation of what's critical to our mission. We'll continue to focus on this. Finally, we'll continue our discussions with the governing board and our exploration of alternatives to reliance on funding from the state, such as consideration of a local referendum that could help restore the revenue loss from the state.

Q: How are academic and student enrichment programs in the Sequoia district being affected by the current financial challenges?

A: So far, we've been effective in keeping cuts away from the classroom, and we've been able to preserve our athletics, performing arts and other enrichment programs. We've done this by absorbing the lion's share of the cuts at the district office. Unfortunately, as additional cuts are required, we won't be able to prevent a larger impact to our schools. If we don't see some relief, we won't be able to preserve all of our programs.

Q: In the spring and summer, the district reduced the 09-10 budget by \$2.5 million. How was that accomplished?

A: We made a conscious decision to absorb the greatest proportion of cuts at the district office – roughly \$1.8 million. This was a decision made by senior management through the process of many hours of dialogue, before we brought the recommendation to the board. Each of the school sites was expected to make about \$170,000 in cuts as well. (For some context, the average annual budget at our four comprehensive high schools is about \$16 million.) Our continuation high school and our adult school were given smaller targets. The schools were given their target reduction, and they used the decision-making process unique to their particular site to determine where the cuts would be made.

Q: At the meeting on August 12, the board directed staff to reduce expenses by another \$1 million to \$1.5 million. How was that target identified?

A: There was discussion by the board about balancing spend-down of the reserve at a rate that is responsible, given the continuing economic uncertainties and the likelihood of additional state cuts in funding, and balancing that with trying to minimize impact to our educational programs or the need to cut any more positions and add to the unemployment rolls.

Q: How will the new target be met?

A: We'll start by identifying cost reductions that can be made independently of our labor agreements. We'll share this list with our unions in the hope of working together to identify alternative options that may need to be negotiated but are options that we can all agree on. From my vantage point, the optimal solution is sharing the burden among us all, rather than the cost impacting just a small group of individual employees.

Q: What are you doing to keep parents and the community informed about what's going on?

A: A key initiative is starting this series of published conversations. Along with distributing these conversations to the media, we send them out to our mailing list of interested community members, and we post them on our website. We're also getting ready to launch a new website. We want to employ the Web and other valuable communications tools to more effectively inform and engage parents and the community. In addition, we've been working on re-energizing our Budget Advisory Committee, which includes parents, community members and staff representatives. The schools also have active PTA organizations, and I meet monthly during the school year with the leadership of the PTA groups.

Q: How is the Sequoia district managing to continue nurturing innovation in the face of the current challenges?

A: We continue to expand our dialogue about ways to advance a 21st century career technical education program that integrates project-based curriculum into the established core content areas: English, math, science and social sciences. Every wave of budget constraints forces us to be more effective and efficient – and that requires innovation. We continuously strive to foster a culture in which innovation is encouraged.

Q: Even with all of the current challenges and uncertainties, you seem generally optimistic. Why?

A: To be sure, our goal of preparing all students for success in a hypercompetitive 21st century is a big challenge, particularly in an environment of shrinking resources. Still, I'm optimistic that we will continue to be successful even during these challenging times because we have a highly skilled and dedicated staff, enthusiastic students who come ready to learn, involved parents and a supportive local community. The Sequoia district also has a strong and effective governing board that has earned a respected and positive relationship with the community. Those are definite sources of my optimism. Personally, I've always tended to choose optimism over pessimism, even in the toughest times, and that has served me well. More than that, I've worked to create a culture within the Sequoia district that views challenges as an opportunity for learning and growth.