

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Paradise Unified School District Uses *i-Ready* Data to Help Rebuild after Wildfire

In November 2018, the worst wildfire in California's history decimated Paradise, a rural town of 26,500 people located in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The fire, known as the "Camp Fire," burned for 17 days. Once the smoke cleared, most of Paradise had been destroyed and only one of Paradise Unified School District (PUSD)'s nine schools was habitable.

Many PUSD students and educators lost everything they owned and had to leave the town they loved immediately after the fire or in the weeks that followed. And yet, even before the fire was fully contained, PUSD educators began rebuilding. They made schools wherever they could find space, coaxed traumatized students to reconnect with their teachers and one another, and used trusted instructional and assessment programs in new and creative ways.

As soon as PUSD opened its makeshift classrooms, educators realized two things: Meeting students' learning needs would require incredible resources, and students were too traumatized to take the annual state summative assessment, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP).

Paradise Unified School District



STUDENTS
3,037

GRADES
K-12

TITLE I
61%

BELOW
POVERTY LEVEL
14.2%

“Although we are in a time of great trauma, loss, uncertainties, and unknowns, we refuse to lose sight of our students, their needs, and what is best for their academic and social-emotional success.”

—PUSD's 2019–2020 Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)

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What They Did

To address students' learning, PUSD teachers revised their instructional approach. As for the CAASPP, Michelle John, who was PUSD's superintendent from July 2017 to December 2019, led a campaign to secure a rare federal waiver for the assessment. Though John was successful, that success raised a new problem: PUSD leaders still needed student data to complete their required 2019 LCAP and secure state and federal funding.



Bringing Students Back Together

Tom Taylor, who was PUSD's assistant superintendent in 2019, explained that as soon as PUSD educators decided to bring their students back together to rebuild PUSD, they first had to find physical spaces where the students could learn. "Almost every administrator turned into a real estate agent," Taylor said. PUSD reopened the one school unscathed by the fire. They also accepted donated space from nearby districts, turned a warehouse into a high school, and transformed a hardware store into a middle school.



Focusing on Social-Emotional Learning

PUSD's reopening was a victory as well as the beginning of a new set of challenges. Students were ghosts of themselves. Those who'd acted out before November 8 now exploded without warning. Even fastidious students had trouble focusing.

In the months following the Camp Fire, PUSD educators concentrated time, energy, and resources on social-emotional learning. "You can't address the learning until you address the trauma," said Taylor. "That was a huge piece of the 2018–2019 school year: How are we going to address the social-emotional needs of our kids so we can then move into learning?"

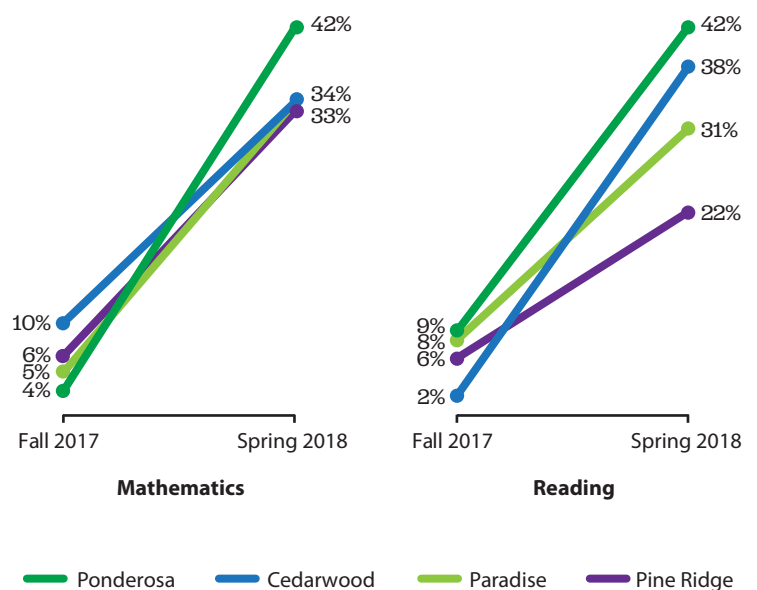


Increasing *i-Ready* Adoption

PUSD had adopted *i-Ready Diagnostic* and Personalized Instruction for Mathematics and for Reading at its four elementary schools in the 2016–2017 school year. Students in all four schools took *i-Ready Diagnostic* assessments in the beginning, middle, and end of the year, but implementation of *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* across the four schools was initially rocky in Year 1.

However, as educators who were able to follow Personalized Instruction best practices began to see results, more teachers and students bought in. Over the course of the 2017–2018 school year, the rate of students who reached proficiency jumped 25 percentage points in Reading and 33 percentage points in Mathematics at the four schools. Furthermore, this growth was reflected in PUSD students' 2017–2018 CAASPP scores, which were higher than 2016–2017 results in both Reading and Mathematics for every elementary grade.

Fall 2017 versus Spring 2018 Performance by School: Percentage of K–8 Students Reaching Proficiency on *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Mathematics and for Reading



“[Our students] were getting pretty comfortable with i-Ready before COVID-19, and now it is a major tool that teachers are using.

When you can tell your students, ‘Get on i-Ready for 45 minutes a week,’ and you can track that, that’s huge for our teachers. And when we begin next year, we’re definitely going to start with i-Ready assessments.”

—Tom Taylor, PUSD Superintendent

After the Camp Fire, Grades 6–8 needed to be onboarded to *i-Ready* for PUSD to have all the student data district leaders needed for the LCAP. PUSD’s teachers—despite being “tapped out,” as John put it—dedicated themselves to becoming proficient in *i-Ready Diagnostic* and *Personalized Instruction*.

What They Accomplished

Before the end of the 2018–2019 school year, most eighth grade students were able to complete one Diagnostic, most seventh graders at least two, and most sixth graders two or more. Elementary grades followed the standard assessment calendar, completing Diagnostics at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.

PUSD’s student population was highly transient after the Camp Fire, which made scheduling Diagnostics and accumulating data challenging, to say the least. However, educators were able to collect enough data for Grades K–6 to compare Diagnostic results from the beginning of the year to the end. These grades all showed proficiency growth from the fall 2018 Diagnostic (which students took before the Camp Fire) to the spring 2019 Diagnostic. The percentage of students at or above grade level went from seven to 32 percent in Mathematics and 11 to 31 percent in Reading. The rate of students who were two or more grade levels below where they should be fell by 13 and 14 percentage points for Mathematics and Reading, respectively.

“We do know that the best part of *i-Ready* after the fire was that we showed growth—and that is over the top,” said Betsy Amis, principal of PUSD’s Ponderosa Elementary School from August 2016 to July 2018. “Michelle John could say, ‘Even though this horrible thing happened to everyone, the kids continued to learn.’”

PUSD administrators were able to complete and file their 2019–2020 LCAP and Federal Addendum, which referenced *i-Ready* in several key sections in: comprehensive support and improvement planning and success monitoring, “Expected Annual Measurable Outcomes” for goals, measurements of goal success, and educators’ professional development (i.e., *i-Ready* training).

PUSD’s triumphs—though extraordinary—are only early chapters in the district’s rebuilding story. PUSD’s ongoing recovery has been marked by victories, setbacks, and changes. Like countless districts across the United States, PUSD has recently had to navigate upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked if she had any advice to give education leaders as they weather the pandemic crisis, John, who retired in 2019, responded with empathy and measured optimism. “There is no written book on how to go through this, so we need to take care of each other and move slowly,” she said. “This is an opportunity for us to really look at our education system and what we’ve been doing for 200 years. I do believe education is going to look different going forward, and I don’t necessarily think that is a bad thing.”



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