

Learning after Tragedy: How Paradise Unified School District Used *i-Ready* to Rebuild after California's Worst Wildfire

Some of the most haunting images to come out of the most destructive and deadliest wildfire in California history, the November 2018 "Camp Fire," are of Paradise Elementary School in Paradise, California: a plastic playground castle, its primary colors dulled by smoke, guarding a hollowed-out foundation and charred trees; student chairs, their seats gone and metal legs twisted, jumbled together underneath a building's blackened skeleton; the word "school" on a cracked slab surrounded by a yellow-brown haze.

The Camp Fire began on November 8 and burned for 17 days. When the smoke finally cleared, most of Paradise had been destroyed, and only one of Paradise Unified School District's (PUSD) 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.



The November 2018 Camp Fire left all but one PUSD school uninhabitable.

And yet, even before the fire was fully contained, PUSD educators began rebuilding. They reconnected students and teachers, made schools wherever they could find space, and ensured healing began for the students who returned after the fire.

When counselors, teachers, and parents said there was no way PUSD students had the emotional and mental capacity to take the annual California state assessment in spring 2019, Michelle John, the district superintendent from July 2017 to December 2019, led an arduous and ultimately triumphant campaign to secure a rarely granted federal waiver.

Assessment data is an invaluable tool, and the lack of it could have compounded the learning loss caused by missed school days and trauma. It could have led to PUSD not having necessary metrics for key sections of their Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP),



Paradise Unified School District
Paradise, CA

K-12 Enrollment: **3,037**

K-8 Enrollment: **1,558**

Title I Percentage: **61%**

Free or Reduced-Priced Lunch: **64.3%**



Michelle John,
Paradise Unified School District
Superintendent,
July 2017 to Dec. 2019

a district-level, three-year plan with annual updates that's required for state and federal funding. But PUSD refused to let any of that happen.

Long before PUSD leaders heard back from the federal government about their waiver request, they knew how they'd update and populate their LCAP even if they didn't have state assessment data. On past LCAPs, they'd used data from various edtech programs alongside state assessment data. In 2019, one edtech program in particular, *i-Ready Diagnostic*, Curriculum Associates' standards-based assessment program, would be an essential tool.

PUSD was able to collect student learning data, complete and file its LCAP, and get the funding that they needed to continue rebuilding. Their story is just one example of how an excellent curriculum, a top-rated diagnostic program, and incredible educators can ensure that learning continues in the wake of a crisis.

Paradise and *i-Ready* before the Fire

Before the Camp Fire, Paradise, CA, was a rural community of 26,500 people located approximately 85 miles north of Sacramento in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The nine schools that made up PUSD were surrounded by dense forests of gray pines and blue oaks.

Though Paradise was rich in natural beauty, it was by no means a wealthy town. Before the fire, 14.2 percent of Paradise's under-18 population lived below the poverty line, and 62 percent of PUSD's 4,154 students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Butte County, where PUSD is located, had long had some of the highest rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—traumatic events that occur before the age of 18—in the state of California.

And yet, Paradise's small population and isolating geography—it's located on a ridge 2,000–2,800 feet above sea level—fostered a close-knit community and drew educators who were passionate about helping students succeed.

Since California introduced the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) in 2014, PUSD had been steadily increasing its performance on the annual state assessment. In the 2017–2018 school year, the year before the Camp Fire, 31 percent of PUSD students met proficiency requirements in math, and 40 percent met them for English language arts (ELA).

Elementary Schools Adopt *i-Ready*

PUSD adopted *i-Ready Diagnostic* and *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* in Mathematics and Reading at its four elementary schools in the 2016–2017 school year. They chose the *i-Ready* programs because, as John explained, they met key teacher and administrator requirements: The programs aligned to California state standards, provided clear data about students' learning and growth, and made differentiated instruction possible for the district's busy teachers. *i-Ready* checked all the boxes and then some.

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 varied. (For example, it's recommended that students use *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* at least 45 minutes a week, but average usage differed from school to school and month to month.)

i-Ready implementation was further complicated by the fact that PUSD elementary schools had recently adopted several edtech programs, one after the other, including assessment and curriculum programs. Adding *i-Ready* meant elementary teachers had to learn how to use yet another program

even as they were still learning others. “When we adopted *i-Ready*, we adopted a math program at the exact same time,” said Betsy Amis, principal of PUSD’s Ponderosa Elementary School from August 2016 to July 2018. “It was very overwhelming. And then *i-Ready* had a lot of pieces, too. It was a rough start because they got rolled out at the exact same time.”

Like Amis, Lori Kerns became the principal of a PUSD elementary school, Cedarwood, in 2016. In her first year in the role, she had to prioritize crucial systems improvements and didn’t have the bandwidth to focus on *i-Ready* implementation. “During my first year, I was trying to stabilize a challenging school environment. My attention was really on building relationships and trust,” Kerns said. However, in fall 2017, she was able to diligently monitor *i-Ready* usage and implementation.



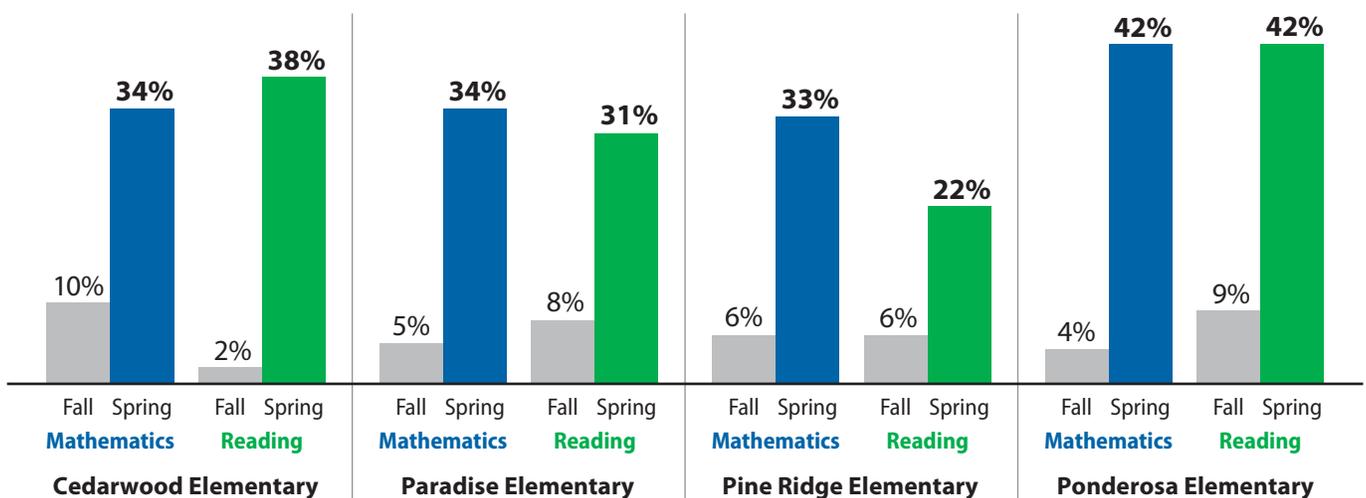
Lori Kerns, former Cedarwood Elementary School Principal, and **Michelle John**, former PUSD superintendent

Educators See Results

Kerns became a self-described “believer” in *i-Ready* after she saw Cedarwood students’ learning growth over the course of the year. Cedarwood went from 10 percent of students meeting proficiency standards in Reading on their fall 2017 *i-Ready Diagnostic* to 34 percent of students achieving proficiency in spring 2018. Cedarwood’s growth in Mathematics was even more dramatic: In the fall, only two percent of students met proficiency, but in the spring, that number jumped to 38 percent.

Cedarwood students weren’t the only ones to make impressive strides. In all four PUSD elementary schools, the rate of students who reached proficiency jumped 25 percentage points in Reading and 33 percentage points in Mathematics over the course of the 2017–2018 school year. The students’ growth was reflected in their 2017–2018 CAASPP scores, which were higher than 2016–2017 results in both ELA and Mathematics for every elementary grade.

Fall 2017 versus Spring 2018 Performance by School: Percentage of K–5 Students Reaching Proficiency on *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Mathematics and Reading



Camp Fire and Tough Decisions

The Camp Fire wasn't the first time Paradise had to evacuate because of a wildfire. Less than a year before the Camp Fire, residents were ordered to evacuate multiple times during the October 2017 Northern California wildfires. On the morning of November 8, 2018, when residents saw black clouds moving across a clear sky, they knew what the clouds meant and what they had to do.

Evacuation routes out of Paradise quickly became backed up with bumper-to-bumper traffic. A school bus driven by bus driver Kevin McKay got caught in the gridlock as he evacuated students from Ponderosa Elementary School. The smoke in the bus became so thick that students struggled to breathe. McKay tore his shirt into strips that teachers soaked with bottled water before giving them to the 22 students to press to their faces.



A photo of Lori Kerns's license plate went viral when another evacuee took a picture of it on the evacuation route out of Paradise.

Amis, who now consults for the district, rushed to an evacuation site to hand out food and water and distract younger children with games. Kerns, even though she had retired from Cedarwood five months earlier, also hurried to an evacuation site where the students were gathering to help.

PUSD educators spent the first days after the evacuation tracking down colleagues and students' families. They tried to get a sense of who had lost what, who was okay, and who wasn't coming back to Paradise.

At first, there was a push to disperse students to area schools as soon as possible. But separation wasn't what students wanted. They wanted to be together. Tom Taylor, who was PUSD's assistant superintendent at the time, recounted how his teenage daughter told him as much a few days after the fire.

"I asked my daughter, who was a graduating senior, 'Julia,' I said, 'tell me what you guys want, what the kids want.' She looked at me and said, 'Dad, we want to be with our friends and with our teachers.'" As Taylor described this conversation, his voice caught on certain words—"friends," "teachers"—and he had to pause and clear his throat before continuing. "I'm listening to her as a father as well as the assistant superintendent who represents 3,400 kids. And in my mind, I'm going, 'How on earth are we going to pull this off?'"

Bumpy Road to Reopening

PUSD educators made the decision to bring their students back together, to rebuild PUSD. "From that point, almost every administrator turned into a real estate agent," said Taylor. "And we were looking for locations to put our kids—where we could put our teachers, where we could get people together."

Educators were anticipating that about 30 percent of students would return to PUSD. The number who came back was closer to 50 percent (approximately 2,500 students), but that number fluctuated wildly from day to day. Even with a diminished student population, finding space was difficult. The fire destroyed nearly 19,000 buildings, and PUSD was competing with FEMA and organizations like the Red Cross for real estate.

Only one PUSD school, Cedarwood Elementary, was unscathed by the fire, and was therefore able to be reopened. Nearby school districts donated space, including Durham Unified School District, which cleared out two building wings and gave PUSD land for their portable classrooms, and Oroville Unified School District, which gave PUSD a whole building for its elementary school students.

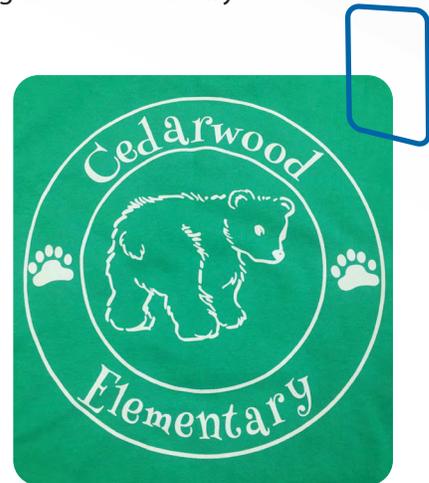
High school students reconvened in January 2019 in a warehouse that had belonged to Facebook®. Students dubbed it the “Airport School” because of its size and proximity to the Chico Municipal Airport.

A hardware store became the new temporary middle school. Educators and volunteers constructed classrooms with aisle partitions and got a kick out of shouting jokes like “Math on aisle 17” and “English on aisle 15” across the vast space.

John asked Kerns, her sister, to temporarily come back to Cedarwood Elementary in December 2018 to oversee its reopening. After her retirement, Kerns had joined Curriculum Associates as an educational consultant. The company gave her a leave of absence and she returned to Cedarwood. Twice a day, five days a week, she and her colleagues drove up “the mountain” with a police escort, past a violently charred landscape and through National Guard checkpoints, until her replacement was found.

In the weeks that followed reopening, PUSD devoted a lot of time to social-emotional learning and educator training in trauma and loss. Academics came second to students’ healing.

“Quite a few of the kids did say, ‘Ms. Kerns, can we just do *i-Ready*?’” Kerns recounted. “I think they saw *i-Ready* as dependable, predictable, too. For them it was a blanket: it’s warm, it’s comforting, and they know what to expect.” Unfortunately for the younger students who missed Snargg, Plory, and all the other *i-Ready* characters, Cedarwood didn’t have reliable internet access for several weeks after reopening. *i-Ready* would have to wait until February 2019.



Cedarwood Elementary School was the only PUSD school that was able to reopen directly after the fire.

Education after a Crisis

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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. Many students were living in motels, RVs, or with family and friends in crowded spaces that still smelled like smoke. Quiet time to do homework or college applications was a luxury.



Cedarwood Elementary School educators prepared signs for students’ first day back after the Camp Fire.

Teachers who had lost everything mustered the strength to support their students, holding back their own tears while students shared theirs. Wendy Hall, one of the teachers who returned to Cedarwood, remembers standing in the doorway of her classroom and thinking about how much her friends teaching in the classrooms closest to her own had suffered. “They all lost their homes, and then not only did they lose their homes, their parents lost their homes, their siblings lost their homes, their aunts and uncles,” Hall said.

State Assessment

Not long after PUSD reopened, John realized that her students weren’t going to be prepared for the annual state assessment and that asking them to sit down and take an hours-long test would be pointless at best: they were too mentally and emotionally fragile, their lives too unstable. John began lobbying the California Department of Education (CDE) to get a waiver for the CAASPP. “I told them, ‘People don’t care about testing. They care about where their next pair of shoes is coming from. They care about where they’re going to sleep tonight, whether they’re going to eat.’”



December 2018, Cedarwood Elementary School students selecting backpacks and other school supplies from items donated by area schools.

But John’s task was much more difficult than simply getting an official in the CDE to sign a slip of paper. Annual state assessments aren’t just required by states; they’re also a federal requirement. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the latest authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, mandates that states test students in English language arts and mathematics every year in Grades 3–8 and once in Grades 9–12 in order to receive federal funding. If PUSD wanted out of the spring 2019 state assessment, the district would need a waiver from the federal government.

In addition to CDE officials, John and her colleagues reached out to the United States Department of Education and politicians. “I wasn’t about to not get anyone involved who I needed to get involved for the sake of the kids,” John said.

On one of the trips California Governor Gavin Newsom made to Paradise in 2019, he asked John, “What do you need?” John didn’t waste any words: “I need the state testing board off my behind, and I need them to allow me not to test and to get my Title I.” John said that Newsom replied, “Consider it done.”

Even after Newsom gave his support, PUSD had more hurdles to jump over. After months of lobbying, John got a call from the CDE: PUSD would get its waiver.

After John hung up the phone, she cried. Then she wiped her eyes and got back to work. She had to turn her attention to making updates to her district’s LCAP without any 2019 state assessment data.

The LCAP and *i-Ready* Partnership

Like most of the 50 states, California disperses school funding to districts using a “foundational funding formula.” Districts get a base amount of funding per student and receive additional funding for high-need students. In California, this formula is called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

A district’s LCAP details how its LCFF funds are connected to meeting student needs. However, LCAPs are much more than fiscal reports—they’re also critical communication and planning tools. They contain districts’ annual goals, the actions they’ll take to meet those goals, how they’ll measure success, and metrics that show how much progress has been made. In order to receive ESSA funding, districts must also fill out an LCAP Federal Addendum that addresses Local Educational Agency Plan provisions of ESSA.

New Implementation and Data to the Rescue

It didn’t take long for John to realize that she had the norms- and standards-based data she needed to update PUSD’s LCAP: *i-Ready* data. “People say, ‘How did you think of that?’ And I’m like, there was no other way,” John said. “It was, it was a no brainer. What data do we have? What measurable things do we have? It’s much more reliable data than a one-week test anyway.”

Like the CAASPP, *i-Ready Diagnostic* is an untimed, adaptive, computer-based assessment. However, *i-Ready* takes less time than the CAASSP. The average amount of time students spend on each CAASSP subject assessment ranges from two and a half to four hours. In contrast, students take an average of 45 minutes to complete the *i-Ready Diagnostic* for each subject (Mathematics and Reading). Test administrators can break each subject’s Diagnostic down into sessions, which is particularly helpful for younger students.

Before the Camp Fire, only elementary grades used *i-Ready*. This meant that Grades 6–8 needed to be onboarded in order for John’s plan to work. PUSD’s teachers, despite being “tapped out,” as John put it, dedicated themselves to becoming proficient in *i-Ready Diagnostic* and *i-Ready Personalized Instruction*. Teachers and administrators learned how to:

- Navigate the Diagnostic dashboard
- Use *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* online lessons for differentiated instruction
- Analyze different *i-Ready* reports

The Personalized Instruction Summary (which shows students’ real-time progress through *i-Ready* online lessons and highlights where they are succeeding and struggling) and the Instructional Grouping report (which groups students with similar instructional needs and provides teachers with detailed instructional priorities and classroom resources) were central to combating learning loss. The Diagnostic Results and Diagnostic Growth reports and information from other edtech programs gave PUSD administrators data they needed to populate their 2019–2020 LCAP.

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 will continue to serve the children of the Ridge with the teachers they love. We will be flexible, adaptable, and persevere as we begin the long, arduous process of slowly returning students and families to the Ridge.

**PUSD Local Control and
Accountability Plan (LCAP)
2019–2020**

How *i-Ready* Can Help during a Crisis and Extended School Closures

In the wake of the worst wildfire in California history, the November 2018 Camp Fire, Paradise Unified School District (PUSD) in Paradise, California, used Curriculum Associates' *i-Ready* reports to measure annual goal progress and success, monitor the effectiveness of a school comprehensive support and improvement plan, gather data for state- and federal-mandated documents, and more.

Now, as school districts across the country contend with the aftermath of extended school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for the 2020–2021 school year, they, too, can use *i-Ready* reports to combat learning loss.



Diagnostic Results and Growth Reports

Experts believe that students will start the 2020–2021 school year with learning loss that's higher than

the typical "summer slide." The Diagnostic Results and Diagnostic Growth reports deliver the clear, actionable data educators will need to understand each student's learning status (their strengths and areas where they're struggling) at the start of the new school year as well as their growth over the course of the year.

With *i-Ready* data, busy teachers are able to create personalized learning pathways and learning goals for each of their students. After significant learning loss, many students will need goals that reach beyond Typical Growth (average, normative growth). Which is why *i-Ready Diagnostic* reports show Stretch Growth—ambitious but attainable growth goals that set students on a path toward grade-level proficiency.

Reports also contain sections that show placement by domain, what a student "Can Do," and "Next Steps & Resources for Instruction."

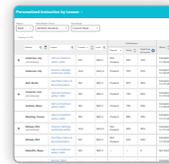


Prerequisites Report (Mathematics)

New for the 2020–2021 School Year

Teachers need to use every minute of mathematics instruction time in the coming school year. They won't be able to cover everything students missed during school closures

and will need to develop efficient strategies that balance prerequisite skills and grade-level learning. The Prerequisites report helps educators uncover and then address unfinished learning. It shows the prerequisites the whole class should focus on to prepare for grade-level learning. It also reveals which groups of students are missing similar prerequisites and offers "on-the-spot" teaching tips and recommended instructional resources for each upcoming topic in core instruction.



Personalized Instruction by Lesson Report

The new Personalized Instruction by Lesson report lets educators see the performance of all students on a given lesson, whether teacher-assigned or *i-Ready*-assigned. Teachers have the option of seeing lesson performance across a custom date range and viewing students' previous attempts on lessons to identify those who are struggling with similar skills.



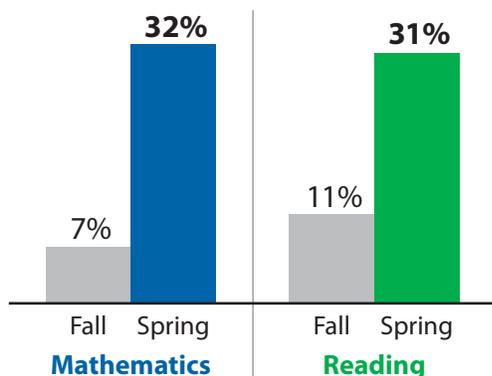
Instructional Groupings Report

Like the Diagnostic Results report, the Instructional Groupings report helps educators facilitate differentiated instruction. This report groups students with similar instructional needs and provides teachers with detailed instructional priorities (and corresponding classroom resources) that various groups require to master essential skills and progress to on-grade level proficiency.

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. Educators were able to collect enough data for kindergarten through sixth grades to compare Diagnostic results from the beginning of the year to the end. Grades K–6 all showed proficiency growth from the fall 2018 Diagnostic 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.

Percentage of PUSD K–6 Students Reaching Proficiency on *i-Ready Diagnostic* for Mathematics and Reading, Fall 2018 and Spring 2019



“ We do know that the best part of *i-Ready* after the fire was that we showed growth—and that is over the top. —**Betsy Amis**, former principal, Ponderosa Elementary School ”

“We do know that the best part of *i-Ready* after the fire was that we showed growth—and that is over the top,” Amis said. “Michelle John could say, ‘Even though this horrible thing happened to everyone, the kids continued to learn.’”

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

Looking Forward

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.

Hall moved on from Cedarwood at the end of the 2018–2019 school year. The drop in student numbers made her nervous about teacher layoffs, and her long commute was wearing on her spirit. She still keeps a picture of her first Cedarwood class on the bulletin board in her home office.

In June 2019, John’s husband, Phil John, died in a biking accident. Without “Mr. Paradise,” as she called Phil, her “forever home” felt empty and made her lonely for family. She retired in December 2019 and moved to Reno, Nevada, to be closer to her grandchildren and mother.

Taylor is now the PUSD superintendent and has the weighty responsibility of leading his district through a new crisis: a global pandemic.

Not long into the second half of the 2019–2020 school year, COVID-19 forced districts across the United States to close schools and move to distance learning. In March 2020, the Department of Education granted all states, Puerto Rico, and the Bureau of Indian Education a waiver for the statewide assessment required by federal law. For the second year in a row, PUSD will not have state assessment data for their students.

Like districts across the country, PUSD is trying to plan for the 2020–2021 school year despite not knowing whether kids will be back in classrooms, whether they’ll continue learning from home, or a combination of the two. Taylor, however, does know that “. . . when we begin next year, we’re definitely going to start with *i-Ready* assessments.”

When asked if she had any advice to give education leaders as they navigate the pandemic crisis, John 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. This is an opportunity for us to really look at our education system and what we’ve been doing for 200 years,” she said. “I do believe education is going to look different going forward, and I don’t necessarily think that is a bad thing.”

“ [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





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