

Claremont Unified School District Board of Education
League of Women Voters of Mt. Baldy Area
Observed Report by Judith Tanenbaum
August 2019 to May 2020

As copied from the district website, “As the policy-making body for the school district, the Board is charged with providing the best possible education for the children of the Claremont Unified School District.”

The school year started with the following Board members, with term expiration dates in parentheses:

Dr. Beth Bingham (11/2020), Hilary LaConte (11/2020), Steven Llanusa (11/2022), David S. Nemer (11/2022), and Nancy Treser Osgood (11/2022). Each member had a minimum of six years of experience on the Board. The roles on the Board changed after the annual organizational meeting in December. Due to the resignation of Dr. Bingham, effective March 6, 2020, the roles changed again, and then for a third time due to the pandemic. Currently Mr. Nemer is President, Ms Treser Osgood is Vice President, and Mr. Llanusa is Clerk of the Board. There was to be an in-person public interview process to fill the vacancy left by Dr. Bingham but due to social distancing it was held by phone in a format available to the public. There were ten candidates and former Board member Mary Caenepeel (11/2020) was unanimously chosen to fill the vacancy.

The top administrative positions at CUSD have not changed in the past year. Superintendent Dr. James Elsasser has been serving Claremont for almost eight years. Dr. Julie Olesniewicz is the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, Lisa Shoemaker continues to head up Business Services, Kevin Ward leads the Human Services Department, and Brad Cuff, the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services completes the cabinet.

Student Board members have been given the opportunity for an advisory vote and occasionally they comment on an issue. Each meeting has been run efficiently and the members of the Board treat each other with respect, even when they disagree. It appears that they come to each meeting having read the material and have been in touch with staff so everyone is prepared.

Meetings are held the first and third Thursday of each month with exceptions being posted. The assistant to the superintendent sends me a reminder of each meeting and a link to the agenda. I missed one meeting and was able to find a substitute observer.

In the past the Board would announce whether discussion was held on an item in closed session. At the beginning of the calendar year announcements were changed to say whether reportable action was taken in closed session. Issues related to a suit brought by Riley’s American Heritage Farms and the sale of the La Puerta property have been on the closed-

session agenda, but it is not known whether discussion was held. No reportable action was taken.

Positive news included updates on projects funded by Measure G, introduction of a Dual Language Immersion Program at Mountain View Elementary School, and introduction of the IB Middle Years Program. The District received clean audits, which was also good news, although not surprising.

In October Governor Brown approved SB 328, which mandates school start times for secondary schools beginning July 1, 2022. Whether this is positive or negative news depend on one's perspective.

Before the Thanksgiving break the District was hit by a ransomware attack. The ransom was not paid and District technical support services worked to make the District functional while services were restored. Many tasks were done on paper or using separate networks and everything was back on track in less than three months and no personal data were known to have been leaked.

A budget report was given on March 19, less than one week after schools were closed due to the pandemic. The prognosis was one of concern. Enrollment was down, CUSD received less supplemental funding, and higher costs of California State Teachers' Retirement System (CalSTRS, for certificated employees) and California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS, for classified employees). The District was expecting to have deficit spending the next two years. Governor Newsom gave a May update of the California budget and the District is now in a different position. At the time this report was written it was clear that there were too many unknown variables to predict precise changes, but it does not seem positive.

Decisions regarding the closing of schools were announced by the Superintendent's Office on behalf of the Board of Education. State and Los Angeles County guidelines were adhered to while trying to balance the safety of the community and the education of the students

The public is encouraged to speak and is treated respectfully, but there were some challenges when the format of the meeting was changed to support social distancing due to the pandemic. Each meeting has become easier to hear, more inclusive, and the process to allow public comment has become more clear. Before shelter-in-place orders there were public comments regarding bullying, mental health, and public access to meetings. Attendance at audio-only meetings has been higher than in-person meetings. Comments have mostly been related to mental health and grading issues.

The Board is following good government standards. It operates transparently, welcomes public input, and members appear well prepared. When constituents speak up there is often follow-up from a staff member. If mistakes are made there is sincere corrective action taken.

I have enjoyed being of service to the League of Women Voters by observing the CUSD Board of Education. I hope to be able to continue in this role for the 2020-21 school year. Thank you for allowing me to be of service.

Respectfully submitted,
Judith Tanenbaum