



## Has Fresno Unified Finally Planted the Flag for an Academic Revolution?

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Simplicity is in at Fresno Unified. The 20-plus initiatives of the past to help struggling students have been replaced with four goals.

Meanwhile, expectations are way up for students, teachers, and administrators.

And, these goals and expectations must be embraced by the district's new superintendent — whether that is Interim Superintendent Misty Her or someone else emerging from a national search.

“We have to be great at a few things. And I think what the board has allowed us to do for the first time in Fresno Unified is to go from very big to now, very narrow,” said Her.

These initial seeds of what could become an academic renaissance for the long-struggling district were developed at community listening sessions in December. Trustees and the interim superintendent's team refined those ideas, which were approved at a recent School Board meeting.

Under a two-year, \$100,000 contract, the School Board receives guidance from [The Council of Great City Schools](#), a group that strives to improve student outcomes at 78 of the nation's largest urban public school systems.

Recognizing a problem is the first step to solving a problem, and Her — unlike retired Superintendent Bob Nelson — is confronting the challenges head-on.

“I will be the first to say that our academic gains have been minimal. Actually, dismal to say the least,” Her told the board on Jan. 22.

At that meeting, the trustees adopted the district’s four goals for student achievement and the so-called “guardrails” to address community concerns and aid in realizing the goals. These are focused on community engagement, equitable access, effective staff, and the health and wellness of students and staff.

## **The Goals**

So, what are the goals?

Three have been nailed down and the fourth awaits a benchmark.

— 1st-graders proficient in literacy will increase from 48% in June 2024 to 80% by June 2030.

— Students graduating from high school college and career-ready will rise from 43% in June 2024 to 64% by June 2030.

— 3rd- through 8th-grade students more than one year behind in English Language Arts and who make more than one year’s growth will increase from 10% in June 2024 to 50% by June 2030.

— The district will track 6th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students for Portrait of a Learner competencies with a percentage goal set soon for June 2030.

Portrait of a Learner refers to traits and skills the district and parents want to see developed during a student’s educational journey. Examples include critical thinking, problem-solving, self-control, and conflict resolution. Many school districts are developing or have put in place Portrait of a Learner goals.

The goals set standards for academic achievement and provide the next superintendent with a clear vision of what the district wants to accomplish, said Trustee Susan Wittrup.

Said Wittrup: “This was a huge historical step for our district.”

After the meeting, School Board President Valerie Davis told GV Wire, “This is the first time we’ve done this type of work for our board and our community. We have to start from somewhere.”

The Fresno Teachers Association appears far less enthusiastic about the adopted goals than district leadership.

“While setting goals is great, it’s clear they’re missing the bigger picture: nothing will change unless they’re willing to shift the district’s culture. That means truly listening to educators, valuing all staff members, addressing the culture of fear/retribution, providing real support, and making decisions that reflect what’s actually happening in our classrooms and school sites,” teachers union president Manuel Bonilla said in a text to GV Wire reporter Nancy Price.

### **A Plan for Every Child**

While the goals are few and straightforward, the road to achieving them will bring big changes to some classrooms.

Her said success will rest with assessing the learning gaps in struggling students and creating unique, individual plans. She noted that each student has a different way of processing information.

“It’s actually what I lived by as a teacher: How do you get to every child by name by need?” she said.

Davis is excited about the road ahead.

“We’re working toward the stretch growth... They won’t make it the first time, but we’ll work on it and then we can fine-tune and focus clearly on what the objectives need to be, what skills the kids are lacking, and make it more prescriptive for every child,” she said.

### **Trustees Demand Increased Accountability**

District leaders recognize that some teachers might struggle with this change in classroom approach. “It is really about how do we build our people so that they can get really good at exactly what I’m talking about. And if they don’t, then you know what? Maybe they don’t belong in our system,” Her told GV Wire in a follow-up interview last week.

The School Board also appears bent on demanding accountability in a district where struggling principals and other administrators often have remained in the district or even received promotions.

One of the guardrails adopted by trustees states that there will be no hiring, promoting, or lateral movement of staff whose performance “does not meet standards.”