

SD Unified Board President's Fact Check

Comments by San Diego Unified Board President John Lee Evans

February 7, 2013

Recent comments by San Diego Unified's new CFO have sparked a lot of controversy. The Superintendent issued a statement debunking what the CFO said. It is unfortunate that falsehoods were not pointed out in the original article.

We all need to pay close attention to what is happening in our public schools. As President of the Board of Education I know that it is important to be open and frank, as well as accurate in my statements. I realize that anything that I say can be fact-checked. For example, the media recently investigated my assertion that the schools in Mira Mesa are outstanding and they found that to be true. A couple of years ago I decried the dismal academic performance in math at Lincoln High School. That turned out to be true, too.

We have continued to make academic progress at San Diego Unified and we have balanced the budget every year and maintained a good credit rating. While the overall district academic performance is improving, a good fact checker will note that we have pockets of success and pockets of failure that we need to address.

As a board member who came onto the Board with idealistic goals, there is a point at which we have to be realistic. Our realistic goal for the 2013-14 school year is simply to achieve stability in our schools. The traditional method to balance the budget is for school districts to issue mass teacher layoff notices. This leads to great instability for our students, especially in our high poverty schools that can lose most of their teachers. We have chosen the alternative of a strategic attrition model to reduce the staff.

We need to make our decisions based on facts. Here is my own fact check on just a few of the myths surrounding San Diego Unified:

San Diego Unified has hundreds of employees that it does not need.

False. There is a difference between having more employees than you need vs. more than you can afford. We need all of the teachers and support staff that we have. We actually need more counselors and nurses and librarians and teachers, but we cannot afford them. That is the reason that we have continuously reduced our staff over the last few years. We intend to eliminate another 300-400 over the next year, not because we don't need them, but because the Prop 30 money will not come in fast enough to save those positions.

Class size does not matter.

False. This is an assertion to justify a budget solution. Ask any parent if they are okay with having over 40 kids in a high school chemistry class or over 30 in a first grade class. There are some studies that support smaller class size, but we need to look no further than San Diego classrooms. We have

reluctantly raised class size, because we have been achieving improvement with smaller classes, particularly in high poverty neighborhoods.

The District is in trouble due to excessive teacher compensation.

False. Several years ago a joint labor-management task force determined that San Diego Unified needed to be more competitive with other districts to attract the best teachers. We were working on making our salaries more competitive when the financial crisis hit and we have repeatedly delayed those adjustments. Our teachers have made salary concessions (besides weathering layoff notices) and should not be slammed for the years of underfunding of public education in California.

San Diego Unified has shied away from the difficult decisions to make the deep cuts needed to save our district.

False. In the past four years, we first eliminated outside contracts and consultants, then made cuts in administration and, finally, had to make cuts in the classroom. Many valuable programs from off campus learning experiences to professionally staffed libraries have gone by the wayside. We have even had to reduce the number of teachers in the lower grades, which increases class size.

The buck stops at the school board and we have done what we have had to do to stay financially afloat, while still making progress in student achievement. The voters supported Prop 30, because they want a great public school system in California. But the increased revenue will come in gradually. As it does, we will scrutinize every new dollar to make sure that it goes to improve student achievement. At the same time we will build up a substantial rainy day fund for the next economic downturn.

We will only achieve this by working together at San Diego Unified. We will continue on our path to a world class school system for all of San Diego's children.