FSUSD impressed California Superintendent of Public Education, Tom Torlakson. The day started at the Public Safety Academy with morning formation. He enjoyed visiting the classrooms and observing problem-based learning. Mr. Torlakson also visited two special education preschool classes on the campus and asked many questions regarding early childhood intervention. At David A. Weir, No Excuses University was evident when viewing the Educreation video entitled, “Six Habits of College Bound 2nd Graders.” (Now posted on the UC Berkeley website!) He watched first graders using iPads and witnessed Common Core in action as a sixth grade student shared her learning in mathematics. (Kaileia shared her presentation with the Governing Board this past Thursday.) The visit concluded with an inspiring trip to Crystal Middle School. A mathematics class conducted a fishbowl activity in which students were able to share their thinking as they solved problems. Other classrooms highlighted the integration of technology and the 21st Century learning skills of collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and communication. The best compliments came from those who didn’t necessarily have to compliment us! Mr. Torlakson had some staffers who accompanied him. One said, “I’ve gone on many school district visits. This is a great district!” We just wish we could have taken him to every school!

Our district is in the process of revising our Local Educational Agency (LEA) Plan. The LEA Plan is the district foundation for improving student learning. The goal is to develop a plan that focuses on improving student achievement. FSUSD partnered with WestEd to collect and analyze data, conduct interviews, survey district and school level staff, and review classroom observation data. The “Four-Dimensional” District study is as follows: Dimension 1 details the needs of the district. Dimension 2 highlights assets of the district. Dimension 3 provides recommendations for improvement. Dimension 4 involves stakeholders in prioritizing the recommendations. The approach draws from research on characteristics of high-performing districts. There are two focus areas. One is on leadership and organizational systems, and the other focus area is on teaching and learning. In the section entitled, “Laying the Groundwork for Continued Success,” it is noted that FSUSD is committed to ongoing improvement. Stakeholders throughout the system see FSUSD’s diversity as an asset. FSUSD has a history of focusing on high quality training to support instruction. A group of forty stakeholders spent three hours reviewing WestEd’s report. We noted bright spots, assets, and recommendations. A team is now using this information to rewrite our LEA Plan. This plan will come to the Governing Board for approval in April. We will be highlighting various sections of the report on our website. One strong recommendation is to revisit and perhaps revise our vision and mission. This is important work that will assist our large organization in aligning policy and practices to the vision and mission of our district.
Chronic Absenteeism

I had a conversation with Chief Tibbet in which he stated, “The best predictor of incarceration is student attendance in grades K-3.” Ever since then, I have been obsessed with chronic absenteeism. This is defined as a student who has missed 10% or more of their school year. I did some research and discovered the following:

-Data from Rhode Island and New York City, among other locales, show that at least three-fourths of the students who become involved with the juvenile justice system have histories of chronic absenteeism (www.ridatahub.org).

-Chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade. The impact is two times greater for students from low-income families. Children from low-income families who were also chronically absent in kindergarten had the lowest levels of achievement in fifth grade (Chang and Romero 2008).

-Compared to children with average attendance, chronically absent students gained 14 percent fewer literacy skills in kindergarten, and 15 percent fewer literacy skills and 12 percent fewer mathematics skills in first grade, based on analysis of a nationally representative data set (Ready 2010)

A study in Baltimore finds a strong relationship between sixth-grade attendance and the percent of students graduating within one year of expected on-time graduation. Approximately 70 percent of the students missing 0 to 10 days graduated; 51 percent of students missing more than 10, but fewer than 20, days graduated; 36 percent of students missing 20 to 39 days, and just 13 percent of students missing 40 or more days graduated (BERC, 2011).

-The Georgia State Department of Education found there was as much as a 50 percentage-point difference in the graduation rates of students who missed 0 to 5 days of school compared to those who were absent 15 or more days (Barge 2011).

In FSUSD, we currently have over 2500 chronically absent students. The grade level with most absenteeism? KINDER!

CONGRATULATIONS 2013-14 TEACHERS OF THE YEAR!

FSUSD is blessed with quality teachers. The following teachers were chosen by their peers and honored at the February 27 meeting of the Governing Board: Kathy Wiegand, Joseph Summers, Carla Co, Art Sullivan, Larissa Sherrod, Dale Horton, Diane Wilson, Jennifer Johnson, Carol Walton, Michelle Labelle-Fisch, Jaci Farmer, Tamera Gediulas, Ann Lean, Marcia Hanson, Pamela Williamson, Karen Firkins, Brandon Weyandt, Christine Sovitsky, Katherine Kerner, Jamie VanWart, and Nancy Dunn. These teachers received a framed certificate and a rose as they were congratulated by FSUTA president Laurel Salerno-White before shaking hands with me and the Governing Board members. Michelle Labelle-Fisch was named as the district teacher of the year and will represent FSUSD at the county level. Michelle stated that she began her education in FSUSD at age 10 as a student. She told stories of the exceptional education she received and how pleased she is that Common Core allows for more hands-on learning and creativity. Michelle currently teaches in the GATE magnet program at KI Jones Elementary. She willingly took on a pilot program for student programming and coding. She is learning with students who will eventually assist in the development of an FSUSD App.

RECRUITING FOR 2014-2015

Our Human Resources Department is extremely busy recruiting quality candidates to join the FSUSD team for the 2014-15 school year. Our Governing Board approved moving forward with class size reduction for next year, which will add approximately 23 new elementary teachers. We also are in need of science teachers, math teachers, special education teachers, bus drivers, para-educators, computer networking technicians, and career technicians. You can follow us on Twitter@FSUSDHR. We are sending teams of educators to recruitment fairs in Fresno, Sacramento, Sonoma, Chico, Dublin, Michigan, Utah, Long Beach, Fullerton, San Marcos, and San Diego. Oftentimes, the best recruiters are current employees! If you know someone who you believe would make an excellent employee, please direct him/her to our Edjoin postings. All job descriptions and positions are listed on our website. We are also in need of substitutes for teaching positions as well as custodians, food service workers, para-educators, noon duty supervisors, and crossing guards. Send inquiries to Debbiep@fsusd.org or annabelleg@fsusd.org.
FSUSD is known for providing quality professional development (PD). We are getting beat up a bit in the press regarding this issue. I did read a post that stated, “They went to college already, if they need to further their education they should go back to school and pay like the rest of us.” I would have to respectfully disagree with this opinion. Everyone needs ongoing professional development and training to grow and improve in their craft. Continuing education is important in every profession, whether one is a medical doctor, attorney, hairdresser, car mechanic, or cashier.

According to Education Week, “effective professional development is often seen as vital to school success and teacher satisfaction, but it has also been criticized for its cost...with schools today facing an array of complex challenges—from working with an increasing diverse population of students, to integrating new technology in the classroom, to meeting rigorous academic standards and goals—observers continue to stress the need for teachers to be able to enhance and build on their instructional knowledge.”

We strongly believe that our great gains over the past few years are due to the increase in quality professional development. One of the reasons people like to work in this district is due to the fact that we offer such a wide array of professional development. Our survey results indicate a need to strengthen and improve the amount of PD for our classified staff. Our Professional Learning Commons (PLC) located on the second floor of the Central Office now regularly offers training in technology and use of Google Docs and Google Drive.

We do have a travel and conference budget in our district. The amount of this budget represents approximately .4 of our entire district budget. It is also important to note that often the out-of-state travel requests are less expensive than some in-state travel.

FSUSD is proud to support our quality educators and staff members with opportunities to continue to enhance and build their knowledge and skills.

Retirees and Substitute Teaching

Sometimes it seems things just don’t make sense. How is it that someone could work in our district for twenty plus years and then be required to apply to become a substitute teacher? We have heard this question and concern from a number of people. Human Resources is working on a way to streamline a process for retirees wishing to substitute in our district after their six month “waiting period” as required by STRS.

We do, unfortunately, have some legal obligations. Once an employee separates from service, they are no longer considered as employees of the district. Therefore, if they are to enter back into the district as a substitute, they must be fingerprinted in the same way as any other “new” employee. This is a legal requirement and not a FSUSD rule. We recognize and value our retirees. Having someone who knows our system and is willing to substitute is a bonus!

Where are the Common Core Textbooks?

Many people have been asking, “Where can I find Common Core resources?” As we continue our transition, it is important to note that Common Core is asking us to shift our choice of instructional strategies, not really the material we use. You might consider implementing strategies with close reading with your current textbook, basal reader, or anthology. If you want to try outside resources, you can find resources listed on the Common Core Literacy portion of following website helpful: http://www.fsusd.org/Page/8276

Currently there are no published Common Core texts. Many publishers are saying they have Common Core materials and are using the same information with an updated “Common Core” cover. Everyone is anxiously awaiting a digital resource that will assist in teaching the Common Core. In the meantime, please utilize our own in-house experts. We have Curriculum and Instruction Specialist (CAIS) teachers who are willing to provide PD or model lessons for you. Email Cara Mendoza (caram@fsusd.org) to schedule!