



February 20, 2026

Dear PAUSD Community,

This morning, effective immediately, the Board of Education took action to reach a mutual separation with Superintendent Don Austin. I know this news may come as a surprise, and I want to be as transparent and direct with you as I can be.

After thoughtful conversation, the Board and Dr. Austin reached a mutual agreement to conclude his service to the District. This is not a retirement or a termination. Rather, it is a decision made jointly, one that allows the District to enter its next chapter under new leadership while honoring eight years of meaningful work. Dr. Austin will continue to serve as Superintendent Emeritus through June 30th, advising the District throughout this transition, which I hope offers some continuity as we move forward.

Dr. Austin's tenure is the longest of any superintendent in the Palo Alto Unified School District since 1975, and it's been defined by some of the most consequential moments in recent public education history. He and the Board navigated COVID together, returning our most vulnerable students first and then our youngest learners, leading the region in reopening efforts and hosting Governor Gavin Newsom in recognition of that work. With the Board's support, he prioritized early literacy when many districts directed relief funds elsewhere, dramatically closing the elementary reading achievement gap. PAUSD was among the first districts in the state to universally screen for dyslexia—work the Board championed alongside Dr. Austin that later became state law.

Together, Dr. Austin and the Board established the PAUSD Promise, strengthened leadership retention, and built a culture of promoting from within through initiatives like the Aspiring Leaders Institute. We were proud to support the opening of Palo Alto Middle College High School, to approve the reconstruction of Hoover Elementary into one of the greenest school facilities in California, to expand mental health supports so that every school has a therapist and every secondary campus has a wellness center, and to broker the Cubberley agreement for the long-term benefit of our community. As President of CalSupts, Dr. Austin will continue to mentor superintendents across the state, and his impact on this District will outlast his tenure here.



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On behalf of the Board, I want to thank Dr. Austin for his service, and I know he would want to thank all of you—the educators, counselors, administrators, and staff whose daily work made everything above possible, and the families whose trust and partnership made it meaningful.

The Board will meet on Monday to discuss the appointment of an Acting Superintendent and to begin the search for permanent new leadership. In the meantime, please direct questions to the District office or to the Board at board@pausd.org.

I also want to add a personal word. I know it's unusual to have the President of the Board write directly to our entire community, but I've served on this Board long enough to know that decisions like this one ripple beyond the boardroom to every room in town. Changing leadership is not easy, and I can promise you this decision was not made lightly. I am grateful to have had the privilege of serving alongside Dr. Austin for nearly two terms, and I understand the gravity of this moment—and how much his presence will be missed.

PAUSD has navigated difficult moments before, and we've done it because the people in this community are exceptional. Here is my commitment to you: we will move with both urgency and care. We will not rush this decision simply to fill a vacancy, but we will not drag our feet when you and our students need clarity. I will do my best to keep you informed as things develop.

I'm reachable through the Board at board@pausd.org or sdharap@pausd.org, and I read those messages personally, even when I can't respond to all of them.

Thank you for your continued trust in our schools and in each other.

Sincerely,

Shounak Dharap

President, Board of Education