



Lisa Ashworth, Realtor at Pacific Union International, reading to students at Longfellow Elementary as part of Realtors Read Across PASadena on Dr. Seuss Read Across America Day. / Photo Credit: James O'Keeffe

## Changing the Perception of Pasadena Unified School District Through an Innovative Realtor Outreach Program

By Jennifer Miyake-Trapp, Ed.D

Not so long ago, Sandy Roffman worked with a local realtor to purchase a home for her young family in Pasadena, California. While the realtor praised Pasadena's neighborhoods and many amenities, she cautioned her clients about enrolling their children in the local public schools, sharing tales of dismal school conditions and poor performance. Fortunately, Ms. Roffman had her own set of personal experiences to counter the realtor's negative perceptions. As PTA President of Jackson STEM Dual Language Magnet Academy, an elementary school in the Pasadena Unified School District, Ms. Roffman was intimately aware of the transformative educational opportunities offered to students. "It's a shame," reflected Ms. Roffman, "that the reputation of an entire school district can become so damaged by voices who have no clue what's happening within it."

For years this negative view held by many local realtors remained largely unchallenged and effectively discouraged new residents from considering Pasadena Unified School District as a viable option for their children's education.

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*April 2018*

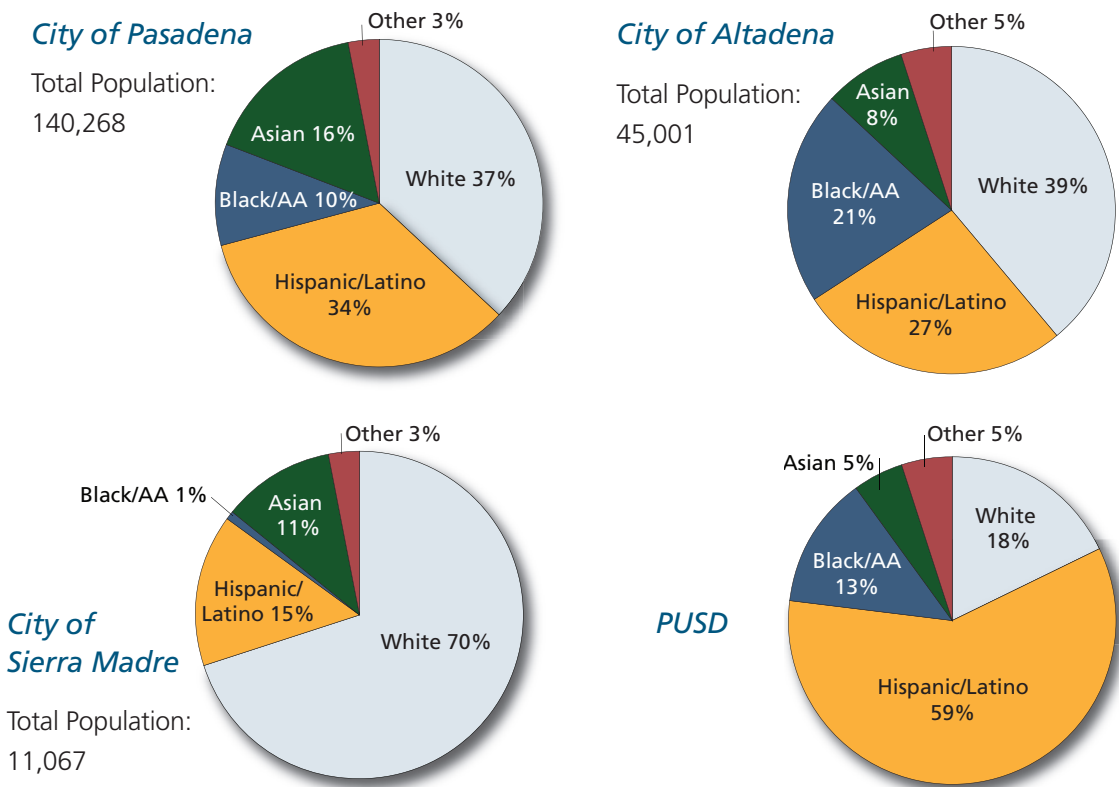
Thanks to an innovative realtor outreach program sponsored by the Pasadena Educational Foundation, however, the perception of PUSD is changing for the better—one realtor at a time.

## EMERGING FROM A COMPLICATED PAST

Pasadena Unified School District has a complex history and relationship to the communities it serves. Years of community strife caused by

court-ordered busing to desegregate schools in the 1970s, the ensuing flight to private schools and neighboring districts, and the subsequent loss of resources and funding have significantly impacted PUSD. Perceptions of poor student performance, budget deficits and school consolidations combined with rising home prices and intense competition from over 50 private and charter schools located within PUSD boundaries have resulted in declining enrollment across district schools. Even today, as the district has stabilized,

### 2016 Estimated Population by Ethnicity of Cities Served by PUSD



### 2016 K-12 School Age Student Data

	Pasadena	Altadena	Sierra Madre	PUSD
Number of K-12 Age Students	18,017	6,918	1,657	Number of Students Enrolled in Charter Schools in PUSD Boundaries: 1,345
K-12 Students Enrolled in Private School (not including charters)	24%	32%	31%	



PUSD families attending Hamilton Elementary School / Photo Credit: Pasadena Educational Foundation

PUSD is only capturing approximately 55% of the school age population residing within its boundaries. The result is a student population that does not reflect the communities it serves.

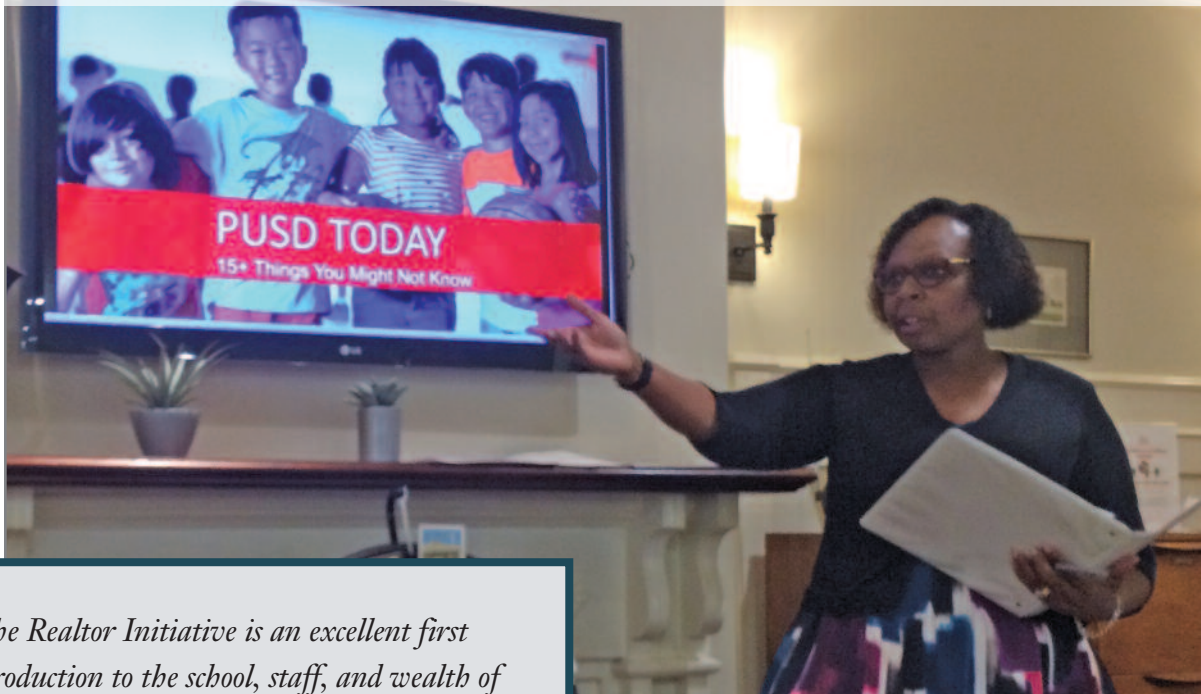
PUSD has embarked on an aggressive campaign to strengthen its schools and attract students back to the district. A variety of district-wide and school-based initiatives have proven successful in improving student outcomes and increasing enrollment. Dual language immersion programs in Spanish, Mandarin, and French have drawn families from inside and out of the district. Magnet programs provide students opportunities in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and visual and performing arts. The K-12 International Baccalaureate pathway engages students in rigorous global learning. Meanwhile, the high schools offer College and Career Academies in Creative Industries; Engineering and Environmental Science; Health Careers; Business and Entrepreneurship; Arts, Media and Entertainment; App Development; Law and Public Service; and Creative Arts, Media, and Design. Students

*“Pasadena Unified’s signature programs offer unique courses and learning experiences centered around an educational theme, such as arts or dual language, which is of high interest to students and families. These programs integrate their unique themes throughout the academic program and the school environment for rich, meaningful learning experiences that prepare graduates who are critical and creative thinkers and effective communicators. Schools also partner with business professionals, cultural institutions, local colleges, and community organizations in the field to provide hands-on experiences that boost achievement and engagement while preparing students for college and careers.”*

— Shannon Mumolo, PUSD Coordinator of Signature Programs

can enroll in college courses while in high school through a partnership with Pasadena City College. All PUSD schools and students benefit from generous partnerships with numerous local organizations as diverse as NASA's Jet Propulsion

Felita Kealing, Pasadena Educational Foundation Board Member, giving a presentation at Podley Properties Real Estate / Photo Credit: Pasadena Educational Foundation



*“The Realtor Initiative is an excellent first introduction to the school, staff, and wealth of quality academics offered in PUSD schools. This is a way for realtors and their clients to see beyond a rating or report card, and to consider quality public schools - that are tuition free. It’s a way to personally experience the great things happening at our schools: kids excited about learning, teachers actively engaging kids in advanced academics - all in facilities designed to ignite learning.”*

— Dr. Brian McDonald, PUSD Superintendent

Laboratory, the California Institute of Technology, the Huntington Library, the Armory Center for the Arts, and the Pasadena Conservatory of Music.

Sharing these innovative programs and partnerships with current and future families is imperative for PUSD to compete with other schooling options, increase enrollment, and integrate its schools to reflect local communities. In collaboration with the Pasadena Education Network (PEN) and the Pasadena Educational Foundation (PEF),

PUSD has participated in ongoing outreach efforts to rewrite an outdated narrative of its schools and students. One such endeavor is the PEF-led Realtor Initiative.

## **A CALL TO ACTION: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE**

A quick Zillow or Trulia search, the first step taken by many realtors and potential homeowners alike, offers a numerical evaluation of schools in a targeted neighborhood. Based primarily on outdated standardized test scores, these 1-10 rankings provided by GreatSchools present a biased first and often last impression of schools. In the case of Pasadena Unified, the numbers are daunting: ten elementary schools and five secondary schools received 1-4 rankings with “Very concerning” and “A worrisome sign” descriptors; four schools received 5-6 rankings; and only seven schools received 7-8 rankings. No PUSD schools received top 9-10 rankings. This is in stark contrast to neighboring districts with many schools boasting top scores. These controversial rankings have

## 2016 Selected Income and Housing Data of Cities Served by PUSD

	<i>Pasadena</i>	<i>Altadena</i>	<i>Sierra Madre</i>	<i>PUSD</i>
Median Family Income	\$90,003	\$97,204	\$117,404	Percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch: 60%
Percent of Population Living Below Poverty Level	15.8%	10.8%	5.8%	
Median Home Value	\$649,800	\$621,400	\$861,200	

reinforced negative perceptions of PUSD schools, contributing to further housing and school segregation.

Dawn O’Keeffe, a member of the Pasadena Educational Foundation’s Board of Directors and parent of four PUSD alumni, recognized a critical gap in the district’s, PEN’s and PEF’s outreach efforts: the real estate community. She immediately began brainstorming ways to partner with local realtors to challenge what she calls the “perception gap” between the good work happening in PUSD schools and the negative narrative perpetuated by many in the realtor community.

Seeking to investigate and better understand realtors’ perceptions of PUSD, Ms. O’Keeffe and fellow PEF Board members, George Brumder and Lorna Miller, interviewed 50 local realtors. Next, they assembled a comprehensive list of realtors’ “impressions” of PUSD schools and suggestions for countering the perception gap. Further analysis of interview data and community conversations culminated in the PEF Realtor Initiative Action Plan, a comprehensive document outlining the purpose and action steps of this innovative outreach program.

The Realtor Initiative has three stated goals:

1. To help realtors now and in the future see our public schools as they really are;
2. To equip realtors with current information about our schools; and

3. To encourage realtors to be active ambassadors for PEF, PEN, and especially, the PUSD.

To build a coalition of PUSD advocates, PEF Board Members met with leaders at nine area real estate companies. They asked owners to recommend one or two real estate agents to serve as their firms’ Realtor Initiative Liaisons. These Realtor Liaisons act as PUSD ambassadors and disseminate current information about the district to their colleagues. As office “influencers,” Realtor Liaisons facilitate communication, strengthen district partnerships, and develop programs to engage the realtor community directly in PUSD schools.

Through regular Realtor Liaison meetings, PEF and PUSD representatives have an opportunity to participate in meaningful dialogue about local schools, sharing current developments and providing realtors with the opportunity to ask questions. The creation of the “Realtor Connect” newsletter was an early success. A monthly email to realtors, “Realtor Connect” includes current stories about PUSD schools and students, links to school profiles and school tour schedules — critical information that realtors can pass directly to their clients.





James O'Keeffe, Director/Cinematographer; Dawn O'Keeffe, Pasadena Educational Foundation Board Member; Del Lile, Realtor at Coldwell Banker attending Lecture & Tour of The Architecture of Pasadena's Historic Public Schools / Photo Credit: Pasadena Educational Foundation

Another signature event in the Realtor Initiative is Realtors Read Across PASadena held in conjunction with the national Dr. Seuss Read Across America celebration. Realtors are invited to read in classrooms at all PUSD elementary schools and learn more about the district. This provides the realtor community with an opportunity to visit campuses and make personal connections with students and teachers, a necessary step in changing perceptions. Participation in this event inspired realtors to sponsor a 2nd Grade Summer Book Drive, an annual distribution of new books to promote summer literacy development.

PEF Board members have also been invited to present "15 Things You Need to Know about PUSD" at realty agency meetings. These presentations seek to inform realtors about PUSD offerings and Signature Programs. After listening to a PEF presentation, Robb Buzzini, a new agent at Podley Properties – Pasadena, commented, "when clients with children are looking for a home, being able to speak in detail about not only what a school district, but specific schools in the area offer is

incredibly valuable. When you can tell a buying client that a school in this area features a dual immersion language program, or that a school was recently renovated, or explain the process of open enrollment, you are providing information that will be critical when they need to make decisions about their children's education." Being equipped with current information about local schools has been a value-added for realtors and some have taken the initiative to tour schools on behalf of their clients.

Lunch with the Superintendent has become a popular occasion for realtors interested in networking closely with district administrators. PUSD Superintendent, Brian McDonald, has welcomed realtors to engage in robust conversation about schools over lunch, strengthening relationships with the realtor community. Dr. McDonald enthusiastically supports the Realtor Initiative, acknowledging that, "the quality of local schools is one of the biggest factors in deciding where to buy or lease a home, and realtors are crucial partners because they introduce new



Realtors, civic leaders, school staff and students participating in Realtors Read Across PASadena on Dr. Seuss Read Across America Day at Don Benito Fundamental School. / Photo Credit: Pasadena Educational Foundation

residents and families to area schools. It's important to ensure that realtors are equipped with facts and personal knowledge of Pasadena Unified schools."

During a Wine & Cheese event hosted by PEF, realtors learned how to navigate the PUSD website and locate school profiles to share with clients. Many realtors also participated in a Pasadena Heritage lecture entitled, "The Architectural Treasures of Pasadena Public Schools," exploring the design and architectural significance of PUSD schools. The Realtor Initiative continues to grow and evolve.

## **THE FUTURE OF THE REALTOR INITIATIVE**

Initial results of the Realtor Initiative are promising. Realtors are engaging with schools as community partners. Adopt-a-School partnerships have

organically developed between schools and individual realtors who pledge to donate a portion of their commission to partner schools. Realtors are volunteering as reading tutors in elementary schools and many will participate in PEF's annual Principal for a Day program which invites local civic and business leaders to all of PUSD's campuses. Realtor participation in these events is evidence of their growing investment in PUSD schools. The PEF Realtor Initiative is changing the narrative by equipping realtors with current and accurate information about PUSD, as well as tangible ways to directly support schools and students, thereby helping to promote vibrant and diverse public schools.

## **APPENDIX**

More information about the PEF Realtor Initiative can be found at [www.pasedfoundation.org](http://www.pasedfoundation.org).



Home for sale in Pasadena, CA / Photo Credit: Jason Trapp

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### *About the Author*

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### *About PRRAC*

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The Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) is a civil rights law and policy organization based in Washington, D.C. PRRAC's mission is to promote innovative, research-based advocacy strategies to address structural inequality. Our current work focuses on the areas of housing, education, and environmental justice, with a focus on developing actionable policies to overcome the mechanisms that continue to reproduce historical patterns of racial segregation.

PRRAC is a founding member of the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD) and helps to staff the coalition's organizing, advocacy, and outreach.

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### *About This Series*

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This brief is part of a series that explores connections between housing and school policy, made as a contribution to the National Coalition on School Diversity. To share a story from the field about housing and schools intersections, please email Philip Tegeler at [ptegeler@prrac.org](mailto:ptegeler@prrac.org).