BE A BRIDGE, NOT A WALL

The Advocate

CUCPTSA ADVOCACY BULLETIN

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2026 FEDERAL • STATE • LOCAL

October: Advocacy in Action

District facilities, classroom technology, family engagement and complete responses from six CUSD school board candidates.

THE LOCAL DESK

What is changing in CUSD?

Shade structures, capital planning, extreme-heat protocols and ParentSquare are among the district updates reported at the October advocacy meeting.

Technology & learning

CUSD is seeking family input on classroom technology and screen time. Reading workshops and non-sports activities offer additional opportunities for engagement.

ELECTION SEASON

Six candidates. The same questions.

All six candidates for the CUSD Board of Trustees were invited to respond to the same questionnaire, and all six responses are included. Candidate answers appear in a dedicated, nonpartisan section of this issue.

Publication note

All answers appear as submitted through the candidate questionnaire. No corrections, shortening or paraphrasing have been applied.

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STATE DESK / LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

SB 1048 (Becker) — State Seal of Climate Literacy. California State PTA co-sponsored the measure, which is now law. ***Thank you to everyone who sent letters and messages in support. Advocacy works.***

PTA is nonpartisan and does not endorse candidates. Candidate responses in this publication are provided for voter information, not as a recommendation or endorsement.

What families should know

From shade projects to districtwide messaging, facilities and communications updates have implications for school communities.

Shade structures and site improvements

- Projects need Division of the State Architect (DSA) approval. Architectural and site plans may bring additional accessibility and soil requirements.
- A $30,000 vendor estimate can increase beyond $100,000 once required improvements are included.
- Approved projects proceed to bidding; construction can take 18 months or longer.
- EZ-Ups and temporary shade structures should not be used on campus. PTAs may replace existing fabric shade sails.
- Complete a district site improvement request before making any project commitment.

Division of the State Architect

CUSD site improvement request process

Capital planning and bond funding

- Major site improvements frequently depend on funding from local bond measures or other sources.
- CUSD's previous local bond measures have been unsuccessful. A future measure *could* be considered in 2028.
- Public education about school facilities can address earthquake safety, campus security, student safety and 21st-century classrooms.

California State PTA: school bond guidance

Extreme heat protocols

- CUSD shared heat protocols with families and staff. Outdoor activities, schedules and events may change during extreme heat to support safety.

District extreme-heat communication

One districtwide platform: ParentSquare

- CUSD plans to replace TalkingPoints and SchoolMessenger with ParentSquare.
- Pilot schools will participate through March 2027; staff access is anticipated by April.
- Districtwide implementation is planned for the start of the 2027–28 school year.

ParentSquare

THE LOCAL DESK / CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITY

Opportunities to participate

Technology and screen time

- At the August 13, 2026, meeting, Trustees adopted Resolution 2627-01, Purposeful, Balanced, and Responsible Use of Technology in Support of Student Success.
- Fall 2026 outreach includes research, focus groups, public forums and surveys involving families, students, teachers, administrators and community members.
- The district plans revisions to classroom technology and screen-time policies and practices in Spring 2027.
- A parent survey is expected in October. PTA representatives can gather feedback for fall meetings with Superintendent Brown.

Reading by third grade

- CUSD's goal is for every student to be a successful reader by third grade.
- Family literacy workshops will provide ways to support reading at home.
    - Participating families will receive **free books.**
- **December 2** — Las Flores K–8.

Watch for additional dates and locations.

Coffee with Chris

- Morning meetings 8:15–9:15 a.m.

Nov. 6 — Hidden Hills;

Jan. 8 — Don Juan Avila;

Feb. 5 — San Juan;

Mar. 12 — Kinoshita;

Apr. 16 — Bathgate.

- Evening forums 6–7 p.m.

Jan. 13 — Niguel Hills;

Apr. 14 — Newhart.

- **Parents and guardians may attend a meeting at any location.**

CUSD Cares and wellness

- CUSD Cares (Connections, Community, Celebration) is expanding non-sports activities for TK–8 students at district schools.
- A Science (STEM) Fair is planned at Saddleback College in Spring 2027.
- Red Ribbon Week messaging focuses on healthy choices and age-appropriate prevention, including a discussion of fentanyl education in high school health classes.

THE CAPO A-TEAM

Advocacy goals. Clear action.

CUCPTSA adopted its 2026–28 advocacy goals to guide engagement and communicate priorities affecting children, families and schools.

Read the 2026–28 advocacy goals

Election season and PTA

- PTA is political in its issue advocacy but remains nonpartisan in candidate elections.
- PTA units and officers must not endorse candidates on behalf of PTA or imply endorsements by using their PTA titles.
- Official ballot-measure positions, nonpartisan voter education and issues affecting children are appropriate subjects for PTA communications.

Study committees and ongoing work

- Pesticides: further discussion and action are pending results of the environmental study.

CAPTA social media advocacy chart

CAPTA state ballot measure positions

ACTION ITEMS / ADVOCACY REPRESENTATIVES

Technology feedback: Share the October technology survey and encourage participation in Superintendent Brown's engagement meetings.

Puberty education: CUCPTSA offers two resources, or a unit may select another provider.

Ed100 Book Club: Invite interested members to register for a Zoom session. Register for a Zoom session

ELECTION 2026 / CUSD BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Meet the Candidates

Six candidates. Three Trustee Areas. Twelve identical questions.

All six candidates were invited to respond to the same 12 questions, with a 150-word limit per response. Candidates are listed by Trustee Area, then alphabetically by last name. CUCPTSA is nonpartisan and does not endorse or oppose candidates.

TRUSTEE AREA 4 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Melissa Caldwell

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

I am running for school board to bring the focus back to where it belongs: academic excellence, student achievement, and total transparency. It's time to remove politics from our classrooms and the boardroom so we can concentrate on meeting every student where they are and provide the exact resources they need to succeed. For the past 12 years, I have actively shown up for CUSD families, and I will continue to be a strong, reliable advocate for our community. As the Chief Operating Officer of a successful law firm for over 25 years, I bring deep professional expertise in fiscal responsibility, governance, and transparent management. I know how to ask the hard questions and I will bring essential perspective to the board. My commitment to service extends across my entire community - as the first female chair of the Laguna Niguel Military Support Committee.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

1. Ensuring all students have the resources they need for success
2. Fiscal transparency
3. Providing families and students with a voice so that they may be heard and seen
4. Continue to work with local leaders and sheriffs to improve safety at our school sites (e-bike education and safety)
5. Remove politics from the classroom and boardroom

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

I believe that students in our districts are thriving and continuing to improve after COVID. However, I do believe we can always improve - especially with our Special Needs and English as a Second Language community.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

To improve student's learning, I believe we need to meet all students where they are with the necessary resources to ensure graduation and future success after CUSD.

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

Declining enrollment is a real but so are aging communities. Families across the nation are having less children and/or having children later in life. With CUSD moving to basic aid funding, there will be hurdles to cross but I look forward to navigating the waters so that CUSD no longer relies on the state for funding but our own community property taxes. For several years, I have traveled to Sacramento to advocate for Raise the Base and will continue to advocate for student funding. Fiscal responsibility and a healthy reserve will be necessary in basic aid funding; however; with careful planning and instruction; CUSD will ultimately receive more money, per student, based on our community property taxes and will overall, allow for more money, per student, regardless of the declining enrollment. I look forward to the further training and understanding of basic aid funding.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

While AI offers powerful possibilities for education, its optimal place in the classroom is as a tool for enrichment rather than internal learning. Students should first master core concepts and build a solid foundation of understanding independently before integrating AI into their study habits. It should be used as a tool to enhance learning but not as a crutch to get around learning the material.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

I will ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed by listening to families and students, asking questions, ensuring students have the resources they need, and staying engaged in my community.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

CUSD has excellent teachers and staff that are committed to students and their families- I will ensure that teachers and staff are heard and seen and I will ask where support and/or training may be needed so we continue to provide excellence to our scholars.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

Politics have no place in the board room or the classroom. Seeking expert advice and discussions from legal experts and law enforcement are essential when making decisions regarding controversial issues; as well as hearing the voices of our families and students.

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

As CUSD Trustee for Area 4, I will be accessible to all families and students so that I may be able to hear their needs and give them a voice. I believe in an open door policy. I am extremely involved in my community and will be present at school events/sites and community gatherings to ensure that families and students concerns and needs are always heard and addressed. I believe every family and student should be seen.

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Every student that graduates from CUSD should have a foundation and understanding of academics, adapt to changing technology, possess foundational skills to problem solve, critically think, communicate and be an engaged citizen -post graduation.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

In four years from now, I will know that I have been a successful board member by serving all families and students in CUSD - not just area 4; as well as; being able to continue to advocate for future improvement and continued success for all students; while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

TRUSTEE AREA 4 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Marco Carralero

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

I'm running because I want every child in CUSD, including my two young daughters, to receive an excellent education in a safe school where parents are respected as partners. My priorities are academic achievement, parental involvement, and responsible use of taxpayer dollars.

My wife and I own and operate a microbiome health company, and my professional background includes business operations at Tesla and public-sector consulting at Accenture, working with state government agencies on federal grants management. Those experiences equip me to evaluate budgets, ask practical questions, and hold organizations accountable.

I have also participated twice in CUSD's Principal for a Day program. I would bring a parent's long-term commitment, a business owner's discipline, and a willingness to listen and learn.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

CUSD needs a sustained focus on academic fundamentals, safe and healthy campuses, and a financially sustainable future. Every student should receive strong instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking, with early help when they struggle and meaningful challenges when they excel.

We must also address declining enrollment through careful planning that protects students. That means reviewing spending, maintaining facilities, and understanding why families choose to enroll elsewhere.

Parents need clear information about their children's progress and a meaningful voice in decisions. Teachers need the time, materials, and support to teach effectively. My priority would be aligning the district's budget and policies with those everyday needs.

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

Many CUSD students achieve at high levels, but district accountability reports also identify achievement gaps affecting English learners, students with disabilities, and students facing economic hardship. Strong overall results should never obscure a child who needs help.

The most important improvement is ensuring students master foundational reading and math skills early and receive timely support when they fall behind. I would also examine attendance, student well-being, and readiness for life after graduation.

Parents deserve understandable information about whether their child is progressing, what support is available, and whether that support is working. Success means helping struggling students catch up while ensuring students who are ready for advanced work continue to grow.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

I would work with fellow trustees and the superintendent to establish clear learning goals, fund effective instruction, and regularly review results.

My priorities would include evidence-based reading instruction, strong mathematics teaching, early identification of learning difficulties, and targeted small-group support. Parents should receive timely progress updates and practical ways to reinforce learning at home.

Teachers need useful training, collaboration time, and access to specialists. We should also protect instructional time from unnecessary distractions and evaluate whether classroom technology improves learning.

A complete education includes science, history, civics, the arts, physical education, and career exploration. I would support both intervention and advanced opportunities, with resources directed toward programs that demonstrate meaningful student progress.

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

My budget priorities are effective classroom instruction, special education services, student safety, and essential campus maintenance. I would evaluate spending by its contribution to student learning and the district's long-term financial stability.

With declining enrollment or revenues, we should use realistic multiyear projections and review administrative costs, outside contracts, and underused programs before reducing classroom support. Ongoing commitments must have sustainable funding.

We should also ask families why they leave and address concerns the district can control. Any proposed school consolidation or boundary change deserves transparent analysis, meaningful family input, and careful consideration of educational and transportation impacts.

I would pursue appropriate grants and partnerships while maintaining responsible reserves and making budget choices understandable to the public.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

Technology should have a clear educational purpose. I support less unnecessary screen time and consistent limits on smartphone use during instruction, with appropriate medical, disability, and emergency exceptions and clear ways for families to communicate with schools.

AI requires clear rules about academic honesty, privacy, and age-appropriate use. Students should learn to question AI-generated information, verify sources, and demonstrate their own understanding. Teachers need training and clear guidance before new tools are introduced.

I would ask the district to evaluate educational benefits, costs, and data protections before purchasing technology. Parents should know which tools their children use and how their information is handled. Reading, discussion, handwriting, and hands-on learning should remain central to the classroom.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

Every child deserves high expectations and support that reflects their individual needs. I would prioritize early identification of learning challenges, timely evaluations, and reliable delivery of services in Individualized Education Programs and Section 504 plans. Parents must be respected as essential members of their child's educational team.

English learners need strong language instruction and access to challenging coursework. Families facing financial hardship need help overcoming barriers to tutoring, transportation, activities, and school participation.

I would review results by school and student group to identify where support is falling short. Students who need advanced instruction also deserve opportunities to grow.

Every campus should protect students from bullying and discrimination and create an environment where each child can participate, belong, and succeed.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

CUSD should be a district where excellent educators want to build their careers. I support competitive compensation within a sustainable budget, strong mentoring for new teachers, useful professional development, and dependable classroom support.

Retention also requires listening. I would seek direct feedback about workload, unnecessary paperwork, student behavior, and access to instructional resources. Teachers need administrators who respond to concerns and help maintain safe, productive classrooms.

Recruitment should include partnerships with teacher preparation programs and pathways for qualified current employees to advance, particularly in hard-to-fill positions. Classified staff, including paraeducators, custodians, office teams, and transportation workers, deserve recognition and support.

I would approach employee representatives respectfully, with transparent financial information and a shared focus on students.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

The board should approach difficult issues with respect, transparency, and a clear focus on students' education and safety. I believe strongly in parental involvement and access to information about curriculum, school policies, and their children's education.

Trustees should hear differing perspectives, review the facts, and obtain clear legal guidance before acting. Policies must comply with applicable law while protecting students' rights, dignity, and safety. When laws or requirements are disputed, the board should explain its options and pursue concerns through lawful channels.

I would keep partisan advocacy out of instruction and insist that families can raise concerns without being dismissed. We should explain our decisions openly, protect confidential student information, and model the respectful disagreement we expect students to practice.

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

I would hold regular office hours, visit campuses in coordination with school leaders, attend PTA meetings, and communicate consistently with families and staff. I also want to hear directly from students about what helps them learn and where they need support.

Participation should be possible for parents who work evenings, speak another language, or cannot attend board meetings. I would support translated information, accessible meeting options, and straightforward ways to submit questions. I come from a bilingual home and as such will be able to communicate directly with Spanish speaking parents who may not speak English.

Listening also means following through. I would acknowledge concerns, help people reach the appropriate staff, and report back when issues require board action. Community members should understand how their input influenced a decision, even when the board cannot accommodate every request.

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Every graduate should be able to read thoughtfully, write clearly, use mathematics confidently, and evaluate evidence before reaching conclusions. They should understand science, American history, our constitutional system, and the responsibilities of citizenship.

Students also need practical skills: managing a budget, understanding credit, communicating professionally, working with others, and using technology responsibly. They should know how to distinguish reliable information from misinformation and how to disagree respectfully.

Graduates should leave with a realistic next step, whether that is college, career training, an apprenticeship, military service, or employment. As a business owner, I value initiative, reliability, and problem-solving. Our schools should help students develop those qualities alongside academic knowledge and the confidence to keep learning.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

I would judge success by measurable improvements in students' learning and families' experience with the district. That includes stronger reading and math achievement, smaller achievement gaps, improved attendance, and better preparation for college, careers, and adult life.

I would also look for reliable special education services, progress on campus maintenance, strong staff retention, and a budget that supports classrooms without creating unsustainable commitments.

Early in my term, I would work with the board to establish clear baselines and public goals, then review progress regularly. Parent, student, and staff feedback should help us understand what the numbers miss.

Four years from now, families should be able to see what improved, understand how their money was spent, and know their trustee listened and followed through.

TRUSTEE AREA 6 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Mandy Bourne

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

I volunteered teaching elementary reading while studying education law. After practicing law, I focused on raising our family and serving our schools. For twenty years, I've served on district curriculum and accreditation committees, held PTSA and parent leadership roles, helped families with college planning, directed elementary field days and high school senior nights. I teach high-school study and life-skills classes and previously taught writing and music.

My husband and I raised six children in CUSD, all participating in its Spanish-immersion program, with our youngest still enrolled. From APs to navigating IEPs, we've experienced many of the opportunities and challenges CUSD families encounter.

I understand the district's strengths and the difficulties families face. As a parent, educator, longtime volunteer and contract attorney, I want to give back to schools we love, helping ensure every student has access to outstanding public education and that CUSD maintains the confidence of families and employees.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

Our district's first need is a clear and consistent focus on academic excellence. Schools should help students become strong readers, capable writers, confident problem-solvers and thoughtful citizens. And I'd like to particularly improve mastery of math. We should spend less time on political issues that divide neighbors and more time on the shared goal of preparing every student for college, a career and adult life.

Our second need is to better engage and empower parents and families, while promoting more civil and effective ways for families and educators to work together. I will strengthen our schools by encouraging transparency, open communication and meaningful collaboration between schools and parents. When parents are informed, engaged and treated as partners, educators better understand what individual students need to succeed. That partnership helps us maintain high expectations for every student while providing the instruction, support and opportunities each one needs to thrive.

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

As I believe CUSD is one of California's strongest public school districts, my first responsibility as trustee would be preserving and strengthening the qualities that have made our district successful while continually looking for thoughtful opportunities to improve. We should never forget that maintaining excellence requires ongoing effort—investing in people, caring for facilities, evaluating programs, and planning responsibly for the future. At the same time, every successful district has challenges that deserve attention. These aren't listed in order of priority, as they are all important. 1. Decrease anxiety and student mental health challenges. 2. Increase academic integrity and address teacher and student concerns about cheating, particularly in connection with technology. 3. Strengthen math proficiency. 4. Ensure each child is progressing appropriately from their starting point, including English learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged and not losing our students in the middle. 5. Improve civility in our district and schools.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

It is difficult to briefly capture them all, so I will mention a few. Improve communication with families and increase families' involvement opportunities. Strong schools depend on strong partnerships with families. Clear, timely, and transparent communication builds trust, encourages collaboration, and ensures parents are meaningful partners in their children's education and children see their families' respect for the schools. I'd also focus on responsible use of technology and AI to ensure academic rigor and integrity, helping establish clear rules, provide training, and remain flexible as evidence and experience reveal what works. I'd help reduce gaps in student outcomes, by identifying struggling students early and finding ways to help more students thrive while maintaining high expectations. And build on CUSD's recent progress by supporting policies challenging students at their individual level—including expanding accelerated math access for families that choose and helping more students become fluent readers by the third grade.

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

I support responsible budgets providing teachers competitive compensation, keeping campuses and children safe, maintaining adequate reserves and ensuring investment where students benefit most. I'll avoid committing one-time revenues to permanent recurring expenses. Preserving music and arts education is a priority as not every meaningful educational outcome appears on a standardized test. I will encourage private sector donations to expand extracurricular opportunities and enhance facilities. Even on a smaller level we can do better at tapping available resources. I supported our high school son who raised the funds and collected donated supplies to work side-by-side with volunteers and a community welder to resolve safety issues in an underserved community where CUSD students live. As our district makes tough budget decisions, I will listen carefully, study the evidence and work respectfully with parents, teachers and district leaders to keep students at the center of every decision.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

I'm pleased with CUSD's recent restriction on classroom phones and the qustodio app to manage chromebook screen time and content. Moving from screens is important for mental health and intellectual rigor. AI can be valuable, but should support learning—not replace thinking or effort. Working together let's thoughtfully embrace tools enhancing learning while teaching responsible use and preserving the roles of teachers, personal interaction and integrity.

AI use should expand when clearly helping learning like providing extra practice, explaining difficult concepts, supporting students with disabilities or language needs, and teaching responsible use. AI can also help teachers prepare, allowing more time to work directly with students.

AI should be limited when students need to develop or demonstrate skills. Students must read deeply, write independently, think critically and learn through productive struggle. AI shouldn't do students' work or compromise privacy. Younger students need especially careful limits and adult guidance around technology.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

Every student deserves outstanding teachers and staff who are equipped to help them succeed. Attracting, developing,

and retaining exceptional teachers, employees, and administrators is essential to educational excellence, meeting all students where they are. We should maintain high expectations, but be thoughtful about different supports for our students when necessary. I am also committed to safe, kind campuses. I have a reputation for treating all people with respect. A culture of courtesy and respect helps students thrive. My six kids have grown up in Title I schools in the CUSD Spanish-immersion program and we have loved serving in and alongside these communities. My years of navigating the school system for a son with special needs further deepened my commitment to supporting all students in their journeys and supporting their mental health and belonging. Schools can help foster safe, supportive learning environments where students feel connected, engaged and ready to learn.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

Attracting and retaining exceptional educators is critical and requires a broad strategy to support educators.

We must offer competitive compensation and benefits while managing district finances responsibly. We should support teachers through mentoring, useful training and collaboration with colleagues. Good principals and a collegial school culture matter too. Teachers are more likely to stay where expectations are clear, professional judgment is respected and concerns are heard.

For years, I've helped lead a public-school educator awards program, and I believe we can do more to recognize excellence. Outstanding teachers should have opportunities to mentor others, improve instruction and grow as leaders without leaving the classroom. We should also reduce unnecessary administrative burdens so educators have more time with students.

Ultimately, people stay where they feel valued, supported and can succeed. CUSD should be a place where excellent educators can afford to live, grow professionally and build rewarding careers.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

The board should keep students at the center of every decision, reviewing what the law actually requires. That demands listening to parents, teachers, staff and students; asking thoughtful questions; reviewing reliable evidence and expert advice, including competent legal advice; and making decisions openly, responsibly and explaining the legal basis and reasoning for difficult decisions. I chose not to use campaign money from special-interest PACs, unions or political parties to remain independent—without favors to repay and free to focus on what is best for students and respect their and their parents' rights.

Additionally, civility is key. Schools can offer something better than the anger, ridicule and personal attacks too often seen online and in public life. We can reject a "culture of contempt" and disagree with kindness, honesty and respect. That starts with leadership top down, and I've modeled that same approach throughout this campaign. There is power in peacemaking.

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

I don't think my job as Trustee is telling our community what we should do or think. My job is listening—hearing from all constituents what is not working, seeking the advice of staff, experts and wise counselors—and guiding to the best solutions considering everyone's voices. As I listen I'll treat each person with dignity. For students to become thoughtful, respectful adults, we must show them what that looks like. Schools are stronger when we listen and discuss on both sides of the aisle. I'll meet with PTAs/PTSAs and student advisory and parent advisory groups, and make an intentional effort to hear underrepresented constituencies. I will continue to regularly be in our schools with the direct involvement I've had for over 20 years. These years in schools and working with kids have developed a good sense of what works to help me process the input I receive as Trustee.

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Graduates need strong foundational skills and preparation for college, careers and life. Our graduates should know the first steps toward one of many legitimate paths after high school: university, community college, technical training, military, trades, employment. Ideally, we can help graduates leave with the initiative, work ethic, and self-reliance necessary to be engaged, caring, responsible citizens. Graduates should read deeply, communicate clearly, solve unfamiliar problems and have math literacy, some exposure to the arts and competency in scientific reasoning. Additionally, I would love our graduates to listen to understand, discuss ideas without attacking people, support claims with facts and recognize the dignity of those who see an issue differently. I've supported my high-school son and his club's work with the Dignity Project, which teaches students to move from contempt toward dignity—disagreeing civilly and with respect. Our next generation of graduates can help break the national political climate of contention.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

CUSD's strong academics will be stronger, particularly in math and fluent readers by third grade. Exceptional arts education will be at least as accessible as it is now. CUSD will remain financially stable despite enrollment pressure. As a whole students will be less anxious, more resilient and better equipped to manage mental health challenges. Student capacity to hear different points of view and resolve disagreements constructively will increase. Additionally, student screen time will decrease. I will hear more often that parents who want to be involved found ways to meaningfully contribute. Special-education families and English-learners will report better experiences. CUSD educators will generally feel they receive the support, training and resources to perform well, and district employees will feel appreciated and that I show respect for their professional roles. And I will have kept my word to model civility and work respectfully with parents, educators and other trustees.

TRUSTEE AREA 6 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Jeanna Emmons

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

My mom was a PTA leader, president at each school, then PTA council president. She eventually ran for school board. As a PTA leader myself,I followed my mom's example.Through PTA I have spent years meeting with district leadership and advocating for our families. Seven of the nine schools in Area 6 are Title 1. I have participated for years on the School Site Council deciding how the Title 1 money will be spent to help tighten the achievement gap of our lower performing students. I have two children in CUSD, one in TK-8 and one in high school. I have a physics degree from USC and own my business in hazardous materials consulting. I am a business owner and chairperson of the board of directors for a trade association. My responsibilities include managing budgets, conflict resolution, managing personnel, and leading my company and the association to the future.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

Based on years of meetings with district leadership, it is clear that a top need for CUSD is funding. My goal is to evaluate programs based on student outcomes. Provide transparent financial information to the community. Stronger communication, transparency and community trust. A district serving many different communities needs meaningful partnerships with families, staff and students. Making board decisions and district finances easier to understand and ensuring families have meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions.

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

According to the California School Dashboard, CUSD has many areas of success. On average, we are showing increases in English, math, and science based off of the results from the California state testing (CAASPP). However, when you drill down on the average, the data shows that our English learners are not following the same trend. There is a strong correlation between low income and low performing students. When we develop our budgets for the Title 1 funding, we are targeting the low performers for additional support. In addition, CUSD has not moved forward in college/career readiness. CUSD has not reached the success seen in pre-COVID graduates, we need to determine the cause and work toward closing the gap.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

Studies have shown that the "science of reading" has proven to improve literacy in children. Some schools within CUSD have already trained their early elementary teachers in the Orton-Gillingham approach to reading. This method utilizes the science of reading which requires both decoding and language comprehension. I would promote the use of the science of reading techniques combined with small group tutoring. The combined effort would drastically improve reading learning outcomes. An approach for math fluency is slightly less straight forward. The Learning Policy Institute published a report in June 2026 which defines teaching practices for high math understanding. The evidence shows that students learn math best when they have positive classroom conditions. Specifically, student relationships with teachers, strong sense of mathematics belonging, and a growth mindset. In order to accomplish this, teachers would need support for teacher training and collaborative opportunities amongst the schools.

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

The CUSD annual budget is approximately $600 million, and of that, roughly 85% of that budget is personnel salaries. CUSD has not been shy about notifying the community that to combat the loss of COVID money and low enrollment, the budget needs to be reduced. Recently, positions have been eliminated and schools closed. As a trustee I will question all other paths for reduction prior to closing schools and loss of personnel. As the district transitions from Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to Basic Aid, the dependency on enrollment becomes less necessary. I will continue to work with CA PTA to meet with legislators to ensure full funding of Proposition 98, it guarantees a minimal annual funding level in our state budget for public schools and community colleges. California's budget fell short of this guarantee by approximately $3.9 billion remaining unpaid in the 2026/2027 fiscal year.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

As technology moves forward rapidly , it is important that CUSD students keep up with that pace and are prepared for the future. Although AI is presenting issues with academic integrity, students need to be taught age appropriate AI literacy. Specifically, it is my belief that AI should only be used once the skill has been learned by students. Introducing AI too early in education will weaken fundamental critical thinking development. In addition, there are ethical ramifications to be considered. For example, students should be taught the environmental impacts of data centers. Data centers cause stress on the fresh water sources that already aren't sufficient to supply the surrounding population in some areas. Moreover, one AI search could potentially utilize the amount of energy needed to power a community. In a world where populations struggle to maintain consistent electrical power, CUSD students should understand the power they have at their fingertips.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

Equity doesn't mean every student needs the same thing. It means recognizing that students have different needs and making sure they have the resources and support to succeed. As a school board member, I will advocate for strong special education services, support English learners, access mental health resources and opportunities for students at every level. We need to listen to families, teachers and students to understand where the gaps exist and use data to make informed decisions.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

Although California has a teacher shortage, CUSD does not, for every opening on average 100 applicants apply. But for California, districts need to entice students into the profession in high school. CUSD has a robust CTE program, with each high school hosting specific pathways. For example, the Education, Child Development & Family Service pathway courses can be taken at Tesoro High School which include Careers in Teaching. As a trustee I would ensure parents and students throughout the district are aware of the program and consider building on the existing framework. Then the district needs to retain the credentialed teachers.. We need to make teacher salaries competitive and train/retrain administrators.Creating a world in which teachers choose to remain and continue teaching will inevitably lead to luring new teachers to the district. Teacher retention and lack of teacher

shortage within CUSD has proven our district is on the right track.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

As a school board member I would always put students first. Student safety, well-being, educational opportunities and individual rights must remain the priority. I would follow the law. Decisions should be grounded in state law, district policy and guidance from the legal counsel. It's important also to listen to all voices. Parents, students, teachers and community members deserve to be heard. As board members it is our responsibility to lead with civility and integrity. Disagreement is inevitable, but disrespect and political division should not interfere with responsible decision making. Individual trustees have a voice and a vote but the board governs collectively, not through individual agendas.

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

School districts are required to develop a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). The plan includes how CUSD will engage educational partners, including PTSA, certified and classified employees, administrators, DELAC (english language committee), and CAC (community advisory committee). Within each meeting attendees are asked to prioritize concerns CUSD should focus on and disseminate the information provided to their members. However, this system does not draw nearly enough community members and needs to be reviewed and enhanced. Possible solutions would include remote options, a survey to each stake holding group to request input and/or recurring meetings at the school sites to engage students and educators.

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Graduates should be prepared for college, work and citizenship. The solution requires multifaceted skill development in critical thinking, communication, self-motivation, time management, and each graduate should understand how they learn best. Graduates should be able to identify bias and credible sources. Students should be capable of expressing their opinions and asking questions in writing, speaking and digitally. A graduate should be able to take a goal and work backwards to build a plan for accomplishing that goal, mastering this goal leads to more confidence and independence. High level competency in time management enables students to set realistic timelines and to balance life with academic/work responsibilities. Students who understand how they learn most effectively are able to work more efficiently, retain knowledge, have greater adaptability, and have less frustration when learning something new. Mastering these skills will best prepare our students for a successful future.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

Success as a board member could be measured in many different ways: student success could be measured by college readiness, attendance, test scores, attendance, graduation rates, and tightening the student achievement gap. If a majority of these categories increase, it would be considered success. However, the measure of a successful school board member would also include the ability to rebound or correct course if data remains consistent or declines. In addition to student learning outcomes, success should be measured by fiscal stability. CUSD is predicted to fall in and out of Basic Aid funding over the next couple of years, however, eventually CUSD should stabilize as a Basic Aid or community funded district. At the September board meeting, Fund 17 was established to set aside money to ensure funding of our schools in the event of an unstable housing atmosphere. It's important to secure economic stability by funding Fund 17.

TRUSTEE AREA 7 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Ron Ruef

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

I am running for CUSD School Board because I believe every student deserves a high-quality education, every teacher and staff member deserves support, and every parent deserves a meaningful voice in their child's education. I want to bring my experience, leadership, and commitment to our community to the Board.

I have been involved with CUSD for many years, serving on four School Site Councils and chairing the Facilities and Finance Advisory Committee for five years. I also helped lead the effort to keep Carl Hankey School open and transition it to a K–8 International Baccalaureate school.

Professionally, I spent more than 34 years in management with Morton Salt, overseeing budgets, financial accountability, and large teams. I also served 13 years on the Mission Viejo Community Services Commission. These experiences prepared me to listen, collaborate, make informed decisions, and be accountable to the community I serve.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

The top needs of Capistrano Unified are to continue improving student achievement while making sure every student has the support and opportunity to succeed. We need to recruit and retain excellent teachers and staff, maintain safe and welcoming schools, and provide meaningful support for students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

We also need to be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars while being transparent as a Board. With a large and complex district, we must maintain a sustainable budget, prioritize classroom needs, and make thoughtful decisions about facilities and programs.

Finally, we need strong communication and trust between the District, parents, teachers, staff, students, and community. Good decisions come from listening to the people affected by them, being transparent about the facts and finances, and holding ourselves accountable for results.

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

CUSD students are doing well overall, with 72% meeting or exceeding the state standard in English and nearly 63% doing so in math on the 2025 CAASPP assessments. However, the results also show important areas for improvement.

The biggest concern is closing achievement gaps. Economically disadvantaged students, for example, had substantially lower proficiency rates than their peers in both English and math.

I believe we need to focus on improving math achievement, reducing chronic absenteeism, and providing additional support to students who are struggling academically. We also need to identify successful practices within our schools and make sure they are shared across the district. Every student should have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

I would focus on what works in the classroom and make decisions based on student data, teacher expertise, and the needs of individual schools. First, I would prioritize strong foundational instruction in reading, writing, and math and make sure students who are struggling receive timely, targeted support.

I would listen closely to teachers and staff because they work directly with students and understand what is and isn't working. I would also look for successful programs and practices already being used within CUSD and find ways to share those successes across schools.

Finally, I would support efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism, strengthen student engagement, and provide appropriate academic and mental-health support. We should regularly measure results, be transparent about what the data show, and adjust our approach when something isn't working. Most importantly, every decision should start with one question: What will help our students learn and succeed?

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

My budget priorities would be protecting classroom instruction, supporting and retaining excellent teachers and staff, maintaining safe and well-maintained schools, and providing essential services that directly support student success.

With declining enrollment or revenues, the District must plan ahead rather than wait for a financial crisis. I would carefully review enrollment trends, staffing, programs, facilities, and expenditures to identify efficiencies while protecting core instructional programs as much as possible. We should look for savings that minimize the impact on students and staff before considering deeper reductions.

I also believe the community deserves transparency about the District's financial position and the choices being considered. Difficult decisions should be based on reliable data, clearly communicated, and made with input from teachers, staff, parents, students, and the community.

My goal would be a financially sustainable District that protects educational quality while being responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

I believe CUSD should embrace technology when it improves learning while also setting clear, age-appropriate boundaries. AI can be a valuable educational tool, but students need to understand how to use it responsibly, protect their privacy, verify information, and develop their own critical-thinking and writing skills. Teachers also need training and clear guidance so technology supports—not replaces—good teaching.

With smartphones, I support reasonable, consistent school policies that reduce distractions and protect students' ability to learn and interact with one another. The goal should not simply be restricting technology, but teaching students how to use it responsibly.

The District should regularly evaluate these policies as technology changes, listen to teachers, parents, and students, and use evidence to determine what is working. Our approach should prepare students for a technology-driven world while keeping learning, safety, and healthy human relationships at the center.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

Every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background, abilities, or circumstances. I would work to ensure that students have access to the academic

resources, support services, and opportunities they need to reach their potential.

That starts with listening to students, parents, teachers, and staff and using data to identify where students may be falling behind or facing barriers to success. I would support resources for students with disabilities, English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and others who need additional support.

I would make sure that students have access to challenging academic programs, arts, music, career education, athletics, and other activities that help them discover their strengths and interests.

Most importantly, I would expect the District to measure whether our programs are helping students succeed and be willing to adjust when they are not. Equity means making sure every student has a genuine opportunity to reach their full potential.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

Excellent teachers and staff are the foundation of a successful school district. CUSD should recruit talented educators by being competitive in compensation and benefits, maintaining a positive work environment, and clearly communicating why our district is a great place to work.

Retention starts with respect. Teachers and staff need to feel heard, valued, and supported by District leadership and their school administrators. I would encourage meaningful professional development, reasonable workloads, opportunities for collaboration, and the resources educators need to do their jobs effectively.

I also believe we need to listen to our employee groups and work collaboratively with them, especially when negotiating compensation and working conditions. At the same time, we must remain financially responsible and ensure commitments are sustainable over the long term.

Ultimately, we should build a culture where excellent teachers and staff want to stay because they know their work is valued and makes a difference in students' lives.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

The Board's responsibility is to put students first, follow the law, and make decisions based on facts rather than political pressure. When controversial issues arise, I would listen respectfully to different perspectives, seek guidance from District staff and legal counsel, and carefully consider the rights and needs of students, parents, teachers, and staff.

Student safety, dignity, and equal access to education should remain central to every decision. At the same time, the Board must recognize the rights and responsibilities of parents and the legal requirements placed on the District.

I believe transparency is especially important on difficult issues. The community should understand what the law requires, what options the District has, and why the Board is making a particular decision. We may not always agree, but we can disagree respectfully and have productive discussions.

My commitment would be to listen, follow the law, protect students' rights

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

Listening is one of the most important responsibilities of a school board member. I will make myself accessible and actively seek input rather than waiting for people to come to me.

I plan to attend school and community events, visit campuses, meet with teachers and staff, talk with students and parents, and hold regular opportunities for community members to share their concerns and ideas. I also want to maintain open communication through email, phone calls, and social media.

My experience serving on School Site Councils and the CUSD Facilities and Finance Advisory Committee taught me the value of hearing different perspectives from all stakeholders before making decisions. I will continue that approach as a Board member.

Most importantly, listening means more than simply hearing people. I will carefully consider what I learn, ask questions, review the facts and data, and explain how community input helped inform my decisions

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Every CUSD graduate should leave our School District prepared for the next chapter of their life whether that means college, military service, trade school, or another path.

They should have strong skills in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and technology, along with the ability to think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, and work with others. They should understand how to balance a checkbook and handle using a credit card. They should know how to evaluate information and make responsible decisions.

Just as importantly, graduates should understand the value of hard work, personal responsibility, respect, and treating others with dignity. They should be confident enough to ask questions, adapt to change, and advocate for themselves and others.

Our graduates should leave CUSD not only with the academic knowledge they need, but also with the practical skills, character, and confidence to become successful, responsible members of their communities.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

Four years from now, I'd measure my success by whether I helped make a meaningful difference for students, teachers, staff, and families.

I would look for measurable improvement in student achievement, particularly for students who need additional support, while maintaining strong academic programs throughout the District. I would also want to see that CUSD has recruited and retained excellent teachers and staff, maintained safe and welcoming schools, and remained financially responsible.

Just as importantly, I would ask whether I earned the trust of the community. Did I listen to different perspectives? Was I accessible and transparent? Did I treat people with respect, even when we disagreed? Did I make decisions based on facts, data, and what is best for students?

If, after four years, students are better prepared for their futures, employees feel supported, and the community has greater confidence in its school district, I will consider my service successful.

TRUSTEE AREA 7 / CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Linda Shepard

1. Why are you running for school board, and what prepares you for the job?

The school board has a strategic role to set policy direction. The school board is an elected body charged with keeping the best interests of students in mind in both academics and activities. The school board ensures accountability that children are learning and meeting or exceeding grade-level targets each year. High School graduates should be prepared for the next steps in life: be it college, trade school, military service, entrepreneurship, or employment and have a grasp of the financial responsibilities of adulthood. The school board is the steward of local taxpayers' dollars. Money should be wisely spent to produce a well-educated next generation.

As CFO for Habitat for Humanity in Orange County, I oversaw that all funds were used to successfully meet our mission. I was on the senior launch team to build Discovery Science Center. I have over 30 years of business experience ensuring goals were met or exceeded.

2. What are the top needs of Capistrano Unified school district?

I intend to fight for a high-quality education for every student in the areas of reading, writing, math, science, and American civics. Children need to develop a love of reading by third grade. I will seek to protect parental rights and defend local control. We must honor that children are the precious treasures of their parents. Parents and teachers need to collaborate to best meet the needs of each child.

3. How are students in this district doing, and what needs improvement most?

Overall, CUSD has excellent standing within the State and nationally. On the latest CAASPP results, nearly 72% and 63% met or exceeded standards in English Language Arts and Math, respectively, showing year over year gains. Reading proficiency is KEY for students to have the opportunity to succeed and thrive in their educational years and beyond. In 3rd grade, students must become proficient readers in order to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn". Analyzing the groups of children falling behind at this level will help identify needs and match resources for improvement.

4. What would you do to improve student learning?

At each grade level, we must evaluate the use of digital tools versus good old-fashioned writing by hand. Gen Z is the first generation to score lower on intelligence tests than their parents. On-line note-taking is inferior to hand-writing. There is a direct connection to information written by hand and information retained by the brain. Entering answers to math problems in a computer does not help the teacher assess where or how the child stumbled.

The purpose of an education is to learn and develop the skills of critical thinking. This requires opening the mind. Students need to be taught that opinions are to be formed based on data or facts that are evaluated. Consider the sources of information and any implicit bias. An excellent warning is that if you hear news and your first reaction is emotional, stop and analyze. Emotion is often used to manipulate.

5. What are your budget priorities, and how should the district respond to declining enrollment or revenues?

As a former CFO of Habitat for Humanity of Orange County, Inc. I successfully navigated the organization through two economic downturns. I understand financials, budgets, and cashflow. In 2024, I was Vice Chair for a CUSD Committee to evaluate schools for merger or closure. In 2026, I am Chair for this committee. Given many years of declining enrollment, we must be vigilante to ensure that taxpayer funds provide an excellent education for students while right-sizing the organization for the number of students served.

6. How should the district respond to rapidly changing technology, including AI and smartphones?

Students must develop skills for research and writing. Creativity and intellectual curiosity were key to America's inventiveness for 250 years. In the recent past, students' "research" on a topic was an Internet search of "curated" responses by the search engine. Now, typing in a question and getting an answer from AI requires even less effort. However, the AI response is from data determined by someone else. There is always a bias, even with AI. Students need to be taught critical thinking skills, including how to evaluate sources of information and seek information from more than one source. Students need to gain confidence in their own ability to write, draw, design, research, etc. Teachers may be able to use AI to more easily find plagiarism. To help students develop self-discipline, smartphones should not be part of the classroom activity. They are a powerful distraction that pulls like a magnet.

7. How will you ensure that students with different needs and backgrounds have real opportunities to succeed?

I am aware that CUSD has many programs to help students who are underperforming academically, including tutoring and English learner monitoring. As a member of the Board, I will seek to understand those resources, how they are utilized, and their effectiveness. I will challenge the Superintendent to measure and track academic improvement. If there is no improvement, then the Superintendent will be asked to look into alternative methods and resources. As I speak with parents, staff, teachers, and people in the community who interact with our students, I will gain an understanding of opportunities for improvement to ensure our tax dollars are well spent on the education and preparation of the next generation.

We should use data to help identify learning gaps and match needs with appropriate resources. We should partner with parents. The PTA leadership is also a partner in ensuring every student feels seen, supported, challenged, and valued.

8. How should the district recruit, support and retain excellent teachers and staff?

I believe that most teachers consider the following for career satisfaction: enjoyment of their work, clear expectations, respectful relationships with students, parents, co-workers and staff, and reasonable pay. With an organization right-sized for declining enrollment, new teachers will be more confident in accepting a job with CUSD since there will be less worry of the newest teachers losing their jobs due to budget cuts.

9. How should the board handle controversial issues — especially when politics, student rights and the law collide?

When controversial issues arise, the Board should put students, the Law, and CUSD's educational mission first, not partisan politics. The goal is for students to feel safe respected, included, and able to learn as they are "prepared to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world" (Mission). The Board should seek appropriate legal guidance and clearly communicate decisions and reasoning, and provide opportunities for students, parents, staff, and community

members to be heard. "It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settling a question without debating it." Joseph Joubert (1754-1824). Thus, it is acceptable to politely challenge opinions.

10. How will you listen to students, families, educators and the broader community?

I am listening to constituents as I knock on doors and meet with various groups. I have had parents of current and past CUSD students, moms of special needs students, parents with children in CUSD charter schools, teachers – current and retired, tutors, teachers at local colleges, and other taxpayers ask me questions and provide me with their insights. In my career, I have found that people can often define issues and may have suggestions for improvement, but do not know who to contact or know what resources are available. I listen. I define problems. I seek out solutions by connecting resources.

11. What should every graduate of this district know and be able to do?

Graduates should be able to analyze and interpret texts and clearly articulate an opinion or an idea (verbal and written) based on supporting evidence. Graduates should understand mathematical and scientific principles and understand when and how to apply them in problems in school and situations in life. Historical events (worldwide and in the U.S.) should be understood, including how some events changed the course of history (good or bad). Graduates should understand the American system of governance, including knowledge of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, and their duties and responsibilities as adult citizens in America. Every graduate should have a basic understanding of economics, how to budget, understand the daily costs of living, save for the future, and evaluate costs and benefits of the many choices in their future (college, trade school, military career, entrepreneur, job). All will develop critical thinking skills that will serve them throughout life.

12. How will you know, four years from now, whether you were a successful board member?

Good governance does not come from one person, but from a team who collaborates with and challenges each other while actively and respectfully evaluating the merits and consequences of various issues and associated viewpoints. In all decisions, we must consider what is best for the students, teachers and staff of CUSD, keeping in mind our mission is to prepare students for a rapidly changing world. At the end of four years, I would look at data and compare student outcomes by year. I desire to see a reduction in learning gaps in the primary grades. I want to know that resources reached the students who needed them most. Overall, I want my impact to be that a fiscally sound CUSD has the financial resources to support excellence in the teaching of the next generation, as demonstrated by more students meeting or exceeding grade level standards.