During my first few weeks as your new superintendent, it became clear that the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District (PVPUSD) benefits greatly from incredible community support. I, along with the dedicated PVPUSD staff, am committed to providing our students with a world-class education.

We believe in building upon PVPUSD's foundation of strength, including its history of outstanding student achievement, robust academic programs, and depth of extra-curricular opportunities to prepare our students for success in college and careers.

I have already seen evidence of PVPUSD's talented staff and committed volunteers. Congratulations to our Peninsula Rotary Educator of the Year teachers: Beth Ann Berry (Cornerstone at Pedregal Elementary), Jonolyn Larson (Dapplegray Elementary), Scot Oschman (Ridgecrest Intermediate) and Glen Van Enk (Peninsula High School). The Palos Verdes Peninsula Chamber of Commerce gave our Palos Verdes Peninsula Council of PTAs the Outstanding Community Service Program award for 2014.

I look forward to meeting PVPUSD students, families, staff and community members to learn more about the district.

Have a great school year!

Don Austin, Superintendent of Schools
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Superintendent Don Austin said the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District (PVPUSD) has the potential to develop a world-class STEM program and give students more options to take Advanced Placement courses.

Dr. Austin praised the district’s exceptional STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program and noted that PVPUSD has one of the region’s leading Advanced Placement (AP) programs as well. He said expanding and strengthening both programs would ensure PVPUSD students are prepared for the more rigorous coursework and state assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The shift to new academic standards and state assessments to prepare California students to be college- and career-ready, is comparable to a kitchen remodel rather than a cross-country move, Dr. Austin explained. It’s a little uncomfortable during the renovation, he said, but once construction is complete, it's the same house with a better functioning kitchen.

“Instruction should always evolve,” Dr. Austin added. “No system is going to be perfect. But it’s tough to argue with the new standards’ emphasis on increasing critical thinking, collaboration, communication and creativity.”

Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services Joanne Culverhouse said she is reviewing academic programs throughout the district to determine what best practices can be replicated at multiple school sites. She said the district is seeking to establish a level

Seventh graders Adela Crow (12), and Avni Iyengar (12), construct a spinning sign in Campbell Nimick's automation and robotics class at Miraleste Intermediate School. The class teaches students to solve real world problems using robotics and computer programming.

Attention: Residential Customer
What would you like the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District (PVPUSD) community to know about one another?

Austin: I think we could not be luckier to have somebody with Dr. Culverhouse's depth of knowledge and experiences, sense of humor, ability to communicate and desire to do a great job. She's a person who has had success everywhere she's ever been, and there's every reason to believe that she will probably achieve her biggest successes professionally here with us.

Culverhouse: Dr. Austin is a deep and critical thinker. He understands how to take an individual and help them reach their full potential. He has the ability to pull people together and build capacity within a group, which, in turn, strengthens the entire organization. Dr. Austin also recognizes the vital contributions that community members make to support a successful school system like PVPUSD. This community could not have chosen a better superintendent.

What are the greatest challenges facing PVPUSD?

Austin: One of the biggest challenges this district will have is a history of strong student achievement. It's a little counterintuitive, but it's sometimes easier to create a sense of urgency in a low-achieving district. As we try to make some of the instructional shifts in our classroom to prepare students for college and careers, we need to look toward the future and competing globally instead of only drawing on our personal previous experiences.

With technology, it's important to create an infrastructure that can withstand scalability. We can meet all of our current and foreseeable needs now. We want to go beyond our foreseeable needs and build a system that can withstand major increases in bandwidth and wireless connectivity. I'd like to see a system where there's a pod of desktops, a cart of mobile devices, along with devices in students' pockets and allow students to go from one technology tool to another. I think it's a massive mistake to go all in on any one initiative.

Culverhouse: The instructional piece attached with the social media technology is also an area of focus for us. It's not just technology for technology sake. Technology has to be used as a teaching tool and strategy to prepare students for that next level in college and the workplace.

How will you encourage PVPUSD students, staff and parents to strive for higher levels of achievement?

Austin: We are currently developing deep, meaningful surveys of the community and staff to find out what priorities they feel aren't being met. I'm evaluating our current strategic plan as we go back and ask people about their priorities. We want to be strategic and put our full resources and efforts behind areas that will have the greatest impact. (The survey process will be completed by April.)

Culverhouse: We're also trying to support the opportunity for teachers to get together and share best practices and great ideas. We have a structure in place in our district for those professional conversations right now — the Curriculum and Instruction Assessment (CIA) teams. We're in the process of blending our special education program into our CIA training.

What advice have you given that you most often hear quoted back to you from former students?

Austin: There are two pieces of advice. If you find yourself in a hole, put the shovel down. The other is: Always look your best, show up early and be prepared.

Culverhouse: My advice goes back to kindergarten: Work and play well with others. You could be at the top of your class in academics, but your success in life will come from the relationships that you've built and how you treat each other.