



Paradise Restored: A School District's Journey of Resilience

When the Camp Fire tore through Paradise, California, in November 2018, it became the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California's history. In a matter of hours, it wiped out nearly 19,000 structures, including more than 12,000 homes, and displaced most of the town's population.

For Paradise Unified School District (PUSD), the question was not whether they would rebuild, but how. Nearly seven years later, the answer has emerged in bricks, beams, and classrooms filled once again with the sounds of learning.

"This district could have dissolved. A lot of people thought it might," said Superintendent Betsy Amis, reflecting on those first uncertain months after the fire. "But Paradise is a rural town built on strong relationships. Generational families live here. Even when everything was gone, people said, 'We're rebuilding. We're staying.' And the schools became central to that recovery."

Amis's own journey mirrors that of the district she now leads. "I actually started teaching here in 2022," she said. "Fourth grade, then first grade at Pine Ridge. I became vice principal, then principal, and later stepped into curriculum leadership. After the fire, our superintendent retired, and the board chose me as an internal candidate. It mattered that I knew this community inside and out."

That local trust proved vital during a time when the district faced the dual pressures of trauma recovery and massive reconstruction.

On the financial side was David McCready, Assistant Superintendent of Business Services, who joined the district in 2012. "Since the fire, we've spent about \$155 million on new construction. For a district with only 1,810 students, that's enormous," McCready explained.

Funding did not come easily. A local bond measure failed in the aftermath of the fire. Instead of halting progress, the district turned to alternative strategies. "We relied on Certificates of Participation (COPs), state construction funds, insurance settlements, and the Measure Y bond money that passed just two days before the fire," McCready said. "It hasn't covered everything, so Paradise Elementary will be built in phases over the next six years. But the first phase will open by August 2026."

The fire forced students and staff into borrowed spaces across Butte County. "We were in Durham, in Oroville, even gathering kids at Barnes & Noble," Amis recalled. "Everywhere you looked, people asked, 'How can we help?' Neighboring districts opened their doors, and we

literally called every single student to make sure they had a place to go. Trauma research tells us—being with your people matters. And that’s what we focused on.”

Today, PUSD’s rebuilt schools are more than functional; they are symbols of resilience. Major projects include:

- **Paradise High School:** New two-story classroom building (\$26.3M), library and science wing modernization (\$9.4M), and a new gym (\$8.4M).
- **Ridgeview High:** Rebuilt for \$13.4M.
- **Paradise Junior High:** \$16.2M modernization.
- **Paradise Ridge Elementary:** A \$24.8M project, now serving 529 students—making it the district’s largest school.
- **Pine Ridge & Cedarwood Schools:** Both rebuilt and modernized, with investments of \$16.6M and \$23.7M respectively.

For Amis, one moment stands out. “When we opened the new high school, students were blown away. There’s an elevator now, and it’s two stories. That may sound small, but in Paradise, it’s the first elevator in town. It symbolized so much more than access. It was proof that we were back.”



The final major project is Paradise Elementary School, which was completely destroyed in the fire. Construction began in summer 2025, with completion of the first phase scheduled for August 2026. “We’ve done this so many times now that the process is efficient,” McCready noted. “But this one feels different. At the groundbreaking, we had retired teachers, former principals, maintenance staff, and alumni all standing together. It wasn’t just about a building; it was the culmination of years of determination.”

The new school, designed with modern safety standards and ADA compliance in mind, will relieve overcrowding at Paradise Ridge Elementary. “Right now, Paradise Ridge has over 529 students, more than our high school,” Amis said. “We’ll need to split that population, adjust boundaries, and transition families. It’s not something superintendents face every day, but it’s the right step for our future.”



The district's recovery has not only been about its facilities. PUSD has also prioritized student wellness and future readiness.

- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** Teachers are now trained in the RULER program (Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate) to help students manage emotions and build resilience.
- **Career Pathways:** New CTE offerings in Emergency Medical Response, Agriculture, and Woodworking give students real-world skills, with plans to expand into Forestry and Natural Resources.
- **Health & Wellness Resource Center:** Serving families across Paradise, Magalia, and Stirling City, the center connects the community with vital health and social services.

As Amis explained, "The fire was devastating, but it also pushed us to rethink education in Paradise. We're not just rebuilding what was lost, we're building what our students deserve for the future."

Paradise Unified's story is inseparable from the resilience of its people. "Think of San Jose," McCready said. "Now imagine half its students gone, and 90% of its homes destroyed. That's what happened here. Yet people chose to stay, to rebuild. For me, that's the most amazing part."

Amis agreed. "Some said, of course we're rebuilding. Others couldn't. But enough people believed in Paradise and in our schools, that here we are today. COVID hit us just as we were getting back on our feet, but now, it finally feels like we're not just surviving. We're thriving."

Looking Toward 2026 and Beyond

With Paradise Elementary set to open its doors in 2026, the district's rebuilding chapter nears its close. For the community, it will mark not just the return of a school, but the completion of a promise made seven years ago: that Paradise would rise again.

"Every new building, every student who walks through those doors; it's a symbol of hope," Amis said. "Our students deserve this. Our town deserves this. And we're proving every day that Paradise is stronger than fire."

Check out the new elementary school for Paradise Unified School District and see what's ahead here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVOro_Xgiq8.

