

Pioneer Union Elementary School District Rising Strong Through Challenge and Community



Pioneer Union Elementary School District has faced years of extraordinary challenges, but through determination, creativity, and community support, the school is rebuilding stronger than ever. Over the past several years, the district has navigated the aftermath of the Camp Fire, the Bear Fire (which became the North Complex Fire), and the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which disrupted the community and the school.

“It all happened at once,” Superintendent Darcy Pollak said. “The fires affected the community, COVID hit, and families were left living in temporary housing. Students had to travel long distances, sometimes 30 or 40 minutes, to attend rented classrooms in neighboring districts just to continue learning.”

Despite these hurdles, Pioneer Union Elementary has steadily rebuilt, both physically and emotionally. Last December, newly constructed classrooms opened in Berry Creek, providing students with a safe and nurturing environment. The district also secured crucial Prop 2 funding after advocating in Sacramento for \$7.1 million, enabling the construction of a second building that will house a commercial kitchen, a gym, offices, and other essential facilities.

Securing that funding, however, was no easy task. Superintendent Pollak described the challenge of communicating to legislators why a small, rural district with fewer than 50 students needed

support for major infrastructure projects. “It was nerve-wracking,” she said. “We had to explain that, even though our student population is small, the costs of rebuilding a school in this remote mountain community are high. We talked about the gym, the kitchen, the office spaces, and how essential they are for providing a safe and supportive learning environment.”



The district’s advocacy paid off, but not without tension and uncertainty. “We were on pins and needles,” Pollak recalled. Some legislators abstained because they did not know our community. In the end, it barely passed, but that vote allowed us to move forward and start rebuilding.” This process highlighted the dedication and persistence required to advocate for small and rural schools, where every dollar and decision directly affects students’ opportunities.

While enrollment is small, currently 49 students, the district has made remarkable progress in student engagement. Chronic absenteeism, which had affected nearly half the student body, has been cut in half between 18–20%. Overall, daily attendance has increased to over 94%, reflecting the district’s ongoing commitment to supporting students. “Our kids are thriving,” Pollak said. “They’re showing resilience, and we’re seeing measurable growth every month.”

Throughout the rebuilding process, the community and families have played a major role in this rural district. Pioneer Union Elementary has made intentional investments in social-emotional support to meet students where they are and strengthen connections with families. The school now offers a wellness coach, a parent success liaison, and restorative practices that emphasize relationship-building, communication, and support. These efforts are designed to build a strong home to school connection and create a positive, supportive educational experience for every child. Superintendent Pollak shared how her team even makes home visits for students who cannot get to school, ensuring every child has access to learning opportunities and feels supported.

“Our approach is about more than just academics,” Pollak said. “We’re helping families navigate challenges while keeping students on track. We’re nurturing resilience and building a positive, supportive environment for everyone.”

Through its Extended Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP), Pioneer Union Elementary provides students with experiences and connects them to the broader world. These opportunities include attending a Broadway production of *The Lion King*, participating in a bowling league, and engaging in arts and science enrichment field trips. These experiences help students build confidence, explore new interests, and grow academically and socially in ways that would otherwise be difficult in such a remote community.



Pioneer Union Elementary hosts monthly parent nights that bring families together through food, literacy, and shared activities. Each event integrates a family meal, literacy-focused learning, information and support from outside agencies, and a hands-on project for parents to complete with their children. These gatherings strengthen relationships, provide families with practical tools, and reinforce the importance of learning at home and at school.

Staff dedication is another cornerstone of the district's recovery. Many employees drive over an hour daily to ensure students have consistent instruction and care. Despite hardship, staff remain deeply committed to students and the broader community. "Our team is incredible," Pollak said. "They've endured so much, yet arrive daily with care, creativity, and determination. The community and students benefit from their commitment."

Rebuilding has brought innovation and new programs. The district plans to offer preschool, hybrid learning, and independent study, providing flexible options for families. These initiatives prepare students for high school and strengthen community ties.

Pioneer Union Elementary has also built stronger ties with neighboring districts, joining joint events and activities that enrich students' experiences. From talent shows to assemblies, partnerships extend classroom opportunities. "Even as a small, remote district, we're part of a supportive network," Pollak said. "Our students gain confidence, skills, and community." Pollak sees a bright future: "We've faced extraordinary challenges, but our students, staff, and families show resilience daily."



Superintendent Darcy Pollak and Students