A Chicago colleague asked recently, “What is the name of your new school district?” “Carmel Unified,” I responded. “Unified?” she inquired as though she had misheard. I quickly responded, “Yes, in Chicago we would call it a Unit District. It serves students in grades K-12. Actually we also have a preschool program here, so it’s actually pre-K to grade 12, but it’s about the same thing as a unit district.”

Lately, I’ve realized there’s more to it than my first simple explanation. I have a growing understanding and appreciation for the power-- and the potential-- implied by the word “Unified” that we carry in our district name, and I am proud to be the superintendent of a district that strives to live out this notion of being “unified.” It is one of the qualities that makes us distinctive. Let me explain this by sharing a couple of recent experiences.

When I was hired last January, board members told me that our district was one of the largest districts in California, at least in terms of geography. We have about 2500 students coming from homes in a 500-600 square mile district! While some of our students live close to their home schools, about 10% have to take a bus trip that can be over an hour one way or longer, depending on the number of stops. Our school buses bring about 140 students west on Carmel Valley Road from our easternmost areas in Cachagua; other bus routes reach down 26 miles on Route One to pick up potentially 138 students from Big Sur which--after the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge reopens mid October--will actually be a trip about 40 miles down the coast.

This is amazing to me! Growing up in midwestern suburbs, many of my high school friends and I were frequently told by our finger-wagging parents when we were complaining about walking home that they had “walked two miles uphill through the ice and snow to get to school.” While I hope ice and snow is no longer in my future out here, I realized recently that as superintendent I needed a firsthand understanding of what it is like for a number of our students to daily make this trek on one of our buses. So in the past month, I have made both trips on a bus --to Cachagua and to Big Sur-- and learned some things I want to share with you as I continue on my personal learning journey to really understand what the experiences are for ALL of our students.

**My First Bus Trip to Cachagua**

Though I had been to Cachagua twice before by car, I decided that was not a fair representation of what the student travel experience must be like, so several weeks ago at 6:25am on Thursday morning, August 30, I joined John Martin, on bus #1 Route B, for the 29 mile trip to Cachagua to pick up our elementary students bound for Tularcitos.

A bit about John. We are lucky to have him as one of our drivers. A retired heavy machine operator, John tells me he
has been picking up about 20 students each school morning and dropping off about 30 each afternoon for about the last 4-5 years. Usually his first pick up is at 7:30 a.m., and he delivers his passengers to Tularcitos about 8:25 a.m. I asked him why he’s driving instead of enjoying retirement. I quickly learn that John likes kids, wanted to make a difference by “giving back,” and like many of our drivers, he is doing just that. Not only do these unsung heroes safely transport our students back and forth to school, through good weather and bad--through smoke from occasional fires (like the Sobranes fire last year) and/or fog and rain-- but for two hours a day, they serve as surrogate parents, role models, and important adult figures that reinforce the values of Carmel Unified’s core mission to our students.

John tells me as we make the trip out that he has occasionally seen bobcats, deer, and wild pigs. If he has time and there’s roadkill on the road, he’ll stop and drag it off to make the road safer for those travellers to come. The traffic can be a bit challenging, he says, navigating a large school bus around local roads where some drivers are speeding in the opposite direction to work.

So on this day, John welcomed me and I settled in for the ride out and back. What’s it like to ride on a school bus? I did not get carsick--which some had been predicted--but I must confess I have not been on a school bus for an extended ride since I was a high school English teacher taking students on a field trip. Today’s buses have high backs and this one had seat belts and four--yes four cameras--which record what goes on during a bus ride. It’s great protection and a subtle deterrent for the occasional rambunctious passengers to help ensure the ride goes smoothly.

Our drive out to Cachagua was beautiful. Once past Carmel Valley Village, the roads wind up and around mountains and valleys. Houses are few and far between. There were vineyards, ranches with cattle, the Carmel Valley Tennis Camp compound, and a mixture of modest homes and elaborate estates. At some point, cell service stops, which thankfully forced me to observe and take in my surroundings. My midwestern ears loved the quaintness of the bus stop names: Ringer’s General Store, Heller Gate, Hidden Valley Ranch, Trampa Canyon, Featherbow, Eaton’s, Rana Creek, Fox Creek, Valle Vista, Los Helechos, and Del Rio to name a few. This particular day John picked up 26 students --grades Kinder to grade 6 --at seven different bus stops-- all headed for a day of learning at Tularcitos. He greeted the students by name and knew from experience which ones should sit together. He kept an eye on a few, sitting them in the front seat near to him and appointed a buddy for another who needed a friend for the long ride. So that he could accurately report attendance, John used his clicker to make a careful count of how many students climbed on the bus, and watched for how many exited when we arrived at Tular. When all stepped off, he walked to the back and made a visual sweep to make sure none were left sleeping on the bus or were distracted from getting off.

The Cachagua route is admittedly long, curvy and somewhat bumpy. Last year, the district purchased a number of IPODs that bus riders may check out to use during the hour long trip. These ipods have been loaded with games to help students stay occupied. One of the reasons I wanted to ride the bus was to see how bumpy the
ride really is and whether some “educational” use of the time might be possible, particularly if we could equip the bus with internet. The jury is out on that investigation-for cell service is spotty and the ride is fairly bumpy—though I will continue to investigate options. Just a note: The buses all have two-way radios to communicate with the transportation office. The Big Sur buses have an additional feature similar to Nextel that allows communication in areas our standard radios can't reach.

Taking a long bus ride to school is only one part of the diversity in our district, and we are richer for it. Those who live in the outer reaches of our district live closest to nature, sometimes experiencing its wild unleashing of energy and force. While others may prefer the conveniences of Carmel, or town living, our unique experiences make us stronger as a community.

I am also appreciative of community groups like The Friends of Cachagua that partnered with the district this past summer to bring a two week enrichment summer program to Princes Camp in Cachagua at the eastern edge of our district. During that time students worked with teachers who: volunteered their time to bring science lessons alive through outdoor treks through the woods, fostered a love of learning through shared reading of age appropriate novels, and provided opportunities to build rapport and team building skills through games and activities. Also included were opportunities to bring students to the ocean’s edge and to a local Y. Nearly 40 Cachagua residents came to a recent board meeting to express their thanks and to share what it had meant for their students to have this two week enrichment opportunity.

We look forward to next summer….

The Road to Big Sur

My second bus ride was on Sept 19 as I joined driver Terry Richwine on bus #10 leaving the district parking lot at 5:40 a.m. to make the trek to Big Sur. Normally, it’s a 40-mile trip but with the bridge being out, it’s about 26 miles.

Terry, like John, has returned from retirement to serve the needs of our students. The trip out that morning in September was made totally in the dark, so it was really only on the return trip that I witnessed the early morning light along one of the most beautiful highways in California. I am still making the adjustment from flat Illinois cornfields to mountainous vistas and curvy roads such as the one that careens around well named “Hurricane Point.” I am grateful our students are in the skilled hands of Terry. This trip was different but equally as beautiful as the road to Cachagua, and it was definitely a smoother ride. Terry has promised that if I join him on the additional
13 miles of the trip down Route One--after the bridge is back in operation -- I may come to realize that it has its own stomach-curdling qualities as the road has more twists and turns further south.

Terry tells me he never gets tired of the drive. He mentioned that just the day before he saw humpback whales past Sobranes point. The trip can have its challenges, though, particularly in the winter when he needs to watch for fallen rocks in the road when he rounds a curve. Dealing with wind and rain on stormy days is also a challenge.

But the kids, he exclaims, make it worth it. “They are some of the nicest kids...many of their parents working in hospitality careers in and around the area resorts”. He shared a story that obviously touched him about one student with Down syndrome who over time actually taught Terry sign language so they could communicate during the trip. Terry’s son lives in the area, serving as a fire captain in Big Sur, and sometimes he’ll stay down there mid trips and have lunch with him. “The community in Big Sur is close,” Terry shares. “You get to know people.” He recounted how he was invited to a graduation party by one family whose child he had taken on many a trip to school.

The bus stops along the way also carry charming names: Big Sur Station, Pfeiffer State Park, Fernwood Resort, Ripplewood Resort, and River Inn, but there is one stop more than the others that makes an impact on me. Gathered at this stop are about 20 students who have walked together through the woods for at least 20-30 minutes just to get to this bus pick up point. They are the children of families who have been isolated since the winter by the collapse of the Pfeiffer Canyon bridge.

Using flashlights and watching out for each other, our students daily make the trek down to the bus stop in the park. At day’s end, they climb the steep path up to meet parents and cars to take them home. With what energy is left, they tackle homework and chores.

Though this bus route carried about 16 middle and 20 high school students, I am reminded that the later morning bus picks up our elementary students who must make a similar journey through the woods. I am reminded of the commitment to education that our parents make and that we as a district make to educate all of our children.

Walking the Trail
I have one last experience to share. On Tuesday, Sept 26, I joined what is probably the last group of Carmel Unified students and employees who together have made seven trips to carry food and supplies up the trail to the isolated residents of Big Sur. It gave me the opportunity to walk the trail to see what it has been like for our students.

What did the trek show me? First, that I need to join a gym. This flatlander is out of shape, and my huffing and puffing up the trail, loaded with a backpack carrying only six dozen eggs, was a fitness reality check. Second, even if I were in shape, this was
not an easy trail to navigate. While on one hand it was a beautiful hike through the woods, it is undeniably steep and extremely dusty, busy with individuals coming and going. I was a gritty mess after this trip. I can’t imagine what the trail is like when it rains. My picture above shows steps, but much of the trail is just a worn path. It is not easy for these students to just get to the bus stop. I am in awe of their persistence.

In whatever way our students throughout the district get to their respective schools, they are met by teachers and staff motivated to know them by name and by their individual needs. They come to us from diverse backgrounds and sets of experiences, and yet our mission statement clearly states that we strive to: “produce lifelong learners who are prepared for the challenges of higher education, the workplace, and their role as citizens of an ever-changing global community.”

For about a dozen years, we walk the metaphorical journey with them, and with you, their parents. It is our hope that together we are raising citizens who are tolerant of others’ differences in opinion and life experiences, who have learned to be resilient no matter what obstacles the storms and “slides” may throw across their paths, and that they take full advantage of the rich resources and opportunities we are lucky to provide for them through Carmel’s “unified district.” I am proud to work alongside those who daily work to meet each of their needs. Yes, I am proud to say: #WeAreCarmelUnified.

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**One additional thank you:**

Though I have not had the privilege of riding with each of our bus drivers on their routes, I want to recognize them for the role they play in the lives of our children each and every day.

**Bus Driver** | **Route or Destination**
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Trish Collins | Cachagua
Gloriela Williams | Town/Valley/Big Sur Later Run
Dave Cline | Valley
Robert Gomez | Palo Colorado/Highlands
Danielle Caldiera | Pebble Beach/Town
Sal Sardina | Valley/Cachagua late Run
Tina Perez | Town/Valley
Elena Munoz | Big Sur Elementary
Oscar Marquez | Valley

**Special Needs Transportation**

Joe Wedlake
Jeff Leger
Ray LeMaire
Cynthia Evans

Also:
Director of MOT - Dan Paul
Transportation Coordinator - Rocky Rivera

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Note: For those of you who are on Twitter, please follow #WeAreCarmelUnified to learn about what sets us apart and makes us a truly exceptional unified public school district! I will be posting (with that hashtag) some signposts of what I am learning on my journey this first year as your superintendent.