

ELK GROVE CITIZEN
HISTORY HAPPENED HERE
HISTORY GOLD STAR 2008 - Elk Grove Unified School District
by Elizabeth Pinkerton
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The second recipient of my *History Gold Star for 2008* is the Elk Grove Unified School District, for its almost 50 years of providing a high quality education for young people. For those of us who have been around since the beginning years of the unified district, we find it amazing that today there are 50 schools and more than 61,000 enrolled. In 1959, when the district began, there were eight elementary schools, one high school, and 3,000 students. Today's students are very diverse culturally, and they speak 80 different languages, the dropout rate is low, and the academic achievement rate is very good. Elk Grove is the envy of many school districts, and there is much to celebrate. Superintendent Steve Ladd is thinking ahead to next year when the district has its 50th anniversary, and it will be quite a celebration.

It would seem that Elk Grove would be a good model or the newest unified district in Sacramento County to follow. The brand new Two Rivers Unified School District begins on July 1, 2008, and the Grant, North Sacramento, Del Paso, and Rio Linda districts will slowly fade away. That is kind of what happened to the independent elementary districts of Elk Grove a half century ago. The name of our high school was retained for the new district, and thus was born the Elk Grove Unified School District on July 1, 1959.

I do not think that anyone argue with my claim that Elk Grove Unified is one of the best school districts in California, and perhaps even in the U. S. Those of you who know me know that I spent 40 years working in EGUSD as a teacher and administrator, so it may appear that I could be considered somewhat biased. However, I have also had opportunities to work with educators from hundreds of school districts, not just in California, but nationally as well, and when I make recommendations for improving their practices, management, and academic achievement, I almost always find myself telling them to look at Elk Grove.

So how did it happen? How did this district grow so fast and still maintain its solid core successful practices? Who should be credited for the past 50 years of good management? And, keep in mind, that EGUSD is a strong history supporter too—both in regard to what is taught to students, how the schools tell their stories, and district support for local history across the years.

For newcomers, here is the EGUSD story.

Geographically, the district covers 320 square miles which makes it one of the largest in California. The EGUSD boundaries cover most of south Sacramento County, stretching to miles from near the Sacramento River to the Amador County foothills. Included in the school district are the entire city of Elk Grove, portions of the city of Sacramento and Rancho Cordova, and large chunks of Sacramento County. The Cosumnes River runs through the district from east to west, and Highway 99 and Interstate 5 cross from north and south. This was all farmland at the time of unification, but the city of Sacramento was growing southward, and there was overcrowding in the Florin area as well as the northern part of the Elk Grove elementary district. The shift from farms, sheep,

cows, and dairies to houses, businesses and shopping centers made the EGUSD one of the fastest growing school districts in the nation during the past decade. It is now one of the largest in California and only 60 school districts in the nation are larger.

Our first schools were in the gold fields of the Cosumnes River, but others began to spring up through the region. We have a claim to fame here for the first official school in Sacramento County in 1853 was the San Joaquin School, located at Grant Line Road and today's Highway 99. I hope that when they finish that over-crossing, someone puts in a marker to make that bit of history known to everyone.

The Elk Grove elementary district is one of the oldest in California, formed in 1866. This was right after the Civil War when families began to move to this area, and many of them had obtained property with their military benefits. The Elk Grove School was built at the little crossroads place on Stockton Road. The second school at this site is still with us. Look for it in its original location on East Stockton Road, just north of Wal-Mart and surrounded by development on three sides.

In 1892 a special election was held among the elementary school districts to tax themselves to create a high school. Sixteen of them said, yes, and that is how the Elk Grove Union High School District was formed. This had never been done in California, and it gave Elk Grove the distinction of having the first rural high school district in the state. The present boundaries of the Elk Grove Unified School District closely follow the high school boundary designated in 1893.

It was a common practice in the 1920s for elementary schools to join together in union districts—probably to save money as enrollments declined. The Elk Grove Union District absorbed three districts: San Joaquin, Victory (near the railroad tracks where the new town of Elk Grove was expanding), and Jackson (on Calvine Road). A new brick school was built on Elk Grove Road, the building that later became district offices from 1968 until 1994 when the new building was completed on Elk Grove-Florin Road. The brick building is now the home of the Cosumnes Community Services District.

The unification of the Elk Grove district took place under the supervision of Sacramento County Superintendent T .R. Smedberg who had been the principal of Elk Grove High in the 1940s. Unification was popular in the 1950s as evidenced by the many districts throughout the state that joined their neighbors to make better use of their resources. In order for a district to unify, the voters of the proposed area went to the polls and voted either yes or no.

It is interesting to note that the Elk Grove election for unification was very close. A total of 1,154 people voted. Voting NO were 565, but 589 voted YES, and unification won by only 24 votes! Of the eight precincts, five said no to unification. Tiny Lee district (later joined with Dillard), Sierra, and Elk Grove voted yes. Franklin, Cosumnes, Dillard, Florin, and Pleasant Grove all voted no. This resulted in some bitterness and lack of trust, but the new district worked its way through it by concentrating on the benefits to all.

One of the amazing things about the Elk Grove Unified School District is that in its 49 years of existence, there have been only five superintendents—George Kibby, Glenn Houde, Bob Trigg, Dave Gordon, and now Steve Ladd. Along with that record of stability, is the fact that citizens elected to the EGUSD Board of Education tend to stay in their positions for many terms. This solid leadership may indeed be one of the main reasons why Elk Grove is such a unique and excellent school district.

I would like to request that Superintendent Ladd and the Board closely reexamine the past 50 years and provide us with their conclusions as to why EGUSD continues to be such a stellar district. Send me your ideas as to why you think we have such a good school district.

1. History Happened Here, Book 1-River, Oaks, Gold.

2. History Happened Here, Book 2-Fields, Farms, Schools

3. Images of America-ELK GROVE

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