



The El Dorado County educational system encompasses 15 school districts serving 30,000 students from El Dorado Hills to Rescue, Shingle Springs and South Lake Tahoe. PHOTO COURTESY OF EL DORADO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The Education Equation

El Dorado schools are a crucial community asset

By Bill Sessa

As he walks through the halls of El Dorado High School, Dr. Ron Carruth sees the school from a very personal perspective.

As superintendent of the El Dorado Union High School District, Carruth oversees the same classrooms where he and his wife received their education four decades ago, and where his parents did the same years before that.

"I think it was a place to get a very good education that prepared me for college and my graduate degrees," he says. "There were strong and caring teachers that helped me find my path," which has brought him back to the Sierra Foothills after a 30-year academic career in Southern California.

“We value traditional academic achievement and have some of the highest graduation and college readiness ratings in the state.”

— Dr. Ed Manansala
Superintendent, El Dorado County
Office of Education

Generations of students have shared that experience throughout the El Dorado County educational system, which encompasses 15 school districts serving 30,000 students and stretches from urban El Dorado Hills to more rural communities such as Rescue, Shingle Springs and South Lake Tahoe.

“We value traditional academic achievement and have some of the highest graduation and college readiness ratings in the state,” says Dr. Ed Manansala, superintendent of the El Dorado County Office of Education. “We also believe in students being well rounded and engaged in service.”

The county’s schools provide equal opportunities for students from a wide range of backgrounds that reflect the population of the region. “We have students who come from high-income areas and those that are eligible for subsidies who are from families that are struggling,” says Dustin Haley, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the Rescue Union School District.

The first opportunity for every student to begin their education is in transitional kindergarten for students as young as four



El Dorado Savings Bank is celebrating its 65th anniversary this year. The bank was founded in 1958 by a group of local business leaders in Placerville and it opened for business in a small storefront on Historic Main Street.

Its mission was to offer competitive savings programs to local residents while promoting home ownership through its real estate lending. As it expanded its operations over the years, the bank remained faithful to these original principles by developing new loan and savings products while adding service delivery channels with ATMs, Telephone Banking, Mobile Banking, Remote Deposit Capture and its new Online Loan Application.

The bank has distinguished itself from the competition during its 65 years by providing the personal, efficient and friendly service to all existing and prospective customers that El Dorado has become known for.

“The management, employees and shareholders of El Dorado Savings Bank are very proud to celebrate the 65 years of growth and success,” says CEO John Cook. “We look forward to continuing to serve the banking needs of our customers and local communities for many years to come.”

The combination of convenient branch locations, employees dedicated to customer service, and a variety of products, services and delivery channels to meet the needs of its diverse customers and communities, has allowed El Dorado Savings Bank to grow its operations while continually recording consistent growth and profitability.

El Dorado operates 31 offices in seven contiguous northern California counties, with four offices in Douglas and Washoe Counties in northern Nevada. As of Sept. 30, 2023, the bank had \$2.54 billion in assets and capital of \$285.3 million, representing 11.17% of assets.

The El Dorado Hills Branch (pictured) is located at 3963 Park Dr. The original El Dorado Hills office was one of the earliest businesses to open in El Dorado Hills. It was initially housed in a modular building across from the Union 76 service station on property that was later developed as the Raley’s shopping center.

Local Branches and Contact Information:

4040 El Dorado Rd., Placerville - Main Branch • 247 Main St., Placerville
2888 Ray Lawyer Dr., Placerville • 694 Pleasant Valley Rd. #3, Diamond Springs
4060 Cameron Park Dr., Cameron Park • 3963 Park Dr., El Dorado Hills
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DOUG VEERKAMP
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS IN BUSINESS!

Doug Veerkamp is the epitome of the self-made man. He started in the business just out of high school working with Joe Vicini Inc. where he was mentored for nearly eight years in the industry. He and his wife Lori opened Doug Veerkamp General Engineering in May 1983 and haven't stopped since. They hired their first employee, who is still with the company, just three months after.

Once Doug Veerkamp General Engineering Inc. started taking on jobs the sky was the limit. The business looked good from the beginning and Doug attributes this to getting the right jobs, with the right customers who helped his business grow through word of mouth. As long as he kept his customers happy and satisfied, he could count on recommendations.

Today, after 40 years into being in business, the company employs around 170 people during its seasonal peaks and boasts a fleet of well over 300 pieces of equipment and trucks to service its customers.

From private jobs to public works, no job is too small or too big for Doug Veerkamp General Engineering. He admits that they are blessed with a good reputation in the community.

A family owned and operated business from the start and continuing into the future. The next generation, their son Matt Veerkamp, looks to lead the business and continue to follow the example set by Doug and Lori.

Doug and family firmly believe in giving back to the community that has helped build and support the business and employees. The firm continues to give back to the community in many ways. Two of Doug's keys to success are honesty and integrity. "Businesses like ours are a dime a dozen," Doug said. "You have to set yourself above the rest. Do what you say and say what you do."

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years old. It's an experience where they can gain social skills by participating in group activities and acquire basic academic skills, like learning the alphabet, that pay dividends in future years.

"We see a better transition to middle school from students when they start in transitional kindergarten compared to students whose first day of school is kindergarten," Haley says.

Education is not limited to the classroom. All seven of the schools in the Rescue Union School District, for example, have gardens that offer a place for students to read and relax or spaces for more private conversations with counselors and teachers. The gardens also offer opportunities to teach some basics about plants and water cycles.

The arts, from music to painting, are also embedded in the daily routine of area schools. "It's an opportunity for students to be creative and express themselves," says Jim Shoemaker, Rescue Union School District superintendent. "There's evidence that being engaged in the arts stimulates imagination and triggers part of the brain that helps with problem solving" while boosting self-confidence that comes from students testing themselves and doing well.

"It's not just done to fill time," Shoemaker says.

For the past 43 years, the importance of the arts in education has been put on display countywide during the Festival of Oral Interpretation hosted by the Pioneer Union School District. Each year, hundreds of students from nearly 20 schools perform poetry and prose, either from famous literary works or their own personally written pieces.

For 64 years, the county has also hosted the Sugarloaf Fine Arts Camp, a summer program where students can immerse themselves in artistic lessons and that ends with students displaying their work or performing for family and friends.

The results of these opportunities, as well as area schools' strong academic programming, show up in student performance. For example, Carruth notes that "Ponderosa High School has one of the top academic decathlon teams in the state."


And while most schools emphasize academics geared toward preparing students for college, many of El Dorado's schools also prepare students for technical careers.

"We built one of the strongest Career Technical Education programs in the state when other school systems were cutting them back and most of them are integrated into community college programs," Carruth says about a curriculum that offers a path to more than 30 highly skilled jobs ranging from agriculture and the construction trades to medical technology and hospitality and tourism.

Regardless of whether students choose an academic or technical curriculum, they eventually end their education in one of the county's four public high schools. Some, like Carruth's El Dorado High School, have enjoyed stable enrollments, but many local schools are projecting a slight decline in future years as shrinking family size and a lack of housing diversity produces half as many students as in the past.

Carruth says this is a statewide trend. He attributes the projected decline to a low birth rate that didn't rebound after the recession of 2008-10. "We used to look at new home construction and calculate how many future students we could plan for," he says. "We probably need to modify that formula."

He says the projected decline is not a problem as long as school districts pay close attention to their budgets and adjust for the changing enrollment. But he also contends that there's a need for more affordable housing "just like other parts of the state" that, at least in theory, might boost future student enrollment.

"This is a desirable community to live in and we have a lot of stability in our teachers and staff," Carruth says. 

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Bill Sessa has been a freelance writer for Comstock's since 2013. He has received many awards for his writing about the automotive industry and motorsports for national publications including Speed Sport, Autoweek and Performance Racing Industry magazines and for the Napa Valley Register.

This is the Life

Amenities set El Dorado Hills apart

There's so much to love about El Dorado Hills that it's tough to name just a few things. Whether you're a resident or visitor, the area is a hotbed of amazing amenities that enthrall people of all ages.

With its scenic hiking trails, championship golf course, numerous lakes and close proximity to Tahoe and Amador Valley, the area also boasts renowned restaurants, entertainment and wine tasting.

Just ask Mela Fratarcangeli, founding partner of Onyx Real Estate, who has lived in El Dorado Hills for 20 years and raised her children here.

"I love the small-town feel and sense of community," she says. "People care about you and know who you are. There is always something great to do, whether it is having a meal at one of the local spots, enjoying the outdoors hiking on one of the many trails, enjoying the beautiful views, or cheering on the football team under the Friday night lights. When you live here, you truly feel connected."

The area also offers high-end housing located in beautiful neighborhoods and top-rated schools. Fratarcangeli says there are also more restaurants, shops and activities than ever before to meet the growing needs of the community.

"More businesses have been attracted to the area as the community continues to grow," says Debbie Manning, president and CEO of the El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce. "This has made El Dorado Hills an even more attractive place to live."

Manning says the population has grown from 44,000 in 2013 to nearly 50,000 people today, with many of the newer homeowners in the area moving into developments like Serrano by Parker Development, Heritage, Blackstone and Saratoga Estates, and several developments along Bass Lake Road.

"We are situated in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains between the San Francisco Bay Area and scenic Lake Tahoe basin, giving residents a wide variety of destinations two to three hours away," Manning says.

She notes that the area welcomes nearly 15,000 visitors a year from all over the state and country — and even its fair share of international tourists — through the chamber-run California Welcome Center.

The heart of the area is indisputably El Dorado Hills Town Center, which Manning says "has become the downtown of our community and hosts many local happenings." The area also boasts stellar retail options at the Montano de El Dorado Shopping Plaza, Raley's Center and Sienna Ridge shopping center.

For entertainment, you can't beat Red Hawk Resort and Casino's new venue The Apex, which features 18-lane bowling, a virtual reality arcade, golf simulator, multi-level karting track, sports bar, grill and more.

For outdoor enthusiasts, there's the Serrano Country Club championship golf course, El Dorado Hills Bowmen club and archery range, and hiking trails like the Browns Ravine South Shore Trail.

El Dorado County is also home to more than 70 wineries offering a wide variety of wine for those who want to taste what this wonderful area has to offer.

— Lisa Kopochinski