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Fourth of July: Uniquely American

By Dr. Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

The Fourth of July is a glorious time of year. Summer vacation is in full swing. Children spend their days playing with friends and extended family, providing service to the community, and visiting our local libraries to check out a great summer read or attend a special event. Many families will gather together on the afternoon of Independence Day before heading to a local park or other special vantage point to view the evening fireworks.

We are grateful to live in a community that makes myriad community events available to our families, and during this special time of year our appreciation is especially enhanced and evokes strong emotions. Fourth of July celebrations remind us of the ideals of freedom and independence that inspired men and women to bold action 242 years ago.

However, for many people across the nation, the energy and excitement that always accompanies Fourth of July celebrations feels more complicated this year. While we are enthusiastic about celebrating our patriotic holiday, complete with spectacular fireworks that help memorialize our independence, we also reflect on what it means to be an American, and what it means for all.

We worry about what will become of our Dreamers, the young people who have never known any other country than ours. For many of us, they are our friends and neighbors. We have attended—and taught together—in our local schools. As integral parts of the fabric of our communities, Dreamers are people we know, trust, and value.

We see unsettling images of families being separated at our nation's borders, with headlines reporting that some children have already gone weeks without their parents. These deeply distressing reports and images leave us to wonder when—or even if—reunions will come.

Thus our dilemma: how do we reconcile the pride and joy we feel on the Fourth of July with the emotions evoked as we witness these difficult situations?

There is no simple answer, of course, but we can look to our public schools as a vivid reminder that enduring models of inclusivity, equity, and compassion stand on display every day. Our schools provide a constant and important beacon of light. Public schools take every student. They embrace everyone. Our schools stand as an example of what we can and should aspire to be as friends, neighbors, citizens, and as the United States of America.

One of our most iconic American monuments, the Statue of Liberty, displays a plaque at its base inscribed with the poem “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

This sentiment expresses who we are as a nation, strengthened by the contributions of immigrants and a beacon of hope to the world.

This is a value and mission our public schools accept every day. It isn’t easy, nor is it without its challenges. But it is right. It is good. And, like our Fourth of July, it is uniquely American.

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