

Case Study

March 2020



Fueling an Appetite for Esports at Fresno USD

Esports: A Definition

Multi-player, online video games played competitively as part of a team*
—NASEF



Fresno Unified School District

California's Fourth Largest School District

Enrollment: 73,249

Number of Schools: 106

Free and Reduced Lunch: 86.9%

www.fresnounified.org

"Instead of parents seeing kids rush home from school, students now want to stay late and practice [esports]. After not feeling connected to the school, suddenly, they are representing us."

— KURT MADDEN,
CTO, FUSD

Esports are on the rise—both in the U.S. and the world—with viewership rapidly catching up to the largest “traditional” sporting events in the world. This growing industry represents millions of dollars of revenue and has opened up career paths for serious esports athletes: a phenomenon that Fresno Unified School District is capitalizing upon.

California's fourth largest school district, [Fresno Unified](#) embarked on a bold, trail-blazing journey in the fall of 2018: to offer full-scale competitive esports across the district, packed with talented players and opening doors for college scholarships. With the outfitting of a gaming arena to host district-wide tournaments that keep pace with the high technological demands of esports, Fresno committed to a robust Intel technology solution to support and grow alongside the school's esports endeavors. Not only do the district's esports players directly benefit from the technology, but it provides cutting-edge infrastructure for Fresno Unified's other academic pursuits such as CTE courses, coding, and graphic design.

The Challenge of Esports in K-12

Since the advent of video games, their controversial nature has been on the educational stage. Dissenters claim that they encourage violence and promote antisocial behavior. For these common reasons, communities may initially balk at the idea of school-sponsored esports—and Fresno was no exception.

The first and biggest challenge was safety. “What blocked us from district-wide adoption? The idea of safety, of appropriateness,” says Kurt Madden, the district's chief technology officer. Parents and the school board were concerned with the violence, increased screen time, and “basement-dwelling” reputation of video games. Yet, with pervasive student interest already secured, a school-sponsored and supervised foray into esports could only elevate a current social phenomenon to a legitimate team-building opportunity.

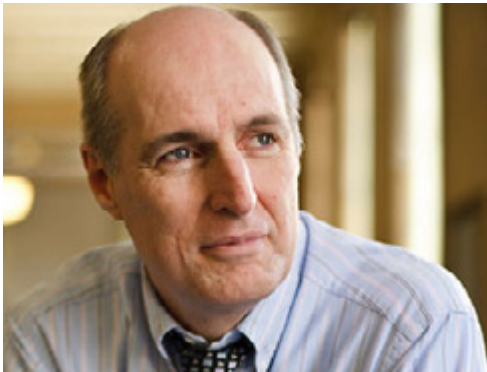
With the growing popularity of esports on a global and collegiate scale, it became urgent for Fresno to keep up with the industry, positioning talented students for scholarship readiness. At the heart of esports—like any sport—is strategy, teamwork, creative problem-solving, communication, and accountability. More than with traditional athletics, esports provides an in-road to more equitable game play, with teams comprised of students of different genders, ages, and able-bodiedness.



The Fresno Approach: FUEL

With extensive data backing up the global reach and collegiate legitimacy of the sport—coupled with students' growing enthusiasm—Fresno Unified began to win over parents and community members. With a dedicated “[Tips for Parents](#)” section on their website that advocates for parents to play alongside their athletes, the district's esports endeavor began gluing the community together.

Fresno Unified launched its esports involvement with a game called [Rocket League*](#), a virtual game of soccer and the third most popular game for scholarship recipients. With no blood or gore and a clear connection to the public's idea of traditional sports, the game seemed like a good start. However, with a high cost-per-player—as well as the fact that there are only three students per team and games only last five minutes—game management was difficult. Fresno Unified eventually turned its attention to [League of Legends*](#), the world's most popular game, where teams of five students compete in a multiplayer battle arena to use each player's unique strengths to capture the opposition's base. As popularity grew within the district, so did the perception of the sport's legitimacy within the community.



Kurt Madden, FUSD CTO

- Chief Technology Officer at Fresno Unified School District
- Author of 2010 book, “The Synergetic Follower”
- Former VP for a Fortune 100 Technology Firm
- Current Adjunct Professor at California State University, Fresno



FUSD's Esports Platform

- MSI* Trident 3 computer with Intel® Core™ i7 processor
 - 16 GB RAM
 - 1 TB SSD
 - NVIDIA* GeForce* RTX 2060 graphics card
- 24” Viewsonic* XG2402 monitor
- MSI* DS502 headset
- VertaGear* gaming chairs

Madden compares the esports experience to any athletic endeavor, advocating for equitable infrastructure and support. “It should feel like a legitimate sport,” he says. To achieve the top gaming standards, Fresno chose an MSI* Trident 3 computer with an Intel® Core™ i7 processor. With 16GB of RAM, 1TB SSD, and an NVIDIA* GeForce* RTX 2060 graphics card, Fresno ensures that students have the highest computing power to stay competitive. They also outfit their athletes with a 24” Viewsonic* XG2402 monitor, a MSI* DS502 headset, and VertaGear* gaming chairs.

Madden acknowledges that not every school can implement this infrastructure immediately, and touts this as one of esports' biggest strengths: schools can use existing computer labs, and students can even play on their own devices. The equipment can grow alongside the team.



FUEL: Fresno Unified Esports League

FUEL emphasizes an equal playing field for its students to engage with one another to help build a stronger community. FUEL celebrates the individuality of its competitors by acknowledging that each individual possesses the potential to achieve their goal. FUEL is about respect of one's self and respect of others.

– FUEL's Code of Conduct

fuel.fresnounified.org

Outcomes

The participation of esports players, spectators, and supporters has skyrocketed throughout Fresno Unified's 12 schools. A burgeoning partnership with Fresno State University, a potential coaches' clinic, a dedicated website, and a reputation as a trend-setting district have all worked together to bolster the program. Additionally, esports have provided a newfound belonging for a previously-disenfranchised group of students. Madden says, "Instead of parents seeing kids rush home from school, students now want to stay late and practice [esports]. After not feeling connected to the school, suddenly, they are representing us."

"Esports should provide an inclusive environment where participants feel welcome and encouraged to engage, compete and improve. Every individual player contributes to the climate in-game, both actively and passively."

- from [FUEL's Code of Conduct](#)



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