

Mayors Mayor Ron Gonzales
Must City of San José
Make
Better
High
Schools a

Top Priority

The traditional job description for mayors includes fixing potholes, protecting public safety, building homes, and attracting jobs to their cities. For mayors in most American cities, schools aren't on the list.

Today, that's not good enough. Improving the quality of education must now be at the top of every mayor's list of priorities. Good schools and successful children are essential for our future prosperity and the quality of life for our communities throughout the nation.

That's what I have done in San José, California. City Hall doesn't have direct authority over schools and education in our city, but I believe we have a very clear obligation to do all we can to improve educational opportunities and strengthen the learning environment for our families and children. The quality of our schools and their ability to prepare all of our children to achieve affects residents in each of our neighborhoods, and it is absolutely essential for our employers.

In San José we have accomplished many goals in early childhood education, teacher recruitment, and afterschool programs. But just as our early care and education programs get kids ready to *learn*, we also know we need to get them ready to *earn*.

That's why high schools are so important for our city's strong commitment to quality education. When high school students don't make it in class, they won't make it in society either. Poor results in high school could mean dead-end jobs, a life of crime, victimization, and/or a terrible cost to our community and our ability to compete.

But by protecting kids, providing better schools and stronger neighborhoods, and preparing our future leaders, we create a better quality of life for all of our residents. And that's the first job for the mayor in any city.

The Challenge

San José's high schools face the challenge of keeping students in school, raising graduation rates, and equipping young people with skills needed in the dynamic Silicon Valley economy. Our latest

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data show that nearly one out of five high school seniors in San José does not graduate on time with his or her class. This works out to nearly fifteen hundred students a year—the equivalent of an entire high school. Of those fifteen hundred, nearly a thousand drop out altogether every year. In a city of almost one million residents and nearly forty thousand high school students, that number might seem tolerable.

But it's not. If an entire high school of one thousand students were to drop out at once, it would be headline news across the country. But one by one, a thousand lives are quietly failing every year. And this is unacceptable.

Partnerships

We are proud of San José as a city of solutions. We continually work with many partners to make our community better. This is true for education as well. The city government and the community regularly come together to meet the needs of our children and help them achieve. Here are some examples of our approach:

- **The Schools/City Collaborative:** San José is served by eighteen independent school districts, including three separate high school systems. We established the Schools/City Collaborative to improve communication and coordination between the city government and the leaders of all our different districts officials. Largely as a result of City Hall leadership, this has become a valuable forum to discuss trends, challenges, and opportunities in San José high schools. As a result we have supported school bond campaigns, linked city services to educational services, and developed a unified voice for speaking to our state legislature. For example, in 2003 the city built Alum Rock Youth Center on the campus of James Lick High School. While the school gave the land to the city for free, the city allows the school to use the center's gym and facilities during school hours. And every day after three p.m., the center opens to serve the surrounding community, involving more city residents with their neighborhood high school.
- **Tapping into national resources:** In the past several years, I have worked closely with the National League of Cities (NLC) and its Institute of Youth, Education, and Families on a variety of issues. NLC identifies and promotes best practices for cities and their work in education across the nation. We are very fortunate to have the Institute of Youth, Education, and Families as our partners on a new high school reform project. With their help, San José is creating a comprehensive plan to ensure that students who are most at risk of failing have access to educational opportunities, a second chance, that can prepare them for college, work, and life. We are joined by four other cities in this effort, and we look forward to sharing our experience and results with others in the near future.

Staying Practical

Especially in education, one size does not fit all. We know there are many practical and innovative ways for mayors who don't have a formal role to play inside our schools to help them. Our successful programs in San José include recruiting and retaining quality high school teachers, ensuring our high school campuses are safe, and acting as a catalyst for vital connections between businesses and high schools.

- **Retaining teachers:** Over the past four years, the San José Teacher Homebuyer Program has helped more than four hundred teachers buy their first homes and put down roots in our city. We provide up to \$40,000 for a zero-interest loan used for down payment assistance for eligible teachers. In a region with very high housing costs, we have helped our schools recruit and retain high-quality teachers.

- **Providing safe high schools:** Children cannot learn, and teachers cannot teach, in an environment where they don't feel safe and secure. San José has made it our goal to ensure that our campuses are among the safest in urban America. Our Safe School Campus Initiative reduces violence and risk for violence at and near our schools by planning and training for campus incidents. The city organizes simulations of potential threats like bomb threats or school shootings to prepare school officials to respond to crises. To prevent violence, the mayor's award-winning Gang Prevention Task Force works with schools, law enforcement, and community organizations to steer young people to positive paths and away from gang crime.
- **Connecting businesses to high schools:** Businesses are becoming more selective in hiring, and high school students must be prepared to learn how to earn in a competitive environment. Schools and businesses have much to gain from each other, and mayors have the contacts and the vision to engage business leaders in our high schools. We must become the catalyst to make the business connections that can provide expertise and resources for schools and help schools understand what employers need in the job market. In San José, I regularly gather our region's largest employers—Cisco Systems and eBay, for example—to discuss what skills they need from high school graduates and how they can contribute to improving those high schools. By getting the business sector on board with education reform, the city is poised to connect high schools in need with the financial and social capital of local businesses. Adobe Systems and Applied Materials have combined to give about \$1 million to one of our newest high schools, Downtown College Prep.

Support Innovation

City leaders across the country have been at the forefront of encouraging innovation in education. An example in San José is my involvement with Downtown College Prep (DCP), the first charter high school in San José. DCP targets underperforming middle school students and offers a rigorous college preparatory program that creates the opportunity for students to go on to college. We are proud to say that DCP graduated its first class in 2004, and 94 percent of the class was accepted to four-year colleges. Statewide, only 19 percent of high school graduates enter a four-year college, while 32 percent enter a community college.

Mayors also can use many practical approaches to foster an environment of educational innovation in high schools. Some of the

approaches that have been successful in San José include financial support, facilities support, and plain old-fashioned political support.

- **Financial support:** Led by the mayor, cities can direct grants or loans to innovative high school programs or new alternative high schools whose mission follows the city's general educational goals, including reducing the dropout rate and increasing graduation. This direct assistance to innovative high schools, including alternative and charter schools, also gives them the leverage they need to raise more funds. Mayors can help connect high schools to businesses and foundations. This is where those mayoral rolodexes come in handy. Anything a mayor can do to help organizations concentrate on instruction and alleviate time-consuming fundraising is a welcome step.

- **Facilities support:** For new alternative and charter high schools, cities should utilize zoning and planning data to help organizations find locations that best serve their high school students. Additionally, building and fire permits that require city approval should be fast-tracked to ensure that a new, innovative high school is up and running within their timeframe.

- **Political support:** Using the bully pulpit, mayors can be effective advocates for better schools. I attend high school district board meetings, parent/teacher meetings, first-day-of-school events, and graduation ceremonies to show the public and the educators where our priorities are.

Especially in education, one size does not fit all. We know there are many practical and innovative ways for mayors who don't have a formal role to play inside our schools to help them.

Conclusion

San José views its role as an engaged partner in education. By positively affecting schools, we improve the lives of children, families, and businesses—all appropriate responsibilities of local government.

America's high school students are at a point in their lives where options will give them the greatest opportunity to succeed. While there are some successful plans in place and numerous organizations working to address this issue, these efforts are not all inclusive or focused. With partnership, assistance, commitment, innovation,

and the use of practical methods, mayors can positively affect the high school landscape, lower dropout rates, and increase high school graduation.

Helping high schools prepare our children for success is essential to San José's prosperity. Our youth, our workforce, and our future leaders are today's high school students, and it is our community's obligation to ensure they succeed.



Ron Gonzales was reelected as mayor of San José, the capital of Silicon Valley, in March 2002. His goals as mayor include strengthening neighborhoods, improving public education, and ensuring the continuing economic vitality of the city with high-quality public services and effective solutions to affordable housing and traffic congestion in the region.

His goals on education have been highlighted by the *New York Times* and *Education Week* in a piece entitled "10 Ways a Mayor Can Help Improve Public Education." Among those goals, he has committed to making San José the most teacher-friendly city in California through helping recruit and retain teachers by providing loans to help them buy homes within the communities they teach.

Gonzales is also a founding board member of Downtown College Prep, Santa Clara County's first charter high school, which focuses on the academic success of high school students from the San José central city area.