

One

community working together

School, civic and community leaders have joined forces with the goal of eliminating the achievement gap in San Jose by 2020.

Santa Clara County boasts some of the highest-performing schools in the state. That's not exactly startling news, given the locale. After all, it's the heart of Silicon Valley, the global center of innovation, and the home to thousands of affluent, well-educated and ambitious professionals.

Those of us in education here are naturally proud of our high-flying schools. But at the same time, we hold our pride in check. For all of the accolades earned by our top schools, we know that far too many of our students do not receive the same high-quality education as their more fortunate peers. Like so many other California counties, from north to south, a significant number of our students suffer the consequences of an opportunity gap that results in a persistent, severe achievement gap.

When we flip past the first page of our good-news reports on our high-achieving schools, here's what we find: In nearly every

section of our county, there is a gap in academic performance between two groups: lower-performing Hispanic/Latino and African American students, versus higher-performing Asian and white/non-Hispanic students.

In the city of San Jose, more than half of all public school students tested are not proficient in their grade-level skills. When the California Department of Education released its graduation and dropout rate report this year, we saw that Santa Clara County's Hispanic students dropped out at a rate of 31 percent. More strikingly, these students – who made up 37 percent of the overall cohort – accounted for 69 percent of all dropouts.

This is not only deplorable, but it's also destructive – to the students, to their families, and to the entire community. When students drop out of high school, the chances

By Charles Weis

that they will be continuously employed, and earn a living wage, drop precipitously. The key to prosperity for any community is an educated citizenry, equipped with the skills to succeed in the modern workplace.

The economic losses to the City of San Jose due to dropouts are estimated at almost \$400 million over these students' lifetimes. According to economist Joe Cortright (2009), for each 2 percent increase of the population with a college degree, there is a 1 percent increase in personal income growth. In San José, 12,052 additional degree holders would translate to an additional \$1.4 billion in aggregate personal income every year.

The launch of an initiative

Clearly, this is a situation that none of us should be willing to tolerate. It's not just educators who feel that way; civic, business and community leaders also recognize the gravity of the situation. That is why, about two years ago, I was joined by San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed, educators at every level, the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, business leaders and community-based organizations in launching an initiative called SJ2020.

The goal of this wide and highly inclusive collaboration was stated simply: to eliminate the achievement gap in San Jose by the year 2020. Our vision for SJ2020 was one community working together to ensure that all of our students, from cradle to career, receive the high-quality education and support they need for college and workplace success.

Although it was independently designed, our initiative is similar to the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati. Strive is a collaborative of early childhood advocates, district superintendents, college and university presidents, community funders, business leaders, and service providers in the greater Cincinnati area, working to benefit every child, every step of the way.

The Strive Partnership is an example of the "Collective Impact" approach, which includes five key elements: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support organization.

Our initiative also was informed by "All Systems Go," Michael Fullan's book about

the elements of successful, whole-system reform involving schools and the community working together.

The city's role

SJ2020 grew out of discussions with education, business and community leaders convened by Mayor Reed and me (we serve as co-chairs of the initiative). The partnership with the mayor of the 10th largest city

for Cities, Talent Dividend, and California Mayors Roundtable, the initiative has access to talent, examples and ideas that help shape strategies and partnerships.

Since the launch of SJ2020 in October 2009, we developed four major focus areas: access to high-quality early learning; cultural changes in homes and communities; cultural, instructional and new opportunities in schools and classrooms; and an em-



Jo Dalit, instructor at the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Santee Head Start classroom in San Jose, helps students construct a monster, guided by Ed Emberley's "Go Away, Big Green Monster."

in the country has been a key element in SJ2020. While the mayor has no formal role in the educational system, he recognizes the importance of education to his city's economic vitality and quality of life. That's why the city has examined its programs to support and improve alignment with SJ2020 strategies and partners.

Important players come to the table

Mayor Reed also has the wherewithal to bring important players to the table; he's recruited leaders in business, philanthropy, higher education and the rest of the community to our executive and steering committees. Senior staff in his office and mine serve as leads for the initiative, meeting regularly to coordinate activities and work with the many SJ2020 partners. In addition, through San Jose's involvement with groups such as the National League of Cities, CEOs

emphasis on 21st century skill development that will prepare students for college and career success.

Last year, we took a big step in that first area by launching the Santa Clara County Early Learning Master Plan. As we all know, high-quality early learning enables children to develop the skills they need to succeed in school. It also helps to reduce the "readiness gap," the disparity among students' skill levels as they enter the early grades, which is the precursor to the achievement gap.

Like SJ2020, the Master Plan operated with a highly collaborative dynamic. It was created by education professionals, community members, civic leaders, and child development advocates. We strongly feel that the more inclusive our approach, the greater the chance for community buy-in, viability and ultimately, success.

The key SJ2020 strategies are a focus on

students across the developmental spectrum, from school readiness to readiness for college and career; and a multi-sector approach that involves business, education, community organizations and philanthropy working together toward our common goal.

This multi-sector approach was a key factor in the recent move to build an EDUCARE early learning facility in San Jose. With nearly \$4.5 million in seed money raised, we have powerful momentum to build a state-of-the-art facility that will serve children and families in Santa Clara County through this renowned model for early education, which is closely aligned with SJ2020. Supporters include the Bounce Learning Network, the Buffett Foundation, First 5 Santa Clara County, First 5 California, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

EDUCARE of California at Silicon Valley will house an early learning center, a professional development institute and a community Family Resource Center adjacent to an elementary School in southeast San Jose. Committed partners are widespread; they

are local, state and national. The success of the EDUCARE model elsewhere (Chicago, Denver, Miami and Seattle, among others) shows that a proven model can be regenerated. Especially in these extremely challenging budgetary times, the key is not to reinvent, but to replicate.

Career tech and STEM a focus

Another key component of SJ2020 is career technical education – “Creating 21st Century Career Choices for All.” This brings together students, educators and employers to strengthen the relationship between what’s being taught in the classroom and its application in the workplace. With an emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), this endeavor integrates academic and technical training to provide students with a pathway to postsecondary education and 21st century careers.

“Creating 21st Century Career Choices for All” is designed to engage students, increase attendance and graduation rates, raise grades, and ultimately help close the

achievement gap. To measure our progress in closing the gap, we developed a set of 13 metrics, ranging from readiness for kindergarten to completion of post-secondary education. The majority of the metrics are based on measures collected by the California Department of Education California Standards Tests; for example, English/language arts and math in the third and fifth grades.

We also included measures in high school graduation rates and graduates eligible to attend the California State University/University of California system, and we plan to refine post-graduate tracking measures as well. To view the metrics, as well as other information on SJ2020, visit our website: www.sccoe.org/sj2020. I think you’ll find a great deal on the website about community and collaboration.

A genuinely collegial spirit

We have been highly encouraged by the enthusiasm demonstrated by our community partners for SJ2020. We knew well that the culture of Silicon Valley, which is distinctly entrepreneurial, is ideal for breeding innovation, but not necessarily collaboration. However, we have found that our partner community-based organizations and entrepreneurs have adopted a genuinely collegial spirit in joining the SJ2020 effort. For instance, United Way Silicon Valley has made reducing the achievement gap one of its three “aspirational goals.” The Cisco Foundation has made working with SJ2020 a criterion for local grant support.

In the same spirit, charter schools and traditional district schools have resolved to work together and learn from one another in this common, mutually beneficial effort. This has been especially gratifying, because in my 40 years in public education, I have found that educators – much like the innovators of the Valley – often are good at innovating, but not always so good at collaborating.

We are working to overcome that tendency by propagating efforts such as Professional Learning Communities, in which educators work collaboratively (within a school-wide culture conducive to this) to focus on learning rather than teaching, and utilizing formative assessment results to improve student learning.

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One thing that has heartened us in this quest to eliminate the achievement gap is that some teachers and schools have achieved amazing results already. We think that by studying these examples of success, and then collaborating to determine whether and how they can be replicated, we can eliminate the gap.

We have an excellent example we can look to in San Jose. Leroy Anderson Elementary School in the Moreland School District shows how dedication, focus, hard work and innovation can improve academic performance across an entire student body. At Anderson, 80 percent of students are Latino, and 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. In 2006, Anderson was the lowest performing elementary school in Santa Clara County; by 2010, it was recognized by the California Department of Education for its success in narrowing the achievement gap and was named a California Distinguished School.

In just four years, Anderson raised its Academic Performance Index from 602 to 810. In that same span, its API for socioeconomically disadvantaged students went from 577 to 807. English learners did even better, from 560 to 806.

Anderson’s dramatic improvement is credited largely to “Academic Excellence for All,” a systematic approach to ensure all students are academically challenged and receive support. Anderson was a winner in 2011 of the American School Board Journal’s Magna Award for Innovative Best Practices, and featured in a story about closing the achievement gap in the *New York Times*.

Early results are encouraging

SJ2020 has been in place for two years now. Early results are encouraging. In the most recent release of the California Standards Test, we found that the county’s Hispanic students recorded growth on all four academic areas assessed by the CST between 2010 and 2011.

Not only that, they also reduced the achievement gap with the subgroup of white students (who also demonstrated academic growth) in ELA and math between 2008 and 2011. In ELA, the gap reduced from 41 percentage points to 38 percentage points;



Students at Wool Creek Head Start classroom in San Jose find the computer screen is a friendly place to gather – and learn.

and in math, it narrowed from 36 percentage points to 30 percentage points. Our task now is to accelerate the growth of these student subgroups to narrow the gap faster.

The results also revealed that more Hispanic and African American students are taking tougher courses, such as algebra, that pave the way to higher education. And even though the number of students taking the test is much greater, the scores still slightly rose. These results might challenge our beliefs about students’ abilities. They show us that we must be extra careful not to underestimate the capabilities of any group. When given the opportunity and support to take tougher courses, all students can succeed.

But we know that students of color are disproportionately required to delay entry or repeat algebra, regardless of testing or proficiency, making it more difficult for these students to meet the state university’s A-G requirements. To combat this, San Jose’s East Side Union High School District, with strong support from the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, is working with its feeder elementary districts to develop a common standard for algebra placement and advancement for all students enrolling in the high school district.

The district – which has a high propor-

tion of English learners, Hispanic students and students qualifying for free or reduced meals – also has adopted the A-G framework as the default curriculum for all students.

Vision of a community

These are just a few of many examples. We are fighting this battle on many fronts, and we clearly have a long way to go to reach our goal by 2020. But we are encouraged about our prospects. While we continue to modify and change SJ2020 as necessary, we feel we have in place a strong foundation that will easily allow for those modifications. What we have created is not the vision of one or two or a handful of people, but of a community. And when a community shares a vision, what inevitably results is durable, valuable and inspirational. ■

References

Cortright, Joe. (February 2009). *CEOs for Cities*. “City Dividends: Gains from Improving Metropolitan Performance.” www.ceosforcities.org.

Charles Weis is Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools. Weis served as ACSA president in 2009-10.