

# The San José Unified School District Story: Implementing a College-Ready Curriculum for All

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San José Unified School District

**S**an José Unified School District is an urban district in the heart of California's Silicon Valley. The school district has 32,000 students, representing the broad ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of California.

## **The Work**

Beginning in the early 1990s, the San José Unified School District embarked upon a series of high school reform initiatives focused on raising standards for all students and assuring that minority, poor, and immigrant students are prepared for college and post-secondary careers. Today we have the highest graduation requirements in the state, with all students completing the University of California system's entrance requirements (commonly called the A-G requirements) in order to earn a high school diploma. Among other prescribed course work, this includes three years of college preparatory math through algebra II, three years of college preparatory science, including two lab sciences, and two years of a foreign language. In June 2004, San José Unified graduated its third class under these rigorous standards, with no dropoff in graduation rates for any of the three classes.

We began our journey with a vision that high school should be a gateway to all possible pursuits beyond high school, including college. In 1992 our district became a partner with the College Board in a national initiative called Equity 2000. The initiative engaged six

sites across the country in a five-year effort to demonstrate that all students could successfully complete algebra and geometry, the two major gatekeeper courses that serve as barriers to college access nationwide. By 1993, San José Unified had eliminated all math courses below algebra I from its ninth-grade offerings. Gone were consumer math and other “dumbed-down” math classes. Our early success in demonstrating that all students could enroll and be successful in algebra was nothing short of eye-opening. Not only were all beginning high school students required to take algebra, but to the surprise of many, the nontraditional algebra takers were passing it at the same rate as they had passed consumer math!

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We learned so much through this early reform effort. Particularly, we realized that teachers need quality staff development, and struggling students need safety net systems. Intensive staff development was clearly necessary to provide teachers with a broad repertoire of instructional strategies designed to make algebra accessible to all students. It was also clear that staff development must instill in the teachers the attitudes and beliefs that all students have the ability to master algebra. Summer institutes for both middle and high school math teachers focused on algebra readiness and instructional methods for teaching algebra to all.

Students were part of the institutes, so the professional development included direct teaching and reflective practice as new skills were acquired. Seminars and workshops during the year focused on developing high expectations for all students. We also learned along the way that strong safety net programs would be essential to ensure success for all students. Saturday academies, tutorials, shadow classes, and afterschool and summer extension classes were created to give necessary support to students. The powerful lessons learned in those early days would become essential components of

Fifty-one percent of the student population are Hispanic, 29 percent are white, 13 percent are Asian, and 7 percent are other. Twenty-eight percent are English-language learners, and 41 percent are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

future work when it came time to implement a comprehensive college-readiness curriculum for all students.

### **Another Bold Step**

In early 1994, during my first year as superintendent, we took another bold step. In the eighth year of a federal court order to desegregate our schools, we began to negotiate a consent decree that changed the focus of the existing order from busing for integration to Hispanic student achievement, equity, and access. I clearly saw the opportunity for the consent decree to be a major lever in our reform agenda, using the authority of the courts to mandate changes that were essential to move the district forward. The decree would focus district efforts on issues of equity and access for Hispanic students and require needed academic support for them to be successful in a rigorous curriculum. I believed, as did plaintiffs in the lawsuit, that insidious practices such as tracking (grouping students by ability) had to be eliminated and that classes needed to be desegregated to reflect the overall population of the school.

Further, to ensure participation of Hispanic students in the most rigorous high school course work, the decree required an aggressive effort to increase minority participation in honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate classes. Parent involvement was also a required component to ensure that parents of Hispanic students would be engaged around high achievement for their children and begin to see the possibility of college in their children's futures.

By 1996, we began to discuss taking the boldest step of all—making it a policy that every high school student graduate prepared for college. At the same time, we realized that we needed to work more closely with community stakeholders to prepare them and gain their support for such a move. Because of my involvement around public engagement with the Danforth Foundation on a national level, the district had access to organizations like Public Agenda, experts on public opinion research. With their assistance we were able to put together a

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comprehensive public engagement strategy to test the waters and ask the question of all district stakeholders, “How good is good enough in San José Unified School District?” This question was pursued through a series of seven formal focus groups involving groups of parents from the suburbs, parents from urban areas (including one focus group conducted totally in Spanish), district residents with no students in school, high school teachers, and high school students. After seven sessions that probed whether the district was delivering a “good enough” education, the feedback pointed us toward raising standards. Every parent and community

group clearly called for a common set of standards for all high school students that would prepare them for college.

## **Higher standards and expectations did not lead to more dropouts but to greater achievement.**

The teachers, though more skeptical about their ability to implement a college preparatory curriculum for all students, articulated that they could do so if sufficient training and student support systems were there to help them be successful. The students presented the most compelling arguments for moving forward. Whether from a poor urban high

school or an affluent suburban high school, they all said the same things about high school: it is not challenging, expectations are low, you can get by with doing the minimum, no one pushes for excellence, and teachers don't care.

This enlightening focus group research helped us structure our next major public engagement initiative, a town hall meeting that we called a “community conversation.” With the help of Public Agenda and the Institute for Educational Leadership we brought together a group of 150 broadly representative parents, teachers, and community leaders to explore in depth the need for rigorous standards and the notion of a college preparatory curriculum for all students. We walked away from that conversation convinced that our major stakeholders were ready for San José Unified to move down this path. Our conviction was validated by a follow-up written survey to all high school parents, students, and teachers. We knew we had a mandate to proceed, and in January 1998 the Board of Education adopted the University of California system's entrance requirements as our graduation requirements, to begin with the entering freshman class of 1998.

## Successes, Results, and Outcomes

Our success in implementing this major reform is clear. Three years of data show that graduation rates have not declined and that the grade point averages of graduating seniors are actually on the rise. Sixty-five percent of the graduates have passed every one of the required courses for entrance to the state's university system with a C or better and are therefore eligible to enter directly out of high school—statewide, the percent is 33 percent. Even more dramatic, 45 percent of the Hispanic graduates are university eligible right out of high school compared to 21 percent statewide. And enrollment of Hispanic students in Advanced Placement courses has more than doubled in recent years. Higher standards and expectations did not lead to more dropouts but to greater achievement:

- Graduation rates have remained steady.
- Achievement scores and SAT scores have risen.
- GPAs have risen.
- The number of Hispanic students in AP courses has doubled.

Test scores on state examinations and the national SATs have been steadily increasing each year since this reform was put in place. Perhaps most importantly, the focus on high school graduation has driven higher standards and expectations all the way down to kindergarten. The most powerful trickle-down outcome is our district's steady progress in closing the achievement gap at the elementary and middle school levels.

Climate surveys administered annually to parents, teachers, and students show continued satisfaction with the preparation of students and the quality of education they receive. The rise in parent satisfaction has spilled over into other important outcomes, such as the passage of two major bond initiatives (totaling over \$600 million) and numerous awards—California Distinguished Schools, National Blue Ribbon Schools, a New American High School, and two district awards for quality from the California Awards for Performance Excellence.

## Community Engagement: A Strategic Approach to High School Reform

While it took a long time and focused resources, our public

### Why College-Ready Curriculum For All Makes Sense: Better Student Achievement

	<u>San José Unified average</u>	<u>State average</u>
Students passing college-ready curriculum	65 percent	33 percent
Hispanic students passing college-ready curriculum	45 percent	21 percent

engagement work with the Danforth Foundation guided our belief that major reforms require a comprehensive public engagement strategy. Early work through the College Board and our court-ordered consent decree was necessary to position the district to move forward with a reform agenda focused on preparing all students for college, but it was not sufficient to implement this major policy reform. We needed public support, and we knew that achieving broad-based community support was not a matter of selling the reform with a convincing marketing strategy. Rather, we had to engage our stakeholders in the decisionmaking process itself.

In a democracy made up of people from all kinds of backgrounds and cultures with differing beliefs and values, a deeper level of work is necessary for leaders to implement a bold vision for the future. Some would call it consensus building; others call it finding common ground. Whatever the terminology, it is clear that finding out what the public is thinking on matters of great importance is critical to reform work. Enlightened leaders must trust the public to engage in thoughtful civil debate around issues for which there are no right or wrong answers. Through a thoughtful engagement process communities can build consensus, find common ground, and become partners in school reform.

### Where Does San José Unified Go from Here?

Our journey continues and is taking shape in a whole new set of reform initiatives around creating a college-going culture within San José Unified and our stakeholders. As powerful as our work

has been in producing dramatic increases in college-ready graduates, district graduates are not yet accessing four-year colleges directly out of high school at significantly greater rates. Given this challenge, we are committed to creating a college-going culture through a focused and comprehensive pre-K–12 initiative. The Board of Education recently launched this initiative by passing a resolution that incorporates a college-going culture into its mission. The resolution addresses the board’s commitment to ensuring that students see college as a possibility from preschool through high school. It calls for students to be able to assess their own progress toward college readiness and for all teachers to be engaged as the single most important contributors to helping all students envision college as a possibility. Finally, it requires that parents be continually and systematically given the knowledge and skills to help their children prepare for postsecondary endeavors.

San José Unified School District’s high school reform work to date has clearly demonstrated that high school can be a gateway to college for students from all backgrounds. Yet we have found that it is not enough to prepare students to stand at the college doorstep—we must get them to walk through that door. In the years to come, district leaders will work diligently to make sure that all students and their families know and believe from the very beginning of their formal schooling that the promise of a college education is truly open to them.

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In August 2004, Dr. Linda T. Murray retired after serving for twelve years as the superintendent of the San José Unified School District. Under her leadership, student achievement improved significantly, with overall rankings growing by fifty-four points in the past four years. Among urban districts in northern California, San José Unified ranks first in overall student performance. Murray also led the district to increase its number of California Distinguished

Schools from three to twenty-three and the number of National Blue Ribbon Schools from zero to ten since 1998.

From 1989 to 1993, Murray served as associate superintendent of instruction for Broward County Schools in Florida. And from 1971 to 1993, she was both an educator and an administrator in the Broward County school system.

Murray received her bachelor's degree in mathematics from Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, in 1966, and a PhD in educational psychology from the State University of New York in 1970.