

PACT 2006 Mayoral Forum

Critical Issue: Public Education

“We are slipping. Yes, the United States still leads in nearly every way one can measure, but that does not change the fact that the foundation on which this lead was built is eroding. Our leadership in technology and innovation has benefited from an infrastructure created by 50 years of continual investment, education, and research. We are no longer maintaining this infrastructure.”

-- from “Losing The Competitive Advantage”
by the American Electronics Association

How can the next Mayor of San Jose be more directly involved in creating excellent public schools?

The Need Is Clear

It is a significant problem that mayors in San Jose have not been more directly involved in solving what can only be described as a crisis in public education. The situation is obviously dire in the poorest parts of San Jose, where fewer than 10% of children attain a degree from a 4-year college or university; equally troublesome, however, is the situation in the middle-income parts of the city, where children are going on to college and getting degrees, but their **mediocre** K-12 education in public schools leaves too many of them at a severe disadvantage in the global job market. *In the recent Mercury News poll of likely voters in San Jose, public education ranked as the second most serious problem that should be addressed by the next mayor – only traffic problems are of greater concern.*

Public schools in the Valley worked just fine for our economy when a high school diploma was a likely ticket to the middle class and when a college degree was like gold. While this is obviously no longer the situation, the vast majority of public schools have not changed to meet the challenges of our dramatically different economy.

The business community in the Valley is clear about this problem: at the recent annual conference of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network, CEOs stated that we are on the verge of losing the race to other countries that are educating many more people than the US to attain the high-skilled, well-paying jobs of the new economy. Local and national media, universities, political commentators are in basic agreement about the high stakes nature of this crisis.

So how is it that the most important elected official in the Valley is not more directly involved in solving the deep problems in K-12 education? Of course, the mayor of San Jose has no legal authority over the public schools (at least, not yet). But that has not prevented innovative mayors of big cities around the country from getting more directly involved in arguably the most important domestic issue of our time.

New Public Schools – An essential part of the solution

In this Valley, some of the best public schools are new public schools – both charter schools and new district-sponsored “small autonomous” schools, like those in Alum Rock. These schools, which have been in existence for just six years or less, are demonstrating that innovation and excellence are in fact possible in public education. Charter schools like Downtown College Prep, KIPP Heartwood Academy, and the Charter School of Morgan Hill are showing that children can achieve at very high levels, regardless of family income. These schools are scoring at the very top of the state rankings. Likewise, children at Alum Rock’s new small autonomous schools, including LUCHA and Renaissance Academy, are achieving at a very high level – tops in the district after just their first year of operation.

So why aren’t there more of these schools? With such great models in our community, why aren’t their plans to create dozens of new excellent public schools? Imagine a city where every family could choose between at least a few world-class schools, perhaps with several different options in terms of curriculum, school culture, or thematic focus of the school.

What’s holding us back? A few missing pieces of the puzzle: more top-notch school leaders, financial resources for start-up, facilities, and the political will among school boards to encourage and support new schools.

As the most important elected official in the area, the Mayor of San Jose could play a vital role in championing this school choice movement and removing the obstacles to creating new public schools. Through a new city office within the Mayor’s Office, the Mayor and a small staff could make San Jose a real center of innovation and excellence in education, through:

- ***Raising millions of dollars of start-up funding for charter schools and district-sponsored new schools.*** The business community in Silicon Valley is willing to support innovation and excellence in the public arena, but nobody wants to see their hard-earned money wasted. Business leaders are looking for successful models and real leadership – funding will follow, where there’s a vision and real results. During New York Mayor Bloomberg’s first term, he was able to raise more than \$300 million for the public schools. He used his connections, position, and “bully pulpit” to help philanthropists see the great potential and hope of public education. The next Mayor of San Jose could do the same.
- ***Recruiting excellent charter management organizations to come to San Jose.*** There are non-profit charter school networks in the US and here in California that are looking for easy places to start new charter schools. Besides the enormously successful KIPP Network, which has opened one school in San Jose (but plans to open no others in California), these charter networks are not interested in San Jose. Why? Three big reasons: the political landscape is relatively unsupportive of charter schools; land and/or facilities are expensive and in short supply; the public education “crisis” seems to be less severe in San Jose than in other big cities. The Mayor of San Jose, like the Mayor of Indianapolis, could attract the best charter school networks to the Valley, by leading the charge to make this community open and supportive and making it clear that there is

great need. In his first term, Mayor Peterson of Indianapolis was able to initiate more than 10 new charters. If the Mayor leads, they will come!

In order to move this effort forward, at the PACT Mayoral Forum on May 21, PACT's grassroots volunteer leaders will ask the candidates the following question:

If elected Mayor, will you open a new office in the Mayor's Office, which will include the following:

- *Raising \$10 Million of start-up funding for charter schools and district-sponsored new schools by the end of my first term*
- *Recruiting excellent charter management organizations to come to San Jose*
- *Leading in the opening of 10 new charters schools by the end of my first term*
- *Assisting with charter school facilities, including assessing available City property*
- *Working with PACT to develop measures of accountability for new public schools*