

San Jose Unified School District

# **A CASE STUDY: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER**



The Education Trust–West

SJUSD is an urban district in the heart of California's Silicon Valley. The school district has 32,000 students, with a demographic profile that reflects the broad ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of California:

51 percent Latino, 28 percent white, 13 percent Asian, 4 percent African American, and 4 percent other. Some 28 percent are English-language learners, and 41 percent are low-income.

# The San Jose Unified School District Case Study

School districts across the country increasingly are shattering the myth that some students can’t learn as much as others. Take the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD). Here, educators are proving that students from all backgrounds can access rigorous curricula. For more than a decade, the district has embraced college readiness as its mission.

This case study examines the challenges and successes the leaders of SJUSD faced in navigating uncharted waters toward the destination of college-ready graduates. No other urban districts had been there; there were no models to learn from, no recipes to follow. But leaders believed deeply that the high school diploma should hold equal value for everyone, serve as a gateway to opportunity, and provide graduates with the option to go to college if they chose. Sadly, far too many students, particularly low-income students and students of color graduated with skills that would lead only to dead-end jobs and lives on the margin. San Jose educators rejected this kind of inequity. And they were determined to level the playing field.

Thus, SJUSD became the first district in the state to expect students to complete the University of California and California State University systems’ entrance

**Table 1: The University of California/California State University “A-G” Requirements. The minimum (and recommended) courses required for admission to UC/CSU systems.**

A	History / Social Science	two years (1 year of World History; one year of U.S. History or one-half year of U.S. History and one half year of Civics)
B	English	four years
C	Math	three years (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra 2); four years recommended
D	Science	two years (Biology, Chemistry, and/or Physics); three years recommended
E	World Language	two years (same language); three years recommended
F	Visual / Performing Arts	one year
G	College Prep Elective	one year

Source: [www.ucop.edu/doorways](http://www.ucop.edu/doorways).

requirements (commonly called the A-G requirements, see Table 1) to earn a high school diploma. Many observers thought this bold vision was doomed to failure. Yet district leaders moved forward, reaching out to stakeholders and planning for implementation.

## THE EARLY WORK: ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

To quell the voices of the skeptics and achieve early success, district leaders sought to build public support for their vision. Public Agenda, a well-respected national polling firm with extensive expertise in framing issues, was brought in to lead this effort. They coordinated a series of focus groups with students, teachers, parents, and members of the broader community, followed by a series of large-scale community conversations, all of which probed one question: “How good is ‘good enough’ in San Jose Unified School District?”

Focus groups took place in a venue where two-way mirrors allowed the superintendent and school board members to watch unnoticed the candid conversations about the quality of their schools. What they heard was sobering. Parents and community members said that education in SJUSD was mediocre at best. The bar was set far too low and not nearly enough was expected of students. Teachers echoed the view that all students were capable of doing much more, although they were unsure of how to make that happen.

But it was the students themselves who best drove home the need to raise the bar. Whether they were from low-income or wealthy families, and no matter what their ethnic background or the school they attended, they all echoed those same sentiments: “School is boring!” “Teachers don’t care!” “It is easy to slide through high school doing the minimum!”

Every single one of them agreed they could do much more if more were asked of them.

The superintendent and school board gained resolve from the focus groups, particularly from the students who begged for schooling that demanded more of them and would allow no excuses to slough off, doing just enough to graduate.

The stage was set. Graduating all students to be ready for college and a career would become the district’s mission.

## Student Voices

"I was planning to make my life really easy in high school and just enjoy it and learn English. I didn't know I had to take all the English, math, and science. As I look back, I think: What was I thinking? The A-G requirements help you, they build you, and they make you who you are until now."

—*Latina graduate 2004*

"You need a door or a window. The A-G curriculum gives you that opportunity. I can't imagine not having it. Students will find the motivation...they only need the opportunity."

—*Latino graduate 2004*

"Everyone should have the A-G courses. You may not go to college, but you have the option. I think it's wonderful."

—*Middle Eastern student from San Jose High Academy 2008*

## GETTING THE TEACHERS' UNION ON BOARD

While the focus groups and community conversations were occurring, district leaders were working behind the scenes with the teachers' union. In fact, backroom politics played a key part in reform.

The district office and the San Jose Teachers' Association had a history of contentious relations. The reform-minded superintendent saw rebuilding trust as the first order of the day for changing the schools. That meant devoting much time and energy to mending the fractured relationship. This proved to be challenging and somewhat dicey, as both the superintendent and the union president had to be willing to put aside power in their relationship with one another. To understand each other's responsibilities as leaders of demanding constituencies took stepping outside their traditional roles. They needed to 'walk in each others' shoes' and work together with the other's interests in mind. This was a tall order, especially when lofty goals for students began to buck up against the rights

won by teachers through collective bargaining.

But the superintendent and the union president came to realize they could work together on behalf of students and teachers. Meeting behind closed doors on a regular basis, they found win-win solutions for many of the issues that historically had strained ties between the district and union members. This allowed them to forge ahead with unity of purpose: to close achievement gaps and prepare students for college.

A lesson emerged from this partnership: Dramatic change and real reform cannot happen without teachers' unions, which have great influence over their members. In San Jose, the union leaders generated teacher buy-in for the A-G graduation requirements. They determined how to communicate the new expectations. Without fanfare or drama, they brought along their members. As a result, teachers, by and large, did not perceive the increased requirements as a top-down mandate, and they didn't push back.

## DISPELLING MYTHS

Over the decade since San Jose Unified School District raised the stakes for graduation, the district has compiled a large amount of data that dispels myths about what would happen to students if the district mission was not just high school graduation, but graduation with a diploma that opened doors to postsecondary opportunities as well. San Jose shattered the most pervasive myths in a big way. The data speak for themselves.

All of the graphs contained in this report compare data from before the reform until after. In most cases the comparison points span a ten year period between 1998 – 2008. The first class graduated with the A-G requirements in 2002.

### Myth #1: The Curriculum Will Be Watered Down

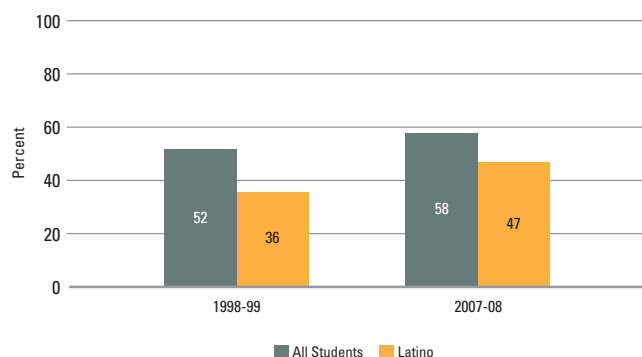
Many parents whose children are already college-bound assume that if all students are taking college prep classes, teachers will end up teaching to the lowest common denominator, which will make school less challenging, even boring, for their children.

District leaders set out to debunk this myth by monitoring the participation and success in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses offered in San Jose Unified. If expectations in the core college-preparatory curricula were indeed being lowered, they would expect to see enrollments drop in the most rigorous coursework, AP and IB, and pass rates decline on AP and IB exams. As juniors and seniors, students would be less prepared to suc-

ceed in the most challenging courses, if standards fell in the core academic program leading up to AP and IB.

In fact, as Graph 1 shows, overall AP and IB participation has improved overall from the years preceding the reform. Notably, Latino students are taking these courses in much higher number.

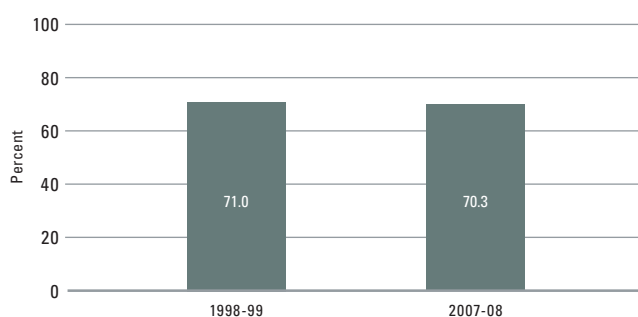
**Graph 1: Percentage of Students Earning Five Credits or More in AP or IB Has Increased**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

Besides increases in AP and IB participation, passage rates on the AP exams would provide the real test of whether students were being prepared for the most rigorous courses. Rather than declining, however, pass rates on the AP exams have held steady for more than a decade, as seen in Graph 2. If classes had been “dumbed down,” as some feared, pass rates would have suffered. Indeed, they did not.

**Graph 2: Percentage of Students Who Scored a Three or Higher on an AP Test Has Remained Steady**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

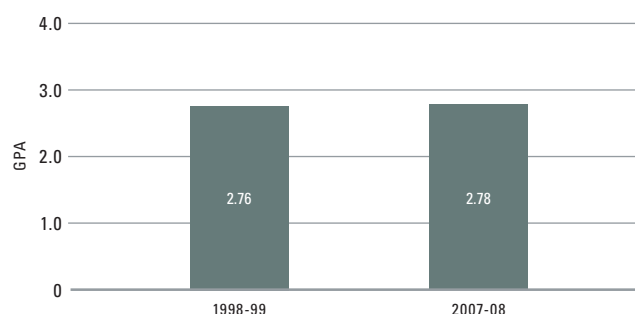
## Myth #2: Grades Will Plummet

At the beginning of the A-G movement, many skeptics thought: “Our kids aren’t ready for tougher classes. They’re going to fail them.” Yet district leaders held fast to what

they heard from their own students: If more was expected of them, they would work harder. They would rise to the new expectations and their grades would not fall.

The data over time has demonstrated that students have worked harder and, in fact, their grades have not dropped. Between 1998 (before A-G) and 2008, as seen in Graph 3, the average grade-point average (GPA) for San Jose Unified graduating seniors has remained about the same.

**Graph 3: Mean Academic GPA for All SJUSD Graduating Seniors Has Remained Steady**

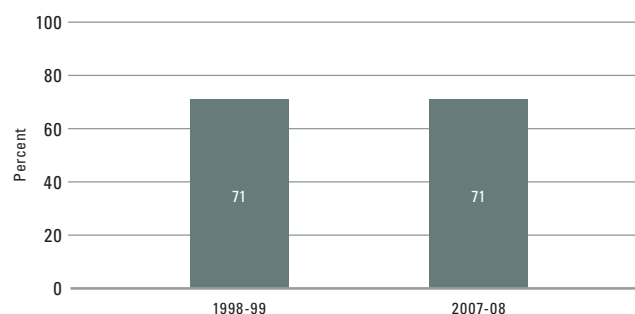


Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

## Myth #3: Students Will Drop Out

Many people believe that tough graduation requirements will cause traditionally non-college-bound students to drop out. Their logic contends that if requirements go up significantly, struggling students will simply disengage and quit school. As dropouts, they would indeed have been worse off than if they were retained in school with an easier path to graduation. Yet as shown in Graph 4, this concern never materialized.

**Graph 4: Graduation Rates Using the Manhattan Institute Methodology Have Remained Steady**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

In San Jose Unified, graduation rates have held steady, even though coursework has become much tougher for

## Student Voices

"I guess what's keeping people around the state from raising the graduation requirements is that they fear that Latinos and minorities are the ones that can't live up to the requirements."

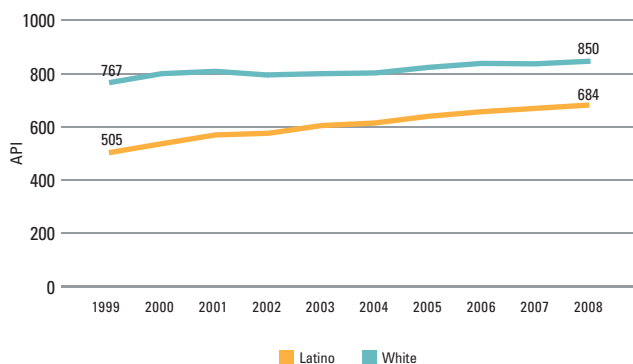
—Latino graduate 2004

students. Contrary to conventional wisdom, SJUSD is not losing students because they are expected to take rigorous courses. High expectations do not push their students out of school. Students don't give up when they are challenged.

### Myth #4: Low-Income Students and Students of Color Will Suffer the Most

Sadly, many educators believe that students of color and those from low-income families will fall behind if the bar is raised. In fact, the opposite has proved to be true. Greater rigor benefits these students in many ways. Most importantly, it reverses the cycle of low expectations. Students who have been traditionally underserved and relegated to low-end curricula are steadily achieving more. Although the district still has much work to do, Graph 5 shows that white and Latino students are achieving at higher levels with respect to the overall district Academic Performance Index (API). Meanwhile, the gap between them has narrowed by 38%.

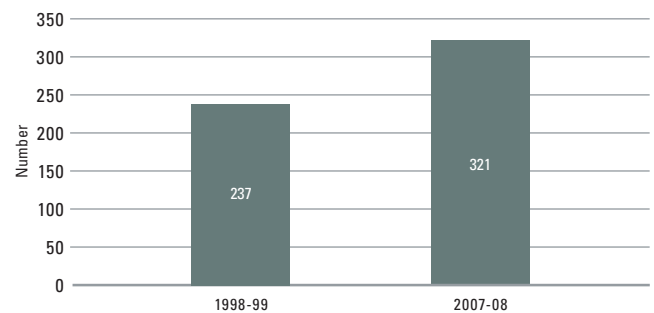
**Graph 5: Latino Students API Has Steadily Improved and the Gap Has Narrowed**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of CDE data.

Latino students also have made major gains in AP and IB (International Baccalaureate) credit earnings upon graduation from SJUSD as seen in Graph 6.

**Graph 6: The Number of Latino Graduates Who Earned at Least Five Credits in AP or IB During Their Work in SJUSD Has Increased Significantly**



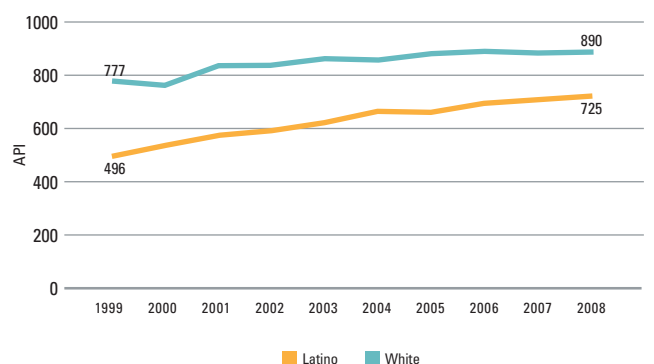
Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

### Myth #5: High School is the Wrong Place to Make Changes

Even those who support a more rigorous curriculum often protest that high school is the wrong place to start. They argue that change has to begin in the early and middle grades, because high school students who lag behind at the outset don't have the prerequisite skills to succeed in rigorous courses. They espouse the belief that you have to reach kids while they are young, or you don't stand a chance.

The San Jose data prove these naysayers wrong. By shifting expectations for what students should be able to do at the end of the line, district leaders drove improvements in learning across the entire K-12 spectrum. Teachers in the early grades worked to build a solid foundation in the basic skills, getting students ready for a college-preparatory high school program. Looking again at improvements and gaps in the API for Latino and white students, this time for just elementary schools, improvements were the greatest there, and the gaps were narrowed the most (by 41%).

**Graph 7: Estimated API for SJUSD Elementary Students.**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of CDE data.



## From Myth to Reality

As compelling data from SJUSD continue to debunk the most pervasive myths, the reality has become clear. College and career-ready high school requirements can greatly improve learning outcomes.

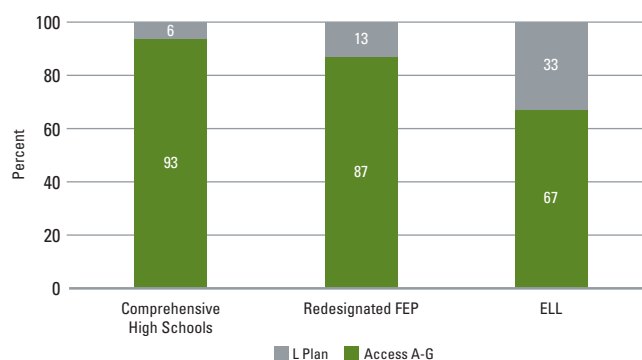
Significantly, graduation rates do not drop, and grades do not fall; gaps close, and many more students master the content that readies them for college and a career upon graduation.

## GRADUATES ACCESS TO THE A-G CURRICULUM

Access to A-G no longer poses a problem in the San Jose Unified School District. Nearly all high school students pass the UC/CSU A-G sequence to earn a high school diploma and only a small number of graduates—including some special-needs students, some English-language learners and the small percentage of students in alternative programs—graduate under special provisions of the district's graduation policy.

Graph 8 shows that over 90 percent of the students in comprehensive high schools take the UC/CSU A-G course sequence. Of note, nearly 70 percent of current ELL students take the full A-G course sequence and 90 percent of students who moved from the status of English language learners (ELL) to fully English proficient (FEP) take these same classes.

**Graph 8: Percentage of Students in the Class of 2008 in Comprehensive High Schools, Redesignated FEP, and ELL Who Accessed the UC/CSU A-G Courses.**

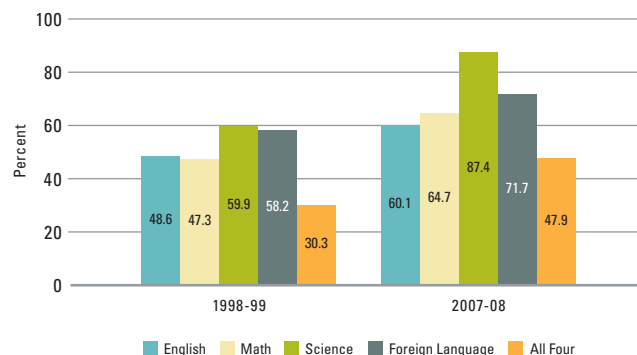


Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

Access to the college preparatory curricula is nearly universal in SJUSD. Of its graduates from the six comprehensive high schools nearly half can apply directly for admission to the California State University systems based on the fact that they took and passed all of the required A-G classes with a C or better. This represents

a major increase from the eligibility rates before A-G became the common core curriculum. Graph 9 shows the C or better pass rates in the core requirements impacted by the A-G policy before and after the reform, as well as the percent of students who pass all of the A-G courses with a C or better.

**Graph 9: SJUSD Graduates Satisfying UC-CSU Subject Requirements from Comprehensive High Schools.**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.

## BELOW-AVERAGE GRADES REMAIN THE GREATEST BARRIER TO COLLEGE ELIGIBILITY

Without exception, students who fail a required class must repeat the class in order to graduate. They most often do this by attending summer school or retaking the course during the regular school year. SJUSD provides many options, so that making up failed courses will not prevent a student from graduating.

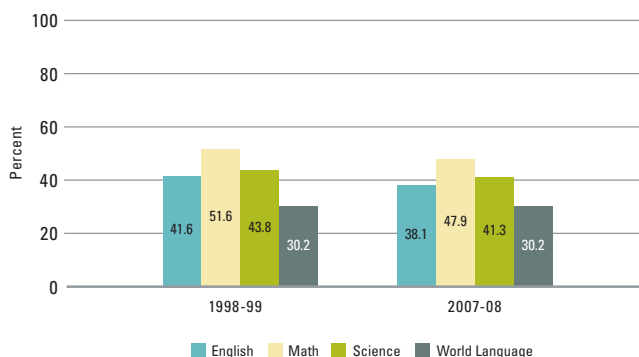
However, below-average grades in one or more of the courses that make up the UC/CSU A-G sequence remain a barrier to college access. Although D grades are passing grades for high school credit in SJUSD and count for meeting graduation requirements, they are not considered acceptable for admission to the public university system. Both UC and CSU require passing grades of C or better in every A-G course. Unfortunately, students have few avenues to make up Ds, as the state does not provide funding for repeating classes that students pass.

Although Ds remain a significant problem, the percentage of Ds and Fs in core courses did not increase when the district ratcheted up academic rigor. This belies the argument that traditionally underrepresented students cannot handle demanding classes. Receiving a D has nothing to do with capacity to learn wherever the bar is set. In recent focus groups, SJUSD teachers acknowledge that below-average grades often stem from such factors as homework

problems, lack of participation in class, and lack of effort to master the content. Very few teachers believe below-average grades have anything to do with ability.

Graph 10 shows the distribution of D and F grades earned in core academic classes before and after the reform. Students got Ds and Fs in low-rigor courses at about the same rate as they did in high-rigor courses.

**Graph 10: Percentage of SJUSD Graduates from Comprehensive High Schools With Ds or Fs in Core\* Courses Has Not Changed Significantly**



Source: EdTrust—West analysis of SJUSD data.  
Note: Core courses generate credit for graduation.

## IMPLEMENTING COLLEGE-READINESS REQUIREMENTS: WHAT CHANGES DROVE SUCCESS IN SAN JOSE?

Putting A-G graduation requirements in place required overhauling the structure of SJUSD high schools. This systemic reform took time.

As the first crop of freshmen progressed through high school, school leaders mapped out a long-range plan to recruit teachers. Given the short supply of science, math, and world-language teachers, the district reached out to teacher-training institutions across the country that were producing science and math teachers. They even recruited language teachers abroad. In addition, the district engaged the New Teacher Project to attract mid-career professionals from high-tech industries in the Silicon Valley to become math and science teachers. The two-year effort succeeded in wooing large numbers of strong teachers, with exceptional content knowledge, many of whom remain in the district.

To accommodate the growing ranks of students set to take lab sciences, the district had to build and update facilities for biology, chemistry and physics. Two bond measures placed on the ballot in the late 1990s—in part to pay for the lab upgrades and expansions—passed by large margins. Public confidence in the school district grew, along with citizen engagement and rising achievement results.

And of course, high schools needed resources to ensure student success in a college-preparatory course of study. The district did not have new sources of revenue to fund the reforms. Administrators reallocated existing resources, which often involved curtailing or cutting some popular programs to free up money for student safety nets.

Yet with all of the logistics for teacher capacity, facilities and finance, the most important systemic changes occurred in instruction. Teaching and learning were transformed. Many of the most powerful changes endure today.

## Summer Bridge

Schools serving the largest concentration of struggling students hold a Summer Bridge program for such students between eighth and ninth grade. The district defines struggling students as those who lag far behind their peers in reading, math, or both at the end of middle school. The intent is to help them catch up academically and ensure success during their first year in high school. The first Summer Bridge program took place at San Jose High School (SJHS), which is located in the city's poorest neighborhood and which serves the greatest number of underperforming students. The program launched with the first incoming class (Class of 2002) mandated to take the UC/CSU A-G sequence to earn a high school diploma. High school teachers taught the summer courses in order to jump-start the students' readiness for higher level coursework, particularly in English and math, where basic skills often needed improvement. The summer session has offered other classes in the "softer" skills needed for high school success, such as note-taking, study habits, and time management.

By design, the program takes place on the high school campus, allowing incoming freshmen to get acclimated before other students arrived. Tailoring instruction to incoming struggling students has eased their transition into high school. As a result, they arrive better prepared for demanding coursework. The Summer Bridge also makes their first days in ninth grade much less intimidating.

## High School Support Systems

Prior to reforms, the district had a smattering of programs that encouraged some underserved students to take rigorous coursework that would prepare them for postsecondary education. These included Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Math Engineering and Science Academy (MESA), and Gear-Up. Although



effective, these programs reached relatively few students. In addition, all high schools had some tutoring and sporadic after-school support for students who were struggling to stay on track for college. District leaders realized that when they raised the bar for all, they lacked supports with a systematic impact. There were no mechanisms in place to trigger interventions for students who struggled to master difficult content. Most often, struggling students simply repeated a course if they failed.

The A-G requirements forced a new way of thinking about “just-in-time” interventions. Schools could not wait to intervene when students failed; they had to prevent failure. Some of the most significant changes at the school level included Saturday Academies and daily support classes for struggling students.

## Summer School

Before reform, summer school existed as little more than a credit-recovery program, with credit given for seat time. Its large classes came with minimal expectations. Revamping summer school involved slashing class size, having students show proficiency through end-of-course exams, and expecting teachers to teach and assess content mastery.

Improving summer school also meant recruiting the best teachers to teach summer school, rather than hiring those teachers who simply wanted extra money. Summer school teachers were provided with professional development to help them embed instructional technology and other strategies into their classes.

## Ongoing Teacher Professional Development

As implementation of A-G began, the district responded to teacher demands for professional development at the site level. San Jose provided funds and training for coaches and mentors, who would help with implementation of a rigorous course of study to all students. Besides receiving individual support in the classroom from coaches or mentors, teachers generated topics for schoolwide trainings at each campus. These included differentiating instruction, utilizing data for instructional improvement, increasing technology-based learning, scaffolding techniques, improving grade calibration, and improving content knowledge.

Teachers within departments asked for common planning and collaboration time, and schools were encouraged to create time within the workday when teachers could work together. Lengthening the number of minutes in each class

## Student Voices

“It was that persistence; that I had to keep doing well and the bar being raised so high that made me realize that I was college material.”

—*Latino graduate 2004*

“What I really like about my schools that they really encourage you to take (higher level) courses...They don’t think that just because you are a Latino or other ethnic group that you can’t do it. It’s back to expectations. They don’t see color.”

—*Latino graduate 2004*

for four days—with a shortened student day on the fifth—became common. Teachers banked collaboration time and used it for joint planning. Moreover, schools began developing master schedules that gave teachers within departments shared planning time whenever possible.

## Opportunities for Acceleration

At the other end of the spectrum, many middle school students were indeed ready to take on the high school curriculum. To address this reality, middle schools started offering high school credit for passing end-of-course exams in algebra, geometry, and world languages. Students who could demonstrate mastery by the end of middle school could get a leg up on their core requirements. This opened doors to higher level core academics and world-language classes—and gave them more freedom in their schedules to take an array of high school electives.

At first, some high school teachers resisted, skeptical that middle school courses could match those taught in high school. In response, SJUSD commissioned teams of high school math and foreign language teachers to write the end-of-course exams which would demonstrate, to their satisfaction, that the middle school students had mastered the content of the parallel high school courses.

The district changed other policies, requiring, for example, that every sophomore take the Preliminary

## Student Voices

"I think that the thing students need most is to have opportunities available to realize their dreams....They need the opportunities and tools to get that done. I am very grateful that I have received those tools and opportunities."

—*Latino graduate 2004*

"My proudest accomplishment is that I will graduate and go on to college. My mom and my dad – they didn't finish high school but want me to have a better life than they did. My whole family is proud that I will be the first generation to go to college."

—*African-American student 2008*

Scholarship Aptitude Test (PSAT). Making it mandatory gave students early feedback on their strengths and weaknesses in terms of college readiness. In addition, empirically derived PSAT subsection scores predict whether a student will do well in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Looking over these "AP potential" derived scores became a tool for schools in the district to find kids whose mediocre grades might have made teachers overlook them for recruitment into AP classes. Open enrollment in AP also became policy: Any student who had taken the necessary prerequisites could enter an AP class.

## Dealing With Students Severely at Risk

The district created a wide array of options for students who were most at risk of dropping out of the comprehensive high schools. All of these intervention programs were small and targeted, offering students a chance to graduate under an individualized learning plan. The most powerful initiatives included the following:

- establishing academic classes at the regional occupational training center, so that some students could pursue technical careers while taking their academic classes on site;
- strengthening the continuation high school

program by bringing in technology to enhance learning;

- opening a career academy at a local hospital where students received experience working on site while also taking all of their academic classes there;
- creating small alternative schools at every comprehensive high school for students who were lagging behind and who needed a personal learning plan to guide their advancement; and
- expanding the middle-college program at a local community college, allowing at-risk students to attend school there full-time with the opportunity to earn both high school and college credit.

## Special Needs and English Learners

Many of San Jose's special-needs students and English-language learners have full access to the A-G curriculum, with appropriate support. Yet a subset of young people with extreme hardship also graduate under an individualized learning plan, in which requirements are adjusted to their needs. These graduation paths are handled on a case-by-case basis. One route involves using the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process to design special-needs individual graduation plans, which include, for the students most at risk, employment opportunities after high school. Another program provides English learners who have limited literacy skills—often newcomers to the country entering in high school—with individual learning plans that focus on English language acquisition. Although many English-language learners can and do complete the A-G requirements, immigrants with limited schooling in their home country and others who are struggling in high school have a pathway to graduation according to their needs.

## STRENGTHENING THE REFORMS: RECENT INITIATIVES

While many innovations enrich the educational experience for SJUSD students and help them become successful, this case study highlights two powerful, recent initiatives.

### Creating a College-Going Culture

Despite SJUSD's rigorous, college-prep curriculum, a crucial piece of the postsecondary preparation puzzle has eluded district leaders. More students are graduating with satisfactory grades in the UC/CSU A-G course sequence,

but a large percentage of them are not pursuing postsecondary education. District leaders have come to understand that students need to believe that they are “college material,” rather than seeing high school as an end-point.

Since 2004, elementary, middle, and high schools in San Jose have sought to cultivate a “college-going culture” on their campuses. Through every aspect of school, they promote college as a viable next step in all students’ educational journey, rather than a dream reserved for only the very best students. The culture starts in kindergarten and follows the students through high school (see sidebar, “Willow Glen High School: What a College-Going Culture Looks Like”).

### Using Data to Drive Change

San Jose Unified School District has become a model for how to improve instructional practice based on data. The use of data has allowed the district to follow the progress and effectiveness of decisions in ways most other districts do not.

Over the past ten years, San Jose has invested in the creation of a comprehensive data warehouse. The district’s system now tracks data on students for their entire thirteen years of education. District office personnel, as well as teachers in the classroom, are able to generate reports based on a query system.

### Setting Goals and Benchmarks

District leaders attribute SJUSD’s deliberate setting of benchmarks and goals to annual double-digit growth in student performance for several years.

- SJUSD uses benchmark assessments to determine which students are “gaining, sticking, or sliding” on performance measures throughout the year as well as on the California Standards Tests at year’s end. This straightforward approach to monitoring student achievement allows teachers to provide timely interventions for individuals who are not making gains—or are losing ground.
- The Edusoft system is the backbone of district benchmark assessments in four core subject areas: English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies. District educators have supplemented it with other locally developed tests.
- All high schools give common end-of-the-course assessments in English Language Arts and math. In the next two to three years, district leaders intend to add common science and social studies end-of-course assessments as well.

### Examples of How Teachers Use Data

- A Social Studies teacher who was seeing decreasing passing rates in his AP courses was convinced that a relatively new freshman social studies teacher had poisoned the well, causing students to be unprepared for challenging AP coursework. A query was set up by the site data team to investigate this hypothesis. It turned out that the current crop of AP students had a variety of social studies teachers in their freshman year, and the data team could find no relationship between the former teacher, course grades and AP performance. The result was that the AP teacher had to examine his own practice and begin more serious collaboration with all of his social studies colleagues to better prepare students for AP success. His pass rate is now on the rise.
- The math department wanted to know why girls are taking fewer math courses. The site data team decided to explore this phenomenon by identifying equally high-performing boys and girls in freshmen math and examining their course-taking decisions in subsequent years. They found that girls were three times less likely to choose advanced math classes. Most stopped taking math when they finished the Algebra II requirement. The school decided to take action and created gender-like classes and a more active recruitment process. Now, in 2009, girls make up a majority of Pre-Calculus and Calculus classes at the site.
- A physics teacher has looked at the CST cluster analysis to find out which standards were creating the largest obstacles for his students. He then sought out colleagues across the district whose students did well on that cluster, to find out how they taught the standards in a way that allowed students to master them. As a result, he was able to change his practice and raise student performance.

- The district and its site-level data teams seek to align classroom grades, benchmark assessments, and CST tests. Teachers study the correlation between final grades assigned and CST performance. They are attempting to bring consistency into the grades of individual teachers, so they more closely reflect standards attainment.
- Inquiry and data-based decision making has permeated teacher practice at the high schools in SJUSD, with data teams in every high school, probing and acting upon the results of their own inquiries.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SAN JOSE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

As school districts prepare students to compete in the workforce, educators need to help them acquire increasingly complex skills. Over the course of a decade, the San Jose Unified School District has demonstrated that students from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds can succeed when challenged with high expectations for their learning. Achievement and opportunity gaps narrow, dropout rates do not increase, and more students are prepared for college and a career.

### Willow Glen High School: A College-Going Culture

Willow Glen High School (WGHS) has a four-year College Readiness Program, which begins before students enroll in high school as freshmen. Eighth graders at the primary feeder middle school, Willow Glen Middle School, all attend “High School and Beyond,” a presentation that helps them begin considering personal goals during and after high school, as well as how to attain these goals. All WGHS students are expected to complete various milestones of college preparation while attending WGHS.

The College and Career Center sits in the middle of campus and serves as a hub for the school. It is a large, inviting space, with modern computers for student exploration and a college and career technician who oversees the College Readiness Program. The center is decorated with posters, pennants, and information about colleges, as well as financial aid and other postsecondary choices. It draws a steady stream of students throughout the day.

Every other year, the school hosts a career day that gives students an opportunity to hear speakers discuss various career fields. All students attend the event twice while at WGHS.

Families also take part in the College Readiness Program, with parent workshops offered throughout the year. These include presentations on specific colleges and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Workshops are held in both

English and Spanish to inform and involve all families. Community members with expertise in taxes and finances give their time to help families obtain financial aid.

WGHS pays particular attention to the unique college preparatory needs of undocumented students. This includes researching scholarships and other financial aid opportunities that do not have residency requirements, as well as educating parents (many of whom did not attend college and often do not speak English as their primary language) about postsecondary options. Undocumented status can limit a student’s opportunities, but WGHS seeks to exhaust every possible option for attending college.

Meanwhile, every professional on campus has taken personal responsibility for WGHS students’ college-going rates. No longer is it merely the college and career technician and guidance counselors’ job to ensure students can navigate their way to college. All teachers invite the career technician to make regular presentations in classes, and students complete projects on future career and college choices.

WGHS also administers an exit survey to seniors to ascertain their postsecondary plans. With these results, WGHS is able to capture a comprehensive snapshot of the college-going aspirations of its students. The school’s graduation rate has virtually doubled in the last decade from 45 percent in 1998 to 89 percent in 2008.

The San Jose Unified case study underscores that successful reform efforts must involve all stakeholders. Public engagement played a critical role in reaching a threshold for the reforms, and it has become a part of the ongoing story of improvement.

Perhaps most important, teacher unions must become partners in improving student learning if increased expectations are to succeed and endure. This aspect of reform work poses challenges, but it is essential.

San Jose Unified has shown that a diverse urban district can require that high school students take classes that will prepare them for a full array of postsecondary opportunities. It is indeed possible to eliminate educational inequality in access to a high school education that counts.

The journey of SJUSD, though unfinished, can give others the heart and the will to make the high school diploma a gateway to college as well as a good career. It is within our reach as a nation to address our faltering global competitiveness, caused in part by an education system that underserves too many of our youth. In schools across America, as in San Jose, educators should offer all students a curriculum that prepares them for a full range of postsecondary options.

## ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST—WEST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels—pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people—especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families—to live on the margin of the American mainstream.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The primary author for this case study is Dr. Linda Murray, who served as Superintendent of Schools in the San Jose Unified School District from 1993-2004, and led the early reform work that is chronicled here. Upon retiring from the District in 2004, Dr. Murray joined the Education Trust—West as Superintendent in Residence where she helps lead the organization's practice work around college and career readiness in California.



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