


Santa Clara County  Office of Education
Charles Weis, Ph.D.
County Superintendent of Schools

Sept. 13, 2010

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President, Thomas B. Fordham Institute
1016 16th St. NW, 8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Mr. Finn:

It's an exciting time for educators in San Jose and throughout Santa Clara County. Despite financial hardships and criticism by naysayers, educators here are buoyed by sound evidence that California's public school system is working.

Recently released standardized test scores show that county students are improving, more pupils are taking and succeeding in rigorous math and science classes, and the achievement gap is narrowing in Silicon Valley. This good news only intensifies the happy back-to-school energy that inspires all educators every fall.

So, it's particularly disheartening that a report (*America's Best (and Worst) Cities for School Reform: Attracting Entrepreneurs and Change Agents*, Aug. 2010) recently released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute ranks San Jose as one of the worst U.S. cities for school reform. As the Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools, I know I speak for all school district superintendents in San Jose when I say that simply isn't true.

Firstly, the report's findings are short-sighted: Its assessment data appears solely drawn from the San Jose Unified School District, ignoring the 18 other school districts scattered throughout the city. The large urban district holds more than 20 percent of the city's K-12 enrollment, but SJUSD is just one of a smattering of districts working tirelessly to educate San Jose youth and make lasting changes through innovative programs and initiatives.

For example, the Alum Rock Union and Franklin-McKinley school districts have launched a number of initiatives to improve student outcomes, including closing failing schools, creating new small schools and converting an existing school into a charter. At the Santa Clara County Office of Education, we are working to foster understanding between traditional school districts and charter schools, most notably through a well-attended summit we launched earlier this year and a roundtable discussion planned for later this month.

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The Franklin-McKinley Children's Initiative, a Harlem Children's Zone-inspired planning effort, is under way to create a cradle-to-career support system for families in the community. Also, it will partner with the County Office of Education to submit an application to develop a model, high-quality, 0-8 early education Educare center. These are only a few of the powerful reform efforts underway within traditional school districts, initiatives largely ignored by the Fordham report, which emphasizes non-traditional reform entities.

Further, many San Jose districts have created innovative partnerships with community organizations to provide after-school educational programs that extend the learning day and provide intervention and support to students. Teach For America members are also educating in San Jose, a fact that is published on the organization's Web site and contradicts the Fordham report's suggestion that San Jose lacks well-respected alternative certification programs.

The report's assertion that San Jose "does not utilize data to drive education reform" is flatly contradicted by Education-Trust West, an education reform organization listed on Fordham's Web site. Its report, *San Jose Unified, A Case Study: Preparing Students for College and Career*, finds on page 9 that "San Jose Unified School District has become a model for how to improve instructional practice based on data. The use of data has enabled the district to follow the progress and effectiveness of decisions in ways most other districts do not."

And while San Jose indeed lacks support from the Gates Foundation and Broad Foundation, the report ignores the rich involvement of Silicon Valley businesses and philanthropies in improving educational outcomes. For example, the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and Silicon Valley Education Foundation have each supported students, teachers and the community through numerous programs. Further, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation is funding a county-wide initiative to develop a comprehensive plan to provide high-quality early childhood education to all young children.

San Jose city leaders have also sought private funds to support innovative programs, contrary to the report's assertion. For example, SJ2020, a joint initiative between the city of San Jose and the Santa Clara County Office of Education, has been under way for almost a year now. One of San Jose's many city-school partnerships that the Fordham report ignored, SJ2020 unites school districts, the business community, philanthropies and community organizations in a commitment to eliminate the achievement gap in city schools within the decade.

This groundbreaking initiative aims for a lofty goal, but I am convinced we will meet the challenge thanks to dedicated students, exceptional teachers, and a community committed to its youth. Come visit San Jose, and I'll show you high-achieving pupils, nationally recognized teachers and administrators, neighborhoods rallying around their schools, and, of course, a County Office of Education that couldn't be more proud.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles Weis".

Charles Weis, Ph.D.
Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools

CC: Frederick M. Hess, resident scholar and director of Education Policy Studies, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research
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