



LATINO LEADERSHIP ALLIANCE

Latino Leadership in Motion

Voces de Silicon Valley

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About Latino Leadership Alliance

Latino Leadership Alliance is the Bay Area's Premier Latino Leadership Development Organization

In 2009, the Latino Leadership Alliance founders created a groundbreaking partnership and collaboration with Stanford University designed to seek out, train, and mentor emerging leaders in the Silicon Valley. The need and the goal were simple:

To identify and provide training and support to emerging leaders across the business, government, education, and non-profit sectors to take leadership roles in all sectors and in issues affecting the Silicon Valley's expansive and diverse Latino community.

Our Mission

The mission of Latino Leadership Alliance is to amplify the voice and expand the power of Latino leadership, engage in policy and advocacy, and build partnerships to focus on race equity affecting the Latino community.

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Voces de Silicon Valley

In this collection, created by the 13th cohort of the Latino Leadership Alliance's Leadership Academy, we have assembled three case studies of Latino Leadership in San José and Silicon Valley. In each, we examine how Latino/a/x/e leaders came together to advocate for greater resources for their communities, and promote equity and justice in San José and Silicon Valley. For each, we have also been honored to speak to and hear from visionary leaders who did the work about what it actually takes to enact change.

The first case study examines how the Mexican Heritage Plaza, a unique resource and site of comunidad in East San José, came to be. The second investigates the East Side Alliance and its collaborative work to share knowledge, resources, and implement aligned effective practices to prepare students for a successful future. The final looks at Madre a Madre, and the work of Maria Marcelo in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood as an example of the impact that servant leadership can have in empowering a community over time.

It is our hope that these case studies will provide both practical lessons and inspiration for future leaders in the Latino/a/x/e community of Silicon Valley and future cohorts of the Latino Leadership Alliance.

We wish to express our immense gratitude toward both the Latino Leadership Alliance board and our cohort facilitators, Eddie García, Lennies Gutierrez, and Andres Quintero for supporting our collective vision. In particular, we want to acknowledge the contribution of the Latino Leadership Alliance board co-chair, Mayra Flores, who offered her skills as an editor during the final stages of this project. Finally, we want to express our tremendous appreciation for all of the leaders who generously shared their insight and experiences with us to capture voices of Latino/a/x/e leadership in Silicon Valley for the benefit of future generations.

ABSTRACT: VOCES DE SILICON VALLEY – MEXICAN HERITAGE PLAZA

The Mexican Heritage Plaza opened in 1999 in the Mayfair neighborhood in East San José – built at the site of the Safeway store where Cesar Chavez announced the first United Farm Workers' grape boycott in 1965. The Plaza is unique in its scale, beauty, and explicit celebration of Mexican, Mexican-American, and Eastside San Jose culture. This case study, intended for consumption by aspiring Latino/a/x/e leaders and curious community members, intends to answer the question of where the vision for a space as special as the Mexican Heritage Plaza came from and how leaders and the community in East San José organized to achieve it.

The groundwork for this project was laid far before the groundbreaking by community trailblazers. Initially conceptualized as a garden, San José City Council Member Blanca Alvarado, community members, government leaders, and the Mexican Heritage Plaza Corporation realized that idea as a 50,000-square-foot cultural center. The Mexican Heritage Plaza features a 500-seat theater, art gallery, and multipurpose room reflecting the style of beautiful plazas across Mexico.

The Mexican Heritage Plaza is a symbol of resilience, vision, and commitment to comunidad by dedicated visionary leaders. Through these key leaders' stories, we capture the story of the Mexican Heritage Plaza. We hope that this case study provides words of wisdom, hope, and inspiration for the next generation of Latino/a/x/e Leaders.

Inception: The First Latina Council Member and a Meeting in a Church

In 1980, after a hard-fought victory, Blanca Alvarado became the first-ever Latina elected to the San José City Council. This was during the same year that was the first time elections were run by city council district rather than at-large, a change that meant working class and Latino/a/x/e neighborhoods would see real representation on the city council for the first time in the city's history. Blanca's district – District 5 – represented East San José. She served District 5 as a representative for 14 years, but her position would be contested throughout her time on the council:

None of my elections, my re-elections were easy. They were all difficult. But because it takes hard work to go door to door, and it takes hard work to prove to the voters and to the residents that you are doing a good job ... How do you decide? Where do you start? Because every part of the district was in need of something. It was tough. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

As East San José's first representative on the city council, Blanca recognized her community was not afforded a fair share of amenities and city resources.

Toward the end of the 1980s, then-Mayor Tom McEnery had a grand vision to turn San José into a "City of Gardens." In this project, Blanca saw an opportunity to bring resources to her community through a garden. In 1987, San José had the Chinese Overfelt Gardens, the Japanese Friendship Gardens, and several rose gardens. McEnery wanted to expand this immensely. The idea presented at the time was originally two community gardens; one reflective of the first arrivals to Santa Clara County and the second for the newly arrived. The first arrivals would be the Mexican community, and the Vietnamese would be the second arrivals (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023).

Now Vice Mayor Blanca packed her staff, Mexican-American community leaders, and community members in the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church to create a vision for San José's Mexican cultural gardens. At this meeting, there was a realization that this was an opportunity to create something bigger for East San José:

Well, lo and behold, that very, very small, planted seed mushroomed into something much more spectacular and something that we felt was much more [...] conducive to the cultural identity of Latinos ... it became clear to us that we were not going to settle for a mere garden, that we needed to go beyond that and to really do something that reflected the culture of the Mexican community. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

The vision of the garden evolved into that of a cultural center. This physical structure would honor Mexican ancestry and culture and invite people from all cultures to celebrate it and enjoy the space.

We were quite egalitarian in our belief that while the focus would be Mexican ancestry and culture and heritage, we would also be a beacon to other cultures to use the space for their own cultural activities as well. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

Now came the task of making this vision a reality.

As Blanca and her staff convened leaders within the East San José community to talk more about this cultural center, they realized this effort would need more than just an advocate in city hall; it would need community leadership:

And she said, 'We would like to have a cultural center. How many of you would like to see that?' Everybody raises their hand. 'Okay. So, we need to figure out where we will locate it. So, we're probably going to need someone to chair it.' And she said, 'Is anyone interested in chairing it?' Nobody. 'Fernando, aren't you a lawyer?' She said, 'Why don't you serve as interim chair for a committee just to get this thing started?' I said I don't know. Interim chairs evolve into permanent chairs.' 'So,' she says, 'Come on, I need your help, and you can do it. You know what to do.' So I said, 'All right.' So that is how this all started. (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

Thus, Fernando Zazueta was impressed into service as the first chair of this grassroots board, and as he foresaw, his interim role quickly became permanent. Gradually, Fernando assembled

directors, including colleagues like Al Morales, who were instrumental in securing the space where the plaza would ultimately be built. This was the first time anyone had experienced raising funds, creating plans, or being on a board. The Mexican Heritage Corporation, the nonprofit building The Plaza, was formally launched in 1988 (Gordon, 1999).

Fundraising: “Nobody Has Ever Raised that in the East Side, Ever”

In 1992, the San José City Council approved the location and plans for the Mexican Heritage Plaza (Gordon, 1999). The next task was fundraising and building the plaza. To assist in this effort, in 1992, the board brought on Pete Carrillo, a long-time ally of Blanca’s and a community advocate, as the Mexican Heritage Corporation’s founding President and Chief Executive Officer. At this stage, his mission, that of Fernando and the board, and that of Blanca as their ally in City Hall was to secure funds to get the plaza built and then build it. The goal was clear, but the path was anything but.

A major obstacle put up by the city once the \$9 million budget for the initial Disposition and Development Agreement (DDA) was agreed upon was that to receive \$6 million in funds from the Redevelopment Agency led by Executive Director Frank Taylor, the Mexican Heritage Corporation needed to raise \$3 million on their own.

The city said, you know, we're not going to do anything with you unless you raise \$3 million. We said \$3 million? We'll never make that kind of money. Nobody has ever raised that in the East Side, ever. (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023).

Some working on the project believed that the city merely wanted to test the mettle of this grassroots board before investing further, while others believed that such an ambitious target had been set because they were expected to fail.

And I am pretty certain. If you gave, what do you call, truth serum to the redevelopment agency people, they will tell you that they never believed that we would raise \$3 million. Never. So for them, you know, we'll park \$6 million here, but we know that down the road they're not going to execute the DDA, and we're going to use that money someplace else. (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023)

Nevertheless, if The Plaza was going to be built, the East San José community had to raise more money than ever.

PG&E donated \$50,000 to get the project going (Gordon, 1999). The Mexican Heritage Corporation board was also hard at work raising funds. Fernando Zazueta was introduced by Tony Carrillo, a professor at San José State University, to an annual Mariachi festival in Tucson, Arizona that raised funds for local nonprofits and saw the potential for a similar fundraiser in San José. As a result, the Mexican Heritage Corporation held its first International Mariachi Festival in 1992 with Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán kicking off the event (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023). "We raised \$120,000 the first year, and that became what we did," shared Fernando. Board fundraising efforts alone, however, would not be enough to bring the vision of the Mexican Heritage Plaza to reality. Even with generous support from the East San José community, the pace of community fundraising efforts would not satisfy the terms of the Mexican Heritage Corporation's DDA allowing them to secure Redevelopment Agency funds, which led to The Plaza's supporters seeking other sources of public funding to meet their end of the agreement. A sense that these funds belonged to the community and deserved to be returned to them was an important part of the belief that made The Plaza a reality.

As Pete Carrillo recalled: "So that was my belief that, you know, it's public money and we pay taxes, and we should benefit from it" (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). It was time to lobby. Toward the end of 1992, Pete Carrillo and Council Member Blanca Alvarado found themselves in the Washington, D.C. office of Luis Stokes, a representative from Cleveland Ohio and member of the powerful Appropriations Committee of the House of Representatives, whose support Congressmen Norman Mineta and Don Edwards had assured them they would need if they were going to get a cent of the federal funds they were seeking. They had come with a request to have \$250,000 in "pure pork" to assist in constructing the plaza. 'Pork' – government spending directed to local projects – was so often appropriated for so many other public and private projects across the country, why not for East San José?

Nevertheless, the first Latina Council Member in San José and the Founding President and CEO of the Mexican Heritage Corporation found themselves immensely intimidated as they waited for their audience with a man who could decide the fate of their project.

So Blanca and I go to his office and we're like scared. [...] You know, he's on this powerful committee. And, you know, we don't know the guy, and he comes. He's very polite. He says, yeah, "How can I help you?" So we start explaining a little bit and he says, "So how can I really help you? I'm already going to do what Mr. Mineta and Mr. Edwards said. Is there something else I can help you with? Or would you like to take a picture with me?" And so I still have that picture. (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023)

A few days after they met with Congressman Stokes, Blanca and Pete received a call letting them know that President George H. W. Bush had just signed their appropriation bill, not for \$250,000 but for \$1,000,000.

With federal funds secured and an endorsement of the vision for The Plaza at that level, Pete, Blanca, Fernando, and the board continued to be fierce advocates for other public funding sources so often denied to East San José. Pete recalls when seeking \$750,000 from a recently passed Park Charter Fund at the county level, "So you have all this money for parks, and we knew it was just not going to our community. [...] And so we went and asked for money, and they [the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors] said, no, it doesn't qualify. (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). Flexibility in funding requirements – what qualified as a 'park' in this case – was often allowed for projects in more affluent communities, but some of the county supervisors found themselves becoming strict literalists when it came time to consider allocating money to East San José. Thankfully, at this time, Supervisor Ron Gonzales was sympathetic to the complaints of Pete and the Mexican Heritage Corporation and wrote a memo to his fellow supervisors stating: "In the Mexican dictionary, a park is a plaza." (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). They were successful in securing \$750,000 in county funding for The Plaza.

As it became clear that The Plaza was on track to become a reality, resistance continued to come from within the organs of the city itself. Redevelopment agency revenues had not been what was projected, and Frank Taylor, their Executive Director, urged the board to modify the scope of the project, which now included a community garden, a 500-seat theater, and classrooms, bringing the total projected cost to \$32 million dollars.

Frank Taylor and other opponents of the project's scope advocated that the projected budget be slashed in half to \$16 million. Intimidated by institutional opposition, some supporters of the project were ready to concede in the hope that additional funding could be secured later, but Pete Carrillo recalls thinking, "We'll never, ever add any more to this project if we let them reduce our budget. Let them go take it from someplace else." (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). Blanca, Fernando, and the board agreed with Pete. They were fundraising at a record pace to meet what was outlined in the DDA. While the scope of the project was growing, Redevelopment was investing money in other projects in other San José communities with far less resistance:

He [Frank Taylor] put up all kinds of reasons why we should not proceed and that, in fact, we should modify considerably our expectations of what The Plaza should look like. But I do remember with such clarity that on the day that it was scheduled behind closed doors at a closed session, our group was allowed to go into the closed session. How did we manage to do that legally? I don't recall. But Fernando Zazueta and three of the board members were with me, and we said, 'No way, no way, no way, no way. Susan, we will not give up, not one inch.' And we were so adamant and so insistent that not a single modification would be made to that project that they found the way to find the money. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

Blanca and the Mexican Heritage Corporation did not budge and stayed true to their vision for the project.

Bottom line is that it takes grit. We were adamant in our belief that we deserved that taxpayer, that we as taxpayers were entitled to get our share of the redevelopment funds for something that would put us on the map. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

The city's contribution eventually grew to \$31 million, bringing the total investment in East San José represented by the construction of the Mexican Heritage Plaza to \$34 million (Garcia, 1999).

Building: Why Not Fill the Courtyard with Gravel?

Aside from creating gardens themselves, part of Mayor Tom McEnery's vision for the "City of Gardens" project in which Blanca and the East San José community saw the opportunity for the Mexican Heritage Plaza, also involved the creation of gateways into San José – one north, south, west, and east – signifying to people that they were entering the city (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023). The Plaza was meant to serve as the gateway to the east. However, as the project grew and began to include theater and event spaces, some began to argue that the best place for the Mexican Heritage Plaza was downtown San José. However, it was important to the vision of The Plaza and its purpose that it be built in East San José.

Even though there were people who insisted that the cultural center should be in the downtown and the theater district, we wanted it to be in the East Side for some pretty significant reasons. Number one, to give the East Side identity and because symbolically, it reflected the first place that the boycott with Cesar Chavez at that Safeway store. So symbolically, the cultural center represents many things. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

However, even as East San José leaders argued for the project to be built in East San José, much resistance came from the community surrounding the future site of The Plaza. There were concerns about the excessive presence of alcohol in the neighborhood during events, displacement of businesses through the purchase of property and uses of eminent domain to secure the site for The Plaza, and cost of living increase around The Plaza (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023). Pete Carrillo recalls advocates for The Plaza in East San José being labeled as 'elitists', while its opponents – including many Chicano activists –referred to themselves as 'communitarians.'

I mean, it got ugly [...] we had over 50 public hearings, whether it was at the city, county, or other governmental level, or community meetings. And they weren't pretty. (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023)

Despite resistance from institutions and some community members, the project had a vision and was moving forward. It was time to decide what the Mexican Heritage Plaza would look like, who would build it, and who would design it. Decisions like these also were not made without

resistance to the idea that quality and artistic vision were something worth prioritizing in an investment in East San José. An example was the Spanish tiles used for the roofs in The Plaza. Fernando Zazueta, Chairman of the Mexican Heritage Corporation, liked the idea of these Spanish tile roofs similar to the ones seen on missions. The city council objected and suggested a less expensive (and less attractive) option – a metal roof. The board stood firmly with their vision of the Spanish roofs and determined that they would not participate further. The city would have to get a whole new board of directors (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023).

The board wanted travertine stonework in the courtyard, and the city staff recommended crushed gravel as a more economical option. Pete Carrillo imagined a plaza where rain would turn the courtyard – where so many galas, weddings, concerts, and quinceaneras are held today – into a muddy wasteland (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). Fernando thought of all the issues gravel might present – tracking crushed rock into the building, damages to the floor, and abrasion. The board stuck to the travertine stonework.

We always encountered opposition to everything we said, and we had to argue to get it done. So one of the things that we learned is you cannot depend on the city staff to be doing what is the right thing necessarily. You have to do your research. You have to look into it. And if you believe strongly. (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

Groundbreaking for the Mexican Heritage Plaza occurred in December 1997, with the Mexican Heritage Plaza opening on September 9, 1999 (Gordon, 2023). This was a massive community celebration that many who worked to make The Plaza a reality, including those we interviewed for this project, fondly remember to this day. East San José felt like they had won and built something beautiful and meaningful for the community, in the community, and they had. However, while The Plaza had been built by the Mexican Heritage Corporation, operating it would prove to be a different challenge entirely.

Navigating Challenges: The Path to the End of the Mexican Heritage Corporation

The Mexican Heritage Corporation was responsible for running maintenance and operations at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, which presented difficulties from the outset. Fundraising for

operations – e.g. building maintenance, non-program staff, and expenses that fall outside direct service – is nearly always a challenge for nonprofits. Two months after The Plaza’s opening, Chairman Fernando Zazueta requested an independent audit to assess its growing pains. The report that emerged from this audit made it clear that without increased support from the city, the Mexican Heritage Corporation was likely to encounter significant financial challenges. (P. Carrillo, personal communication, September 13, 2023). The city, however, did not want to cover costs for ongoing operations, and support from the city to the Mexican Heritage Corporation in the form of grants eventually became a loan (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023). The implications of this change were immense. While fundraising for operational rather than service-related expenses is already difficult, it became nearly impossible for the Mexican Heritage Corporation to secure funds from major foundations with loans on its books as it is a standard practice in philanthropy to not make grants to organizations with significant debt. Exacerbating the deficit, the city required that the Mexican Heritage Corporation rent out office spaces in tiers, with nonprofit organizations charged a lower rate, and the difference made up by the Mexican Heritage Corporation (F. Zazueta, personal communication, July 13, 2023). Organizations operating in the plaza at a reduced rate also could make use of the theater, which was great for the community, but resulted in the Mexican Heritage Corporation having fewer days to use the space it operated to fundraise and tend to its own financial situation.

Operational costs stacked up, with everything from lighting for events, cleaning, heating, security, and the inability to raise funds from major donors and foundations leading the Mexican Heritage Corporation further and further from breaking even. After years of audits, consultants, and changes in strategy – in 2008, the city assumed control of the Mexican Heritage Plaza from the Mexican Heritage Corporation. A new organization, the School of Arts and Culture, “was formed in direct response to the community’s demand that the facility should not be shuttered after the Mexican Heritage Corporation left its role as the operator of the space” (V. Shieh, personal communication, September 29, 2023). In 2013, the city named the School of Arts and Culture as the Mexican Heritage Plaza’s permanent operator (Woolfolk, 2013).

Conclusion: An Enduring Legacy of Belief

The Mexican Heritage Plaza is more than just a beautiful space. It is a reminder of the vibrant community of East San José and the throughline of resilience from Cesar Chavez and

organizers of the past to those fighting for equity and visibility in building The Plaza, and today. This legacy is one that the current leaders of the School of Arts and Culture acknowledge.

The current leadership of The Plaza is indebted to those who built The Plaza. [...] The Plaza's past leaders fought for the community's vibrancy and pride to be seen. And, in many ways, that fight continues. The Plaza is a reminder that the people of East San José deserve expansive and beautiful spaces that celebrate them. (V. Shieh, personal communication, September 29, 2023)

Even if the organization that built The Plaza – the Mexican Heritage Corporation – no longer operates it, the Mexican Heritage Plaza stands today as a testament to the grit and determination to advocate that resources so often invested elsewhere be invested in East San José. The belief that East San José was as entitled to public investment as every other community in San José and that what they were doing in building the Mexican Heritage Plaza was worthwhile was at the core of the success of Blanca, Fernando, Pete, the Mexican Heritage Corporation and the community in making this project a reality.

We have to constantly reaffirm our own belief in our value. We did not allow ourselves to be undervalued or this project to be undervalued. It is a source of so much pride and so much happiness. Because when you go to the Plaza, and you see the multiple uses that take place there, it just makes your heart leap with joy. (B. Alvarado, personal communication, July 13, 2023)

The Plaza is a physical representation of the culture and value of San José's Mexican community and remains – as intended – a space for all cultures and communities to gather.

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ABSTRACT: VOCES DE SILICON VALLEY – EAST SIDE ALLIANCE

East San José has acted as the cultural center, economic hub, and home for Latinos/as/x/es of Silicon Valley for the last 50 years. With over 200,000 residents, the zip codes most prominently featured of 95127, 95122, 95116, and 95133 are served by multitudes of community organizations, including public service providers and educational nonprofits. As of the 2013 - 2014 academic year, only one in five Latinos/as/x/es in Silicon Valley possessed a higher education degree in comparison to half of all adults in the region.

Since then, the San José-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara Region has continually been listed as one of the nation's three most unaffordable metropolitan regions. Per the California Department of Education's DataQuest Dashboard, in its first year reporting four-year outcome data for high school students (2016 - 2017), the Latino/a/x/e Graduation Rate was 75.2%, and A - G completion rate at 27.3% in East Side Union High School District.

These poor results not only pose difficulties for the students and their families in household earning potential but also diminish the number of qualified professionals in the region year-over-year. Individual non-profit programs and public agencies have worked to rectify the low access to higher education and persistence rates. However, East San José's more than 25,000 high school-aged youth annually have not been served at a large scale with high program fidelity and a strong hand-off between educational levels.

Over the forthcoming decade, Latinos/as/x/es under the age of 24 make up 41% of their age group in Silicon Valley. Though interventions were employed at the school site and district level, a connected effort with a central vision remained unavailable until 2014. Ongoing barriers to academic achievement include funding disparities between East San José schools and affluent counterpart districts, misalignment between graduation requirements and four-year university admission requirements, and low levels of reclassification for English Language Learners. At the same time, competing and complementary priorities to academic achievement for school districts also developed with a new lens of social/emotional learning and individualized support requiring greater bandwidth locally. With the region's most prominent sectors of technology, healthcare, and education commonly requiring a four-year Bachelor's Degree for livable wage employment, this dire state of secondary education demonstrated a high need for reform and external support.

The East Side Alliance (ESA), a collaborative initiative formed in partnership with 40 community partners, eight public school districts, and the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, aimed to fill this need. The East Side Alliance sought to establish alignment between East San José's elementary school districts and its sole high school district to serve more than 60,000 students collectively per academic year. Established in 2013 on the East Side of San José, California, the ESA includes the East Side Union High School District and feeder elementary schools, including Alum Rock, Berryessa, Evergreen, Franklin McKinley, Mt. Pleasant, Oak Grove, and Orchard.

The ESA is composed of various stakeholders, including superintendents, the Silicon Valley Education Foundation (SVEF), and collaborative partners working across the eight alliance districts. The East Side Alliance's vision is to prepare every student for a lifetime of success in Silicon Valley. To achieve this vision, the ESA has implemented a range of initiatives, including the implementation of the Common Core State Standards across districts, support for technology access for students, closing the achievement gap, accelerating African American and Latino/a/x/e A-G rates, and the implementation and support of the Spartan East Side Promise (SESP). These initiatives collectively work toward the ESA's overarching goal of providing students with the tools and opportunities they need to thrive in Silicon Valley. With five strategic initiatives aimed to bring holistic development and core subject proficiency to its students, the East Side Alliance is building a framework to become the model collaborative in California for serving historically disenfranchised communities.

Common Core Standards Implementation:

To achieve their mission, the East Side Alliance has put in place crucial educational components that serve as the groundwork for their efforts. These instructional pieces are essential in ensuring that students have the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to succeed inside and outside the classroom.

Acting as the foundational instructional pieces of the East Side Alliance are:

1. Implementation of compliant Common Core standards in line with the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act;
2. Development of standards-aligned course content and curricula; and
3. The progression of instructional practices among the elementary and middle schools feeding into ESUHSD schools.

The focus of improving instruction and support through supplemental instruction has primarily been in Mathematics. In the 2014 - 2015 academic year, the United States released the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to adequately measure grade level proficiency across regions in line with college-going standards. In ESUHSD's baseline data year, then-Superintendent Chris Funk announced that only 17% of Latino/a/x/e students "Met" or "Exceeded" grade level standards - the lowest for any ethnic demographic group.¹ In response, per the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, all districts under the East Side Alliance are working to participate in "common mathematics pathways, middle school [College Preparatory Mathematics - CPM] curriculum, and standardized assessments." The East Side Alliance emphasized that the Mathematics focus will remain "the initiative's most critical piece for students" to attain success in higher education. Moreover, a tall order exists in properly preparing educators to take on new expectations to bridge the gap of grade level proficiency through proper professional development.

A key component of understanding the baseline data from students transitioning from various elementary and middle school districts into ESUHSD school is the 9th Grade Math Placement Test. This diagnostic exam was enacted into California law as the California Mathematics

¹ [Microsoft Word - CAASPP 2015 Final.docx \(esuhsd.org\)](#)

Placement Test of 2015² “to improve the measurement of student performance in order to move more students successfully through the high school curriculum.”

Closing the A - G Achievement Gap with Peer Districts

Prior to the establishment of the East Side Alliance, the seven elementary partner districts in the East Side and the East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD) functioned independently. This separate and fragmented approach presented significant challenges for students transitioning from K - 8 to the East Side Union High School District’s 11 comprehensive high schools. These challenges included a lack of continuity in curriculum, unclear articulation between grade levels, a disparity in supplemental education opportunities for underserved sections of East San Jose, and inconsistent educational standards across districts. Consequently, students often missed valuable opportunities to participate in rigorous coursework and receive adequate college preparation as they entered high school.

Recognizing these issues, one of ESA's primary objectives was to promote collaboration and alignment among the K-8 districts and the 11 high schools they feed into. This initiative was driven by the overarching goal of increasing the number of students who complete A-G course requirements, the minimum course standards required for admission to a four-year public university in California. Boosting A-G completion rates and expanding access to post-secondary education is particularly significant for students living in the Silicon Valley area, as pursuing higher education can serve as an opportunity to engage in the region's economic growth, innovation, and overall development.

In 2012 (before the establishment of the East Side Alliance), only 33% of East Side Union High students had completed the A-G requirements³, highlighting the need to implement a new approach to improve student outcomes and close the achievement gaps.

The multi-district collaboration fostered by ESA has allowed for the implementation of consistent standards, alignment in instructional practices, and opportunities for teacher professional development. Furthermore, ESA serves as a space for dialogue and coordination between K-12 districts.

² [Bill Text - SB-359 California Mathematics Placement Act of 2015.](#)

³ [Mercury News - East Side Alliance: Schools forge bold new model for student success](#)

One key accomplishment for the East Side Alliance is the improved consistency in math placement practices for students throughout the districts, especially in subjects such as middle school algebra and 9th-grade geometry. Partnering districts have been pivotal in directing students toward appropriate courses and providing support. Math is a core subject in A-G preparation, and accurate placement guarantees that students remain on a proper and challenging coursework trajectory.

In 2022, the overall A-G completion rate in the district was 53.3%. Notably, African-American students achieved a completion rate of 36%, and Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e students achieved a completion rate of 28.5%⁴, underscoring the need for targeted efforts to address these disparities and ensure equitable access to educational opportunities.

The East Side Alliance's increase in A-G completion is a reflection of their dedication to addressing disparities in access to higher education within the East San José community. Their multifaceted approach, encompassing support for students, college awareness initiatives, and district partnerships, holds the promise of a brighter future for East Side Union High School District students, where educational opportunities are more equitable and accessible to all.

Spartan East Side Promise Program with San José State University

In 2016, the collective commitment to enhance the college-going pathway and improve access to higher education for families and students in East San José led to the creation of a new partnership between the East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD) and San José State University (SJSU), known as the Spartan East Side Promise (SESP)⁵. Housed under San José State University's Student Outreach and Recruitment (SOAR) Department, the Spartan East Side Promise provides guaranteed admission to qualified high school students and offers comprehensive support and assistance.

If an ESUHSD student falls short of the eligibility index score for their desired major but has met the Minimum A-G requirements with a C- or better, followed all deadlines, and maintains a 2.75 A-G GPA or higher, they are offered provisional admission to SJSU as undeclared major⁶. This

⁴ [ESUHSD 2023-2024 Local Control Accountability Plan](#)

⁵ [Spartan East Side Promise.pdf \(esuhsd.org\)](#)

⁶

means that, even if a student doesn't meet the requirements for their chosen major, they will still have the opportunity to enroll at SJSU and explore their academic interests.

In 2019, the initiative received funding to extend its services, including outreach and support for local students and families and transition and retention aid for newly admitted students.

- **Community Outreach:** The outreach and support component of the Spartan East Side Promise focuses on engaging local high school students and their families. It provides valuable information on admission requirements, deadlines and assists with the application process. Additionally, Promise staff works closely with various organizations and partners, including ESUHSD counselors, Cal-SOAP, the East Side Education Foundation, and the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, to provide robust support.
- **Transition and Retention:** Once students are admitted to SJSU, the program offers support throughout their academic journey. This includes academic, personal, and professional development resources. A key feature is the Spartan Summer Program, a 10-day summer program that connects incoming students with campus resources and mentors.

More than 3,000 students have been admitted to San José State University through the Spartan East Side Promise Program - many students identifying as first-generation Latino/a/x/e and deriving from socioeconomically disadvantaged households.

The East Side Education Foundation also sponsors scholarships for program participants, further reducing financial barriers to higher education. These scholarships can range from \$500 to \$5,000, significantly impacting students' ability to pursue their college dreams.

Technology Access and Support Against the 'Digital Divide'

Technology and education have become increasingly intertwined and have transformed the way students learn. Access to reliable internet and digital resources is fundamental for students and families in the 21st century. In California, as of 2020, approximately one in six school-aged children face a significant barrier to their education due to a lack of internet access at home⁷.

⁷ [Education Equity in Crisis: The Digital Divide by the Education Trust-West](#)

This digital divide disproportionately affects the state's most marginalized students, including those of color, low-income backgrounds, and English Language Learners. Recognizing the urgent need to bridge this gap, the Eastside Education Alliance has made equitable internet access a priority.

The Eastside Education Alliance collaborates with the City of San José to provide digital access with Wi-Fi accessibility and technology support to students and their families. The partnership promotes options for continuity and availability of Wi-Fi connectivity across East San José.

The Alliance also partners with the Silicon Valley Education Foundation (SVEF) to provide support through the School2Home initiative. The School2Home aims to cultivate a sustainable digital learning culture within schools and communities. The program is built on partners providing digital devices such as laptops, Chromebooks, and tablets that students can use both at home and in their classrooms. This program also aims to provide digital fluency and bridge social, economic, and geographic gaps, helping underserved communities access the essential tools for quality education.

East Side Alliance Progress and Future Priorities

Over the last ten years, the Alliance has made significant progress in improving student learning and bridging the educational achievement gap in East San José. The Alliance has shown its commitment to prioritize equity and academic achievement for all students. ESA's forward-thinking aims to ensure its mission of being an educational community where educational leaders share ideas, leverage resources and align practices with the end goal of preparing every student for a lifetime of success in Silicon Valley. The initiative addresses the educational and college-going success of all East Side students comprehensively, equipping them for success in college, careers, and the global arena. A fundamental aspect of the collective impact model involves a shared vision, commitment, engagement, and action. This ambitious and innovative endeavor offers a unique opportunity to create a profound and sustainable impact for all students in San José's East Side.

Special Thanks

Our deepest gratitude and appreciation to Superintendent Dr. Elida MacArthur, Superintendent Juan Cruz, Superintendent Dr. Roxane Fuentes, and Spartan East Side Promise Program Lead, Amanda Aldama Fernandes for their important contribution to the sharing of knowledge about East Side Alliance, Spartan East Side Promise Program, and Latino leadership in Silicon Valley. Their expertise and insights have provided immense value to our community. Through their contributions, they have helped shape a more inclusive and equitable world, and we are deeply grateful for their collective efforts.

ABSTRACT: VOCES DE SILICON VALLEY – MADRE A MADRE

This white paper celebrates the enduring legacy of Madre a Madre, a leadership group led by the late Maria Marcelo, dedicated to advocating for immigrant, Latino/a/x/e, and low-income communities for more than 22 years.

Originating within Washington Elementary, Madre a Madre's separation from the institution due to misaligned values with administrators led to the formation of the non-profit organization, Healing Grove. This paper displays the exceptional resilience embodied by Madre a Madre, a shining example of servant leadership. Despite adversities, their unwavering commitment and innovative approach sustained their mission and created lasting change in the Latino/a/x/e community.

This narrative illustrates how servant leadership can inspire transformative impact. Madre a Madre's journey is a testament to the power of resilient leadership and its potential to foster lasting change.

Inception

The Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood is located south of Downtown San José, a historically Mexican-American and immigrant community. According to the 2020 Census, most families in the neighborhood are low-income, with more than 60% of Latinos/as/x/es earning less than \$50,000 annually, and the majority of residents having less than a high school education.

As a community of Latino/a/x/e immigrants, there has always been a need to build community and connections with neighbors to foster familial and cultural relations. The mothers of Washington Elementary students certainly felt drawn to elevating the leadership of the community by focusing on being involved in their children's school life. In 2004, with the support of Principal Maria Evans, mothers of Washington Elementary started gathering in a group they named Madre a Madre (Mother to Mother). The mothers gathered weekly to learn about educational resources, and mental and physical health, amongst other topics.

Soon, Madre a Madre became a pillar of Washington Elementary and the broader community, led by Maria Marcelo, a local mother, and leader, the Madre a Madre initiative grabbed the attention of non-profit activists, politicians, and higher education institutions, including Santa Clara University, University of California, Berkeley, and San José State University (SJSU). All of these stakeholders had a mission; increasing the literacy skills of English Language Learners, and creating a vibrant, safe, connected, informed, and inclusive Washington neighborhood.

Facing Challenges

A powerful force to reckon with, Madre a Madre ensured the mothers of Washington Elementary developed the skills necessary to advocate for themselves and their children. As the mothers became more involved, they had a big presence on campus, Madre a Madre held weekly meetings and many members chose to volunteer in the school reading to children every morning. As the mothers developed advocacy skills, other institutions became interested in collaborating with them to make improvements in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood.

Santa Clara University was one of those institutions, and with the help of Maria Marcelo started two programs centering the leadership of Madre a Madre members. The Thriving

Neighborhoods Initiative and the Prosperity Initiative were two programs hosted by the university. These programs provided resources to bring in leadership and community development opportunities for the Washington neighborhood and were led by the university's undergraduate students and staff (Tufts, 2015).

The Santa Clara University programs aimed to foster genuine relationships and develop connections that would ensure equal power between university representatives and community members. Unfortunately, this was not the case as the Washington community still depended on funding and resources provided by the university. The challenges faced are explained in the university's publication *The Sacramental Nature of Community*:

"... as the SCU-Washington-Madre a Madre partnership grew in its first three years to include over 20 programs co-designed by SCU faculty, staff, college students and Washington parents, interpersonal conflict sometimes undermined the ongoing enthusiastic participation of both the university and community partners. Competition between Washington school staff and SCU students, faculty, and staff for the time and attention of parents sometimes moved relationships into power-struggles." (Merritt et. al., 2018)

Even with these challenges, Madre a Madre prospered and the group kept growing, reaching numbers of up to 80 mothers at meetings (Healing Grove website). Unfortunately, the existing tension grew, and when there was a turnover in staff at Washington Elementary, the conflicts reached a breaking point. After Maria Evans, the principal who helped found the program transitioned out of her role, Madre a Madre had complicated relationships with the new leadership, eventually leading to the group separating from the school. This transition included conversations and conflict over the name Madre a Madre, and for a short period of time, the group was forced to adopt the name Mamas Unidas (Moms United) to differentiate themselves from the original affiliation to the school.

Fortunately for the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood, even without the support of the school, Madre a Madre had the resources and internal leadership to continue with their advocacy and servant leadership. Most importantly, they had Maria Marcelo – a pillar of hope and dedication who led the group to success following the separation from the school. Identifying now as Madres Unidas, mothers continued to advocate for the resources the

community needed. Their partnership with institutions continued, including a relationship with UC Berkeley. As one of the mementos from their work together, a painting was created to commemorate the community. The painting, now sitting in Maria Herndandez's office, portrays a tree with robust roots expanding into a vibrant community, full of color and people playing and celebrating around the tree. Across the tree branches, a sign reads "Mamas Unidas."

Growing

When Madre a Madre began in 2004, there were only a few women showing up to the weekly meetings and as time passed, the numbers continued to grow. Much of the base was brought in by Maria Marcelo through her organizing skills. Many of the members found the tools and relationships they needed to find their voice and develop the resilience to advocate for the resources they needed. Most importantly, members had the opportunity to be with their children, as one early member of Madre a Madre described.

"The fact that we were there in the program, at least for me, my daughters felt proud, because they said my mother is there in the program, and they felt great, they went to their classes and turned around, greeted me, and then said, "My mom is there", I mean the program helped them and it helped me." (Lopez, 2023 Translated, personal communication)

Members of the group developed a culture of care with one another, and a true identification with the group. In one of their anniversaries, the group developed an acrostic poem, which one of the moms still holds in her phone after many years of its creation.

The poem reads:

*Madre a Madre
Mujeres Fuertes
Alegres
Destacando el
Respeto y
Excelencia a la vida
Amadas por todos
Madres
Alentadoras*

*Dedicadas a
Reforzar la
Educación y el amor*

The translation of this poem reads:

*Mother to Mother
Strong women
Joyful
Highlighting respect and
excellence in life
Loved by everyone
Mothers
Encouraging
Dedicated to
Strengthening
Education and love*

After their transition out of Washington Elementary, the amount of support Madres Unidas received was impactful. Brett Bymaster, an individual who had supported the group for many years, was one of the biggest advocates who was essential for establishing a system in which Madre a Madre could thrive and could continue to provide resources for the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood. Brett partnered with Maria Marcelo to create Healing Grove, a non-profit organization providing resources for health care, soul care, and culture care, as listed on their website. Once Healing Grove was established and the group had a permanent home, Madre a Madre regained its original name, along with the original programs held by the group.

Maria Marcelo

Through all the challenges, the resilience of the women was monumental, and there is no denying that the work of Madre a Madre stemmed from Maria Marcelo. Maria Marcelo developed meaningful relationships with all the women who joined the group and she worked side by side with them fostering their leadership. As we interviewed the community, we learned

about Maria Marcelo's approach to building leadership in the Washington-Guadalupe Neighborhood through Madre a Madre.

“She was really good at adjusting but unfortunately there’s a lot of women and people in the neighborhood who aren’t as good at adjusting, who have language barriers like si no hablo inglés no me puedo comunicar, entonces no me puedo involucrar, no valgo lo suficiente, (If I don’t speak English, I can’t communicate, then I cannot be involved, I am not worthy enough) so for her it was that, that pushed her to create the group and have other people feel strong enough in the fact that they are worthy to be here, the fact that they’re strong enough to be here and even though they didn’t know the language there were ways in which they can advocate for their children and advocate for themselves.”
(Hernandez, 2023, personal communication)

Leaders of Madre a Madre connected with one another through their experience as mothers and beyond that, they found a community of individuals passionate about providing a better life for their families. Maria Marcelo believed in the activism that was needed to create that better life, and her legacy is a group of powerful women with the tools and determination to create a better community for their families and neighbors.

“We became like a family, we respected each other, we helped each other, we listened to each other when one had a problem, we always had the support, so Madre a Madre has helped a lot.” (Lopez, 2023, translated, personal communication)

Unfortunately, in December 2022, as the group was conducting posadas for the holidays, Maria Marcelo was struck by a car on her way home and died. The next day, members of Madre a Madre flooded her family with support, and the community united to pay their respects and continue the community work Maria was so passionate about. Hundreds of individuals gathered to celebrate Maria's life, including prominent politicians and community representatives (Gay & Seldon, 2022).

Impact in the Community

Madre a Madre has had an immeasurable impact in the Washington-Guadalupe neighborhood. What started as an initiative to help children in school, completely transformed the community.

Some of Madre a Madre victories include the preservation of open space, as they organized and advocated to keep Tamien Park.

“That area where the park currently is, that was supposed to be a Rocketship Elementary, so that was one of the first things that united Brett and my mom, one of their first projects where they worked together to kind of stop another Rocketship Elementary, we would go to board meetings every week, there’s even a YouTube channel that they created where they interviewed the moms, you where, why we don’t need another Rocketship in our neighborhood.” (Hernandez, 2023, personal communication)

In this now vibrant community space, families meet for food and prayer on Thursday evenings during the summertime. The advocacy for the park remains, as the community advocates for the maintenance of the space through greening and clean-up services. Madre a Madre members agree that Tambien Park is one of the only available open spaces where children and families can exercise and connect with nature in the neighborhood, thus making its maintenance essential for a healthy community.

There have been other advocacy efforts from the group, which have been transformational for the neighborhood. In 2014, the neighborhood experienced a high level of crime and prostitution. Thanks to Madre a Madre advocacy, local law enforcement was able to advocate for funding to address the issues of prostitution (Torres, 2014).

Once Madre a Madre found a permanent home with Healing Grove, the group was able to host a series of programs for the community, including arts and crafts for children and Mujeres Interesantes, a series of workshops where school children learn about women in the community and their pathways to leadership.

An essential part of Madre a Madre is unity through faith. Maria Marcelo was a woman of faith, and the partnership with Brett, who was a pastor, allowed the group to bring faith to the Madre a Madre leaders. As the group grew, they celebrated important Christian and Catholic holidays, including Easter and Christmas. They also established Luke 14, a program for which Madre a Madre members brought food to unhoused folks in San Jose.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Madre a Madre, through Healing Grove, held a program named Nehemias, where community members were trained in food handling, providing trainees with important entrepreneurial opportunities (Cruz, 2021). All of the programs put forth by Madre a Madre are an opportunity for the community to foster connections within themselves and their built environment, allowing them to co-create a vibrant neighborhood centering joy, health, and leadership from powerful Latinas.

Madre a Madre Today

The creation of Healing Grove has undoubtedly been one of the biggest successes of Madre a Madre. The organization provides health care services as well as community care – all within one establishment. Healing Grove provides a space for multi-generational interactions, programs start with children and youth, and they extend to parents and elders. This culture of family and culture is well exemplified as the role of Maria Marcelo is now occupied by her daughter, Maria Hernandez, a brilliant leader guided by the wisdom of her mother and community.

Weekly Madre a Madre meetings still take place and in the summer 2023, Maria led an initiative to have Madre a Madre meetings at Tamien Park. During these meetings, the community comes together to share food, games, and music and read bible scriptures.

Healing Grove's mission centering health, soul and community care is seen through all the services provided by the organization. Members are proud to be part of Madre a Madre, and the group is the perfect example of how community-driven leadership can have a monumental impact in Latino/a/x/e neighborhoods.

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Translated Quotes

“Nos convertimos como en una familia, nos respetamos, nos ayudamos, nos escuchamos cuando una tiene un problema, aqui siempre es el apoyo, entonces madre a madre ha ayudado bastante.”

“ El que estuvieramos ahi en el programa, por lo menos para mi, mis hijas se sentían orgullosas, porque decían mi mama esta ahi en el programa, y ellas se sentían grandes, pasaban a sus clases y volteaban, me saludaban y entonces decían, mi mama esta ahi, osea que a ellas les ayudaba y a mi me ayudaba.”



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