

Brooke Ashjian: Time for Fresno Unified trade school is now

By Brooke
Ashjian

After a few months on Fresno Unified's school board, I am incredibly pleased to see progress on improving the quality of education and the culture of our district.

Fresno Unified is promoting new opportunities to improve the future of our city with initiatives like our soon-to-open entrepreneurship high school near Fresno City College. This, along with emerging partnerships with Fresno State and State Center Community College District, are critical to educating our children.

How do we accomplish this in a city where each day brings headlines of people with not enough food, shootings, growing crime, and slow economic recovery? What can we do to strengthen our community and stop the disintegration of the family?

In my third board meeting, the administration brought in a case where a student was being expelled. The board has the ultimate authority for this. The student had pushed a teacher during a fight and the teacher did not want the student back in the classroom.

I wanted to know more. Where is the family? Is there a father at home? Where is the mother? Living conditions? I was not ready for what I heard. The student's father is in prison. The mother lives in a homeless shelter, where the student goes every night to sleep. There is no home. No couch to "hang out on." No friends coming over. No dinner table where, like at my house, if you show up at any given night at 5:30, dinner is ready.

This is not unusual in Fresno. These kids are screaming out for help. They have nowhere to turn. FUSD has become their family and now in this example that family is kicking them out.

This is not to excuse unruly behavior. It is a cry for help from the child to their community. We need mentors! We need those who have navigated the system and have "made it" to come back, step up and make a difference by volunteering.

The school district can and must do better as well. We need to build a Career Tech Facility for these kids and teach them a trade like plumbing, road building, carpentry or welding. Why don't we teach them to build a few small houses a year and sell them? They need something that channels their energy into creating income for their families. We *all* know education is the only vehicle for this change and changes lives for the better.

The district does not get a pass. It is rushing in to provide more social workers, counselors and caring volunteers, but it needs to do more. You might ask why not Duncan Poly? The answer is, I have never heard of any employer stating that they went to Duncan Poly to recruit employees nor have I seen a job fair put on by them.

This does not mean they are not doing good work, But a factory with no shipping department is out of business.

I believe in creating jobs through education and will be encouraging my fellow board members — all of whom have run for office on increased investment in Career Technical Education and believe in it — to charge the superintendent with building a new high school just for this type of education.

This would be the first of its kind in the nation. Fresno is the perfect place for this, seeing how Fresno has the second-highest concentration of poverty in America. There would be no need for a pool, gym, or soccer fields. This is business, and business will get done.

I ran for this school board to improve the quality of education that our children receive, to bring teachers and administrators out of the doldrums and get them energized to mold young minds, and to keep our promises to taxpayers that we would educate *every* kid that walks through our doors.

The only way I see to deliver on those promises is to bring about a culture change. For now, that change starts with something simple like taking our less than average students and teaching them in a new way. Or is it an old way? It's how I learned, going to work in the family business, counting change back to customers, and dealing with disgruntled customers.

There is an old adage that says a person doesn't wake up lost in the forest. It is a series of steps. The time is now to correct our course and become our brother's keeper once again.

Strong communities are built when people come together, single in purpose. Families are united and rebuilt alongside of communities when people have jobs and purpose.

We must act now!

Brooke Ashjian represents Area 7 (Bullard High School) on the Fresno Unified School District Board of Trustees.