

Can high-powered Fresno leaders push through a career-tech high school?

By Hannah
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From left, Fresno City Council Member Sal Quintero, Fresno County District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp and Fresno Unified Trustees Brooke Ashjian and Luis Chavez meet with other Fresno leaders at the Downtown Club on April 21 to talk about a new career high school.

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- *After years of talking about expanding school career programs, Fresno leaders are teaming up to draft a plan.*
- *Career programs have been viewed as a way to keep students interested in school.*
- *Officials say a career school could help reduce truancy rates and give businesses a much-needed pool of skilled workers.*

In the private dining room at the Downtown Club, a nook with dark wood paneling and white linen-covered tables, a handful of Fresno's most powerful elected officials are meeting.

Small talk and ice clinking in glasses stops as Brooke Ashjian, Fresno Unified's newest school board member, seated between fellow Trustee Luis Chavez and District Attorney Lisa Smittcamp, dives in.

Mayoral hopeful Lee Brand is here. So is Tish Rice, head of the local teacher's union. Fresno Business Council CEO Deborah Nankivell is sitting next to Kendra Rogers, former First 5 Fresno County leader and now a director for Granville Homes.

"This is a worthwhile group, for sure, a very powerful group, and this is how we're going to get this done," says Ashjian, owner of a paving business.

He's talking fast. Everyone here has stepped away from the office for the meeting, the second time the group of school and community college trustees, city and county officials and business leaders have met over lunch to chat about a new high school. It's a school staked to important promises. To raise up kids who would otherwise drop out. To prepare Fresno's next generation for jobs. To curb a vociferous cycle of poverty that grips so many Fresno families.

The meeting's attendees have a shared vision: One where students learn how to weld and do electrical work instead of taking advanced placement classes or electives. One with diesel mechanics classes and a full-fledged fire and police academy.

"The good news is, we have local support from taxpayers to do more ([career technical education](#)), we have support from the private sector and now we have the will," pipes in Miguel Arias, trustee for State Center Community College District.

If the group has its way, the dream for a career-oriented high school will become reality within months, not years.

There's a lot tethered to this. People have been talking about more career education for years. Fresno Unified has made notable progress already, adding career-track classes alongside general education and investing year after year in Duncan Polytechnical High, which already offers several career pathways.

But there's a sense this will be more than all that.

"With education, if we don't get it right, that affects that child for the rest of his or her life," Chavez says. "We can't fail on this project."

A long history — and lots of talk — about career education

Formalized career training programs in the United States date back more than a century. The mission has stayed mostly the same: get young people the skills they need to have a successful career.

During the Industrial Revolution and in the early 20th century, most programs focused on specific jobs. Students enrolled in the programs straight out of high school. But there have been significant shifts in the past three decades, in part because of criticism that vocational programs steered low-income and minority students out of college-prep courses and into coursework leading to low-income, low-skill jobs.

Schools began phasing out the programs as national education standards moved to a college prep model, with all students sampling electives on top of math, English, social studies and science classes. As a result, California high schoolers taking career classes dropped from 66% to 38% between 1992 and 2013, [a report](#) from the California Department of Education shows.

Meanwhile, more career academies — pathways that tie together academic and vocational classes — have sprung up across California, including the Center for Advanced Research and Technology, a partnership of Fresno and Clovis unifieds. Neighborhood high schools have begun offering career tracks in agriculture, green energy, health care and law. Last school year, Fresno Unified officials invested an extra \$5 million in career programs.

But many say the investments are too little. They've come too slowly. And they don't focus on the jobs the Valley needs most: welders, mechanics, electricians.

The latest plan, Trustee Carol Mills said, comes years after she first called for rebuilding the district's career program. It's been a frustrating seven years. While she says she's "heard other board members give it lip service," she's gone to local union shops to talk with professionals. At board budget meetings, she's preached what she's learned, such as the desperate need for welders and electricians as wide swaths of Fresno's older workers retire.

"I've never gotten any traction on really making it happen until Brooke got on the board," she said. Ashjian's interest, his personal business ties and his friendships with big names in Fresno have propelled the school project, she said.

Propelled it far beyond school board room conversations.

Leaders on both city and county boards are jumping in, saying they'll do what they can to cut bureaucratic red tape and make the project work.

Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes says he's game. Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin supports it. And two Fresno City Council members, Brand and Sal Quintero, say the city can help Fresno Unified find a site for the school. The city owns lots of empty land, Quintero said, including a 49-acre plot on Peach Avenue that used to house a U.S. Department of Agriculture research farm. It's one of many possible sites being tossed around.

Why career education? Why now?

All the right gears seem to be turning.

But why push such an ambitious plan now? Fresno Unified is ready to put a bow on a new entrepreneurial high school this summer in the central part of town. And Duncan Polytechnical High enrolls about 1,000 students in automotive, health and other programs.

"There's a lot of people that are screaming for this," like business owners, parents and law enforcement officials, Ashjian said.

Students, too.

"In northwest Fresno, as I go to these different schools ... I talk with the kids and I say, where are you going after this?" Ashjian said. The usual answers: Fresno State, University of California at Los Angeles. He asks the same question of high schoolers south of Shields Avenue. The answer: "Mr. Ashjian, I just want a job. Can I just get a job?"

Until now, school districts haven't set up their career programs to coordinate with existing ones at local community colleges.

Chavez says he imagines a seamless tapestry of classes from ninth grade through college in which students learn and build job skills until they're ready to enroll in a certificate program at Fresno City College, Reedley College or elsewhere. It's especially important now, he said, "with all the different construction projects going on."

"With high-speed rail, with the water project the city is undertaking, with all the construction bonds, there is going to be a tremendous need for these trades to be out there for our young folks," he said.

The plan fits perfectly with other citywide goals, Smittcamp said, like cutting down high truancy numbers and lowering crime rates.

Schools in Fresno have a big job to do. For many students, school is the only haven from trouble at home or in the neighborhood. Some bring those troubles into the classroom, like recent crimes committed by students at the Fort Miller Middle campus.

“Children who don’t succeed in school often times end up in the criminal justice system,” Smittcamp said. Not everyone is interested in reading Shakespeare or applying to Harvard, she said. But they might be interested in doing manual work, an interest that could keep them from dropping out.

Not an easy task

Administrators at both Fresno Unified and State Center Community College District say it’s the right time to create a partnership between K-12 and higher education.

Superintendent Michael Hanson says it’s a good sign that elected officials want to work together. And interim Chancellor Bill Stewart says he’s “very interested” in talking with Fresno Unified about collaborating.

They agree on another thing: There’s a tremendous amount of work to do.

For one, Hanson said, school districts must break through a gauntlet of state hurdles any time they want to construct a school building. The Division of the State Architect has a laundry list of requirements for new schools, and that’s something no city or county official could make disappear.

Then there’s the question of curriculum.

“Taking something on like this requires we would do homework because we don’t have the models here locally,” Hanson said.

There’s also questions of staffing, attendance and maintenance: Who will teach the courses? Who will be allowed to enroll, just high schoolers or adults seeking career programs? And will State Center or Fresno Unified maintain grounds and facilities?

And then there’s the big question: funding.

Ashjian’s group has said there’s money left over from Fresno Unified’s Measure Q bond, plus \$30 million from a previous State Center bond, that could pay the bill.

But Stewart was quick to squelch that idea. The district has \$30 million in bonding capacity, he said, but those funds are tied tightly to a pending project to build a southeast Fresno campus. The money is “absolutely not” available for a new high school, he said.

“The voters gave us the money to build facilities in the college district and not to build a high school,” he said. “There are many other things with this that need to be settled ... there are 6,000 questions that need to be answered.”

Hanson said the concept “was not on the drawing board” when voters passed the Measure Q bond.

“It doesn’t mean we can’t figure out how to do it, but I don’t want to send the signal to anyone that we would redirect bond funds,” he said.

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