

Pablo Muñoz: Educating Children at the Highest Level

Pablo Muñoz, superintendent of the [Elizabeth Public Schools](#), in Elizabeth, New Jersey, has a plan. It's ninety-nine pages long, but he boils it down succinctly: "We want to make technology available to our students, starting with the prekindergarten three-year-olds, and going all the way through the high school level."

In addition to Internet access in every classroom of the thirty-school district, all rooms are equipped with four or more PCs, plus the teacher's computer. Most classrooms also have interactive television, and eight of the district's schools have interactive whiteboards.



Pablo Muñoz

Credit: Peter Hoey

But the Elizabeth Public Schools Technology Plan, developed under Muñoz's leadership, is much more than a high tech infrastructure. Of greater importance, he emphasizes, "is the plan's other strand – the actual use of instructional technology, and the kids end up doing a pretty wonderful job of using it."

Complementing the classroom technology, the district's instructional models call for small groups of students to "rotate through the classroom's computer center," says Muñoz, giving them more individualized computer time using software on the schools' master servers and accessing the Web. Language arts, math, science, and social studies are central in the district's curricula. Muñoz says an interconnected humanities curriculum is still under development.

A few years ago, when he was the district's director of curriculum and instruction, "we started to design [WebQuests](#)," Muñoz says. "A WebQuest is a lesson the teacher creates around a particular topic, which students then research on the Web, but within a structure. You set up the questions and give them guiding links. They go out on the Web, find the information, and report back. It's all done in class."

The district applies the same proactive approach in training its teachers. Its technology plan outlines a teacher-training program that gives new teachers a self-assessment assignment; those identifying themselves as in need of training receive district-provided instruction to become competent in appropriate technologies.

Muñoz knows the Elizabeth schools inside and out not merely because it's his job but also because he grew up in the district and went through the public schools there – he's a 1987 Elizabeth High School graduate. After receiving an undergraduate degree from Yale University and a master's degree from Columbia University, he returned to the district as a social studies teacher. "My passion is connecting with individuals – in this case, students – and trying to help them improve their lives," Muñoz says. "The first step for me was to be a teacher."

Does he miss being in the classroom every day? "I do," he replies. "I think that I will end up back there somehow. Informally, as the superintendent, I try to teach as often as I can."

Muñoz typically adheres to a schedule of classroom visits every Tuesday and Thursday morning. In

prekindergarten through second grade, he reads to the kids and talks to them about the stories. In the third, fourth, and fifth grades, he may give a short talk on, as he describes it, "skills and behaviors they need to do well in preparation for middle school, high school, and college." When he visits middle school classrooms, Muñoz focuses on homework and topics such as the impact education can have on one's earnings over a lifetime. He often has roundtable discussions with the high school students, answering questions and assuring them, as he puts it, "that they can achieve great things if they set their minds to it."

Muñoz is deeply rooted in the Elizabeth area, and he's well known for his commitment to parent and community involvement. In spring 2007, he strengthened that commitment by elevating the district's connection with the outside world. "I created the position of assistant superintendent for family and community outreach," he says. "I appointed a longtime employee who was working here as a principal at the time. We have a cadre of parent liaisons in the schools who all report to him. He has been instrumental in connecting with community leaders, creating a bridge between them and the schools."

In conversation, Muñoz gives considerable credit to his colleagues for the district's successes. "I talk to my cabinet -- high-ranking members of my staff -- and one of the important pieces that I talk about is that it's not about me, it's about the work we do for the children," he says. "My fundamental passion is educating our children at the highest levels to deliver to them what I was given when I was a youth, which is high expectations, the dream to complete college, and to be able to use those educational tools, combined with the University of Life, to raise your own family and live the way you want to, but happily."



How do you use the Web or other technology in your work?

I use Microsoft Outlook to schedule my days and my month, and to make sure I'm doing the things that are the most important to this organization, as well as to my family. I use the Web largely to communicate information about the organization. We try to make our school district Web site as user friendly as possible -- to project what the organization is trying to do as well as tell about the things that we have done.

Which resources have inspired and informed your work?

My educational experiences have been rich in shaping me; my own personal journey in reading has been instrumental in that, and then just life experiences.

My experiences as an undergraduate took me from being a kid growing up in a poor family to an environment of great diversity and wealth at Yale. That was a great moment in my life. Then the rigors and high expectations of that university shaped me, so that I can actually translate that back now to the organization I work in.

But my most important educational experience to date, in shaping me and my ability to lead this organization, has been the [Broad Academy](#), an intensive training for CEOs. (See [Class Act: Former Business Executives Put Their Skills to the Test](#).) The [Broad Education Foundation](#) created an academy to train business executives to be superintendents in the public schools. That has had the largest impact on my ability to lead and learn as a superintendent, because it took me through a course of executive training around management, finance, teaching, and learning that I had not received in my undergraduate or graduate levels.

In my personal readings, the one that has most shaped how I have led my life is Stephen R. Covey's [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). Most recently, I'm reading [John C. Maxwell](#) and [Jack Canfield](#), who have shaped my thinking, my hope, and my design to become a better leader, learning every day. In my work here as superintendent, we use as foundational pieces Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and his ["What Is Your Life's Blueprint?"](#) speech, about his quest for excellence and for social justice. We really are an organization about creating justice for our children and allowing them to achieve excellence through education. One last book that has shaped my approach to leading is Donald T. Phillips's [Lincoln on Leadership](#).

Who are your role models?

Stephen R. Covey, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., John C. Maxwell, Jack Canfield, and Barack Obama. I try to take bits and pieces of whatever they've written or done to shape my own life.

But the three individuals I would call my role models in the sense that I've spent time with them, I've cried with them and laughed with them, are the following people:

The first one is my father, Pablo Muñoz Sr. – he's the guy that I look to all the time. He's always shared great wisdom with me. He and my mom are not big talkers, but their actions speak much louder than their words.

The second is one of my high school teachers, Clinton Taylor, who just retired from this school district. I looked at him as a role model when I first became a teacher. He had high standards and expectations for his kids. He demanded a lot, but he treated all of his students with great love and respect.

And the last person is Carlo Parravano, executive director of the [Merck Institute for Science Education](#). He is a man of rich intellect, but he's also a patient, loving man who's well respected and has high standards for what he wants to accomplish.

The three have a lot in common, my dad, Clint, and Carlo, and I'm actually striving still to be like one of them or all three of them, but I have a long way to go in my own development to catch any three of them in their life accomplishments.

What advice would you give those who consider you a role model?

I don't make that a life goal -- to be someone else's role model -- but I do understand the importance of it, and I understand that in my role as father-husband-family member-teacher-administrator, and now superintendent, that people are going to look at me. I've always understood that I have to project a strong image around excellence, a strong image about high expectations, a strong image about working hard. And quite frankly, given that I'm Puerto Rican, which makes me Hispanic, means I also have to project an image of excellence for a larger community that's still in many ways trying to find itself in the American populace.

In addition, I would share two major statements I've been making to students, my staff, and even my daughters. The first one is a quick equation: $L + K + Sv + E = Success$. Those four letters stand for *leadership, knowledge, skills, and effort*. Missing one of those elements can affect your ability to be successful. And one of the more important pieces of that equation is effort. You can be the smartest person in the world, but if you don't apply a whole lot of effort to what you need to do, you limit your ability to succeed.

The second one is, you have to project hope, you have to dream big, and you have to do that through love, through a laserlike focus on teaching and learning, and through leadership.

What fundamental beliefs have guided your work?

We have a moral obligation to deliver excellent experiences and services to our children, and we have a moral obligation to prepare our children for the international marketplace that is here and coming down the road. We can't control all of America, but certainly here, in the city of Elizabeth, in our public schools, we can control the 22,000 students' experiences and prepare them for the international marketplace that they're going to have to compete in. In preparing them well to be successful in life, at least in our part of America, we're strengthening the fabric of America and allowing America to be the great country that it is and that it will continue to be.

What is your mantra in the face of adversity?

For me, it's about never quitting. If you're going to fulfill big dreams, you're going to be faced with obstacles, you're going to be knocked down, and that's when you're going to have to figure out whether you're going to get up and keep on going for it. These big dreams don't come easy, and they often take a lot of time.

The big dream of turning your typical urban school district into one of the world's best institutions does not happen overnight. You're going to be faced with a lot of challenges and with people that don't want to see it happen. The question is, Are you going to have the strength to make sure that you fight through it and keep on working at it until you finally fulfill that dream? If so, then you have to keep on moving forward, making

sure you're developing people around you, bringing people onto your team to help you achieve the larger goal -- not for me but for the kids.

CORE STRATEGIES	COMMUNITY	SECTIONS	STAY CONNECTED	THE FOUNDATION
Overview	Blogs	Grades K-2	Weekly E-Newsletter	Mission & Vision
Comprehensive Assessment	Groups	Grades 3-5	Weekly Giveaways	A Word from George Lucas
Integrated Studies	Facebook	Grades 6-8	Widgets & Badges	Advertise
Project-Based Learning	Twitter	Grades 9-12	RSS Feeds	Contact Us
Social & Emotional Learning	YouTube	Classroom Guides		Donate to Edutopia
Teacher Development		Quizzes		Terms of Use
Technology Integration		Special Reports		Privacy Policy
		Videos		