

# Project Roadmap



Written By **ROBIN SHEPHERD**

When the time comes for our kids to start making their own decisions about getting an education and building a future, they need a roadmap. I know what you're thinking. . . . try telling that to a teenager! One local organization is doing just that, with great results.

First year program participants (l-r): Edgar Gonzalez, Esperanza Gonzalez, Isidro Gonzalez, Jennifer Gonzalez, Freda Ross, Claudia Ross, Mario Banuelos, Uriel "Cookie" Alvarez, Irene Macias-Morris, Irisbel Gonzalez, Former Morgan Hill Mayor Dennis Kennedy, George Flores, Luis Gonzalez, Francesco Justo.

In 2010, George Flores, Claudia Rossi and Mario Banuelos established Project Roadmap. The focus of Project Roadmap is to create a college going culture among first-generation students and their parents. The goal is to empower kids to create their own roadmap so they can achieve their full potential, from campus to career. Empowered parents are also part of the equation.

George Flores was and still is a Science teacher at Britton Middle School. Claudia Rossi was on the Morgan Hill Unified School District (MHUSD) Board of Education in 2010, and she's currently on the Santa Clara County Board of Education. Mario Banuelos is a founding board member of the Morgan Hill Community Foundation (MHCF). All three are passionate advocates of this program.

According to George, "We attended a countywide conference, ALAS (Achieving Latinx Advancement and Success), at San José State University, and it got me thinking that we could do our own conference. We could hold workshops to help students and their parents come up with a long-term roadmap that included the steps they needed to take and a timeline." Claudia and Mario agreed.

"Project Roadmap serves kids from

middle school through high school," George explained. "We work with kids who think they're not college material and kids who dream of going to the big-name schools but have little idea what it takes to get there.

"From the beginning, we've worked closely with district counselors and teachers. Our schools disseminate the necessary information related to college planning, but for some families it can be overwhelming and additional guidance is required along the way. For Spanish-speaking parents we provide information in their native language so they can be aware and supportive of their students' goals and actions.

"Our students need to know the entrance requirements for different colleges, when to enroll in A-G classes, how many AP classes to take and what defines a competitive GPA score. Some families don't realize they're eligible for financial aid or how to apply for it. They need to know when the SAT must be taken and how students can prepare for it. Failure to take certain steps at the right time means missed opportunities.

"It's a reality check for the kids," George said, adding, "There's no room for pipedreams!"

Claudia Rossi recalled the first meeting of Project Roadmap: "We got students and their parents together and said, 'We want you to be able to follow the best possible path to a college education, which will open doors of opportunity. There's a roadmap for success for each of you.'"

"We met with the families on weekends and asked what their concerns were and how we could help," Claudia added. "When a freshman student said he felt totally lost in class, we asked if a workshop on effective note-taking would help. He said yes, so we made it happen, and many students attended. When the kids said they needed help with SAT test preparation, we put together a new workshop. At one meeting a parent asked 'What can we do to help our kids get scholarships?' We set up a workshop for that too."

As Mario Banuelos described it, "We're just facilitators. The kids learn to drive the process." Mario not only committed his time to help move the project forward, but he also asked the MHCF board to consider funding support for Project Roadmap.

"We invite school administrators, teachers and professionals from business, law and other fields to lead workshops," Mario said, "Many are first-generation college grads who've overcome obstacles



to succeed in their chosen field. People like Teresa Guerrero-Daley, a Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge, who shared her story of studying and working her way through college and law school, becoming a judge, and giving back to her community. She told the kids how, long ago, she was advised to drop her surname, Guerrero, to have more appeal in the job market—advice she chose not to take. She said when she walks into her courtroom today and people stand as her name is announced, she is proud of who she is and the path she chose. Students and their parents were moved by the judge’s story.”

Along with monthly meetings, Project Roadmap hosts its annual student-led event, the “No Excuses” Youth Conference. A two-week “Summer School for Parents” program helps parents connect with school teachers and staff. They discover that it’s okay to ask questions and voice their concerns.

“We have families living in poverty in our district,” Mario said. “These kids have grown up seeing their parents working in the fields, doing piece work, putting in long hours at multiple low-wage jobs, sacrificing to keep them in school. These kids are torn. They want to go to college but sometimes they feel selfish, thinking they should get a job right after high school and contribute to the family income. We want parents to know that college is not just a luxury for the well-to-do.

“With this in mind, I invited a local friend, Humberto Rincon, to lead one of our workshops. He grew up poor, but did well in high school and was fortunate

enough to win a scholarship to UC Davis. After that he earned a master’s degree from Stanford. During high school he’d been working in a local retail store. His boss offered him a job as store manager after graduation. His dad thought he should take the job, a “sure thing” that paid a salary, rather than spending four years in college with no guarantee of a job after. He loved his father, but he chose college and went on to work as an engineer at IBM. When his own teenager started talking about college, he was ready to support her dreams, without hesitation. Our kids really connected with Humberto’s story and his message for them.”

On average, Project Roadmap has served about 400 students and parents per year. The project is aligned with school district and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals through the supportive partnership of Superintendent Steve Betando; Assistant Superintendent Ramon Zavala, who convenes Project Roadmap meetings; and Heather Nursement, the district’s new Director of College and Career Pathways.

Community partners including Morgan Hill Community Foundation, Morgan Hill Kiwanis Club, and the Edward Boss Prado Foundation have also lent their support.

“We’re committed to this program because we’ve seen it work,” Mario said. “When it works and our students are successful, it benefits their families and the entire community. The generous support we receive from our community partners is essential as Project Roadmap serves new student families each year.”



Jennifer Gonzalez,  
Project Roadmap Alumna

Jenn Gonzalez is studying hard at Santa Clara University where she is pursuing a triple major in Political Science, Ethnic Studies, and Women and Gender Studies. After that she plans to go to law school. Project Roadmap played a big role in her secondary school experience. While a student at Britton Middle School, she worked with Science Teacher George Flores and participated in Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), a national student organization, and on the English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC). She got involved with Project Roadmap during her Sophomore year at Ann Sobrato High School.

*“I realized the great need there was for marginalized communities to receive resources to guide them towards higher education. I, as a child of immigrants from Mexico, felt different from my peers whose parents volunteered in the classroom and were very present on campus. My parents have always believed in education and in me. Project Roadmap allowed them to understand the steps I had to follow to reach my goals and how they could support me as parents. They saw first-hand the impact of helping others. For me and my parents, Project Roadmap was like being part of a larger family that values education and community service. I learned that education is the most powerful tool we possess and it’s something no one can take from us. It gave me a foundation of empowerment. I know that I have individuals cheering for me, believing in my ability to succeed. I understand what my education means to my family and my community. We are breaking through old barriers and fulfilling an American Dream.”*



Santa Clara County Supervisor Mike Wasserman, MHUSD School Board Member Ron Woolf, MHUSD Superintendent Steve Betando and County Office of Education Trustee Claudy Rossi.

Photos Courtesy of Project Roadmap and Morgan Hill Unified School District