

Meet the San Dieguito School Board Candidates

District 5: side by side, in their own words

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DISTRICT 5



Ginny Merrifield

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Justin Moodie

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1. What does "innovation" in education mean to you? What are some things you would like to see schools do differently—or better—for today's students?

Ginny Merrifield

I don't think innovation necessarily equals technology. Innovation means discovering a new way of learning that results in better outcomes. We have to be careful not to adopt the new shiny object, just because it's alluring and full of promises. The district has to take responsibility for its own evidence—piloting their own EdTech programs, without bias and with careful data-driven measurement. That's the district's job. Not the EdTech company's.

Justin Moodie

In general, I think innovation is about problem solving. If we're innovating correctly, we're finding new ways to reach and serve each student so they can achieve as much success as possible. A lot of it comes down to somebody on the ground knowing that individual young person, and being able to tailor the education to their needs.

As to what we could be doing better? On some level, everything. It's easy to come to the table with a lot of big ideas to overhaul something, but sometimes we need to move the needle a small amount and be cautious about how drastically we're changing things. We're a top-notch school district and can't forget to celebrate the successes of our district and the individuals driving them.

2. What role should technology play in education, and what guardrails do you think are important to make sure it supports rather than distracts from learning?



Ginny Merrifield

There are ways in which AI is going to be devastating to teaching and learning, and we aren't going to get our hands around it until we have district-wide policies in place and we are evaluating instructional practices to see how AI is actually being implemented. We have state guidelines and district policy on paper, but no best practices or procedures. If we're not evaluating the use of technology in the classrooms, how could we know if it's working?

Middle and high school students shouldn't have technology completely withheld at school—they need to learn how to become good citizens in a digital world. And school is a good place to learn that. So we need to introduce technology, but going all the way to 24/7 Chromebooks ignores the other side of our students' development. We have to teach our kids to build healthy social relationships, learn how to shake hands, have eye contact, engage in two-way communication, debate effectively, and stand on their own with some confidence.



Justin Moodie

Technology should enhance the learning experience and improve a student's engagement and love of learning. If we can find new ways to have students want to seek further information about whatever subject they're learning, then absolutely, technology has a tremendous role in that moment.

But, technology should never replace something that's working well simply for the sake of bringing technology into the classroom. I think there's room for students to have individual choices, too. Might they opt for the digital version of the textbook, or do they like the feel of paper in their hands? At some point, we have to give them space to explore making their own choices.

3. Are you aware if SDUHSD has a comprehensive cell phone policy for classroom use, and how is it implemented?



Ginny Merrifield

SDUHSD policy is in-line with the new state guidelines for student cell phone usage, but you can't just legislate this kind of thing. It's a bigger issue. We have to teach students the discipline of not using their phone when they're listening to someone else who has meaningful content to share. At a certain age, the high school years, we need to transfer learning to the student and have kids be internally motivated to learn regardless of cell phone policy enforcement. It's a skill they have to learn. It would help if adults were good models too.



Justin Moodie

San Dieguito has a pretty comprehensive cell phone policy. And it's really easy to say, okay, we put a system in place. But, the reality of the day-to-day is so different from the policy on paper. It's immensely difficult to police, especially if we don't have buy-in from all stakeholders: teachers, parents, and students. Teachers want a realistic policy that takes a reasonable amount of time and energy to enforce. Parents have to feel comfortable knowing where their children are and how to reach them. And the young people, well, they have to somehow come to the conclusion that they also want this. Schools everywhere are still trying to find the best way to handle student cell phones. There is no magic solution yet. In the meantime, I believe that any policy should be written by people who have actually taught in a classroom.

4. Can you share your thoughts on YouTube during school hours?



Ginny Merrifield

YouTube has so much content. I believe intentionally and appropriately used, it's a valuable resource for information. But having it on all day, just learning from un-curated YouTube, it's a question of time. How much time do we have in the day with our students? It needs to be curated for the class they're in. And, I don't know that you can very effectively carve out the safe parts of YouTube from the unsafe parts of YouTube. In high school, again, I'm back to this question of on-ramping to be good citizens in a digital world. I think we should spend a lot more time talking about what that means. If students don't create for themselves a sense of boundaries around what's good for them, they're going to go out in the world and be pretty vulnerable.



Justin Moodie

YouTube. What a wonderful and terrible tool, right? Who among us does not go to YouTube to learn something? So then, how silly to suggest that we couldn't be learning from YouTube inside of school. On top of that, if there is a better or safer way to learn how to use YouTube, we should actively teach that as a skill while students are at school. It's very hard for students to stay in a state where they desire to be focused and present with their teacher and classmates all the time. Yet, students need marketable, professional skills. And, if we're talking about going to work every day with a phone in your pocket and a computer in your hands, with multiple ways to access YouTube at every moment, students have to learn restraint and we have to actively scaffold it. I'd rather there be those kinds of guardrails than regulations or an IT block.

5. Can you share your thoughts on the AI tool MagicSchool?



Ginny Merrifield

There should be only one way to use AI in a school district, and that is, it goes through a central vetting process: How do they use the de-identified data? How does the vendor use student data? What kind of biases are in there? Have we tested that? Are we evaluating its efficacy in the classroom? There has to be a process, and we don't have one at this time. Our district can be a leader in this by engaging community experts to point out evidence where this is working. AI is a different beast than the technology we've had before. We can't rely on vendors to provide solutions to problems we haven't clearly identified yet. If ever there was an issue that required engaging community experts, the adoption of AI practices is it. Just buying an AI solution is short-sighted and not strategic enough for a district of our standing.



Justin Moodie

I'm truly open to the possibility that AI is going to benefit humanity somehow. But, to date, I have seen zero evidence that it truly has. So far, it seems that AI has created as many, or more, problems as it is going to solve. That concerns me. Specifically, I worry that every time teachers use a tool like this, they lose a little bit of touch in terms of how they're assessing their students. The more classroom steps AI gets involved in, the further we get from actually being instructors who know our students. And on the student side, instant help from AI on their device removes this incredibly ancient human struggle from the learning process. We need that space where we are challenged to problem-solve over a long period of time.

6. What would meaningful partnership with parents look like to you, and how do you plan to keep families engaged and informed as the district makes decisions affecting their children?



Ginny Merrifield

To me, this is the biggest opportunity we have in schools: to reengage with families in a really authentic way. There's a crisis in education today. Parents need support parenting teens and schools need support from parents. We can't partner if we don't build stronger bonds of trust. In our community, parents are highly educated, professional, and have enough time to show up during the day. This is the opportunity of a lifetime to partner with educated moms and dads who want the best for their kids. There has to be an ongoing, authentic communication involving parents, rather than the district merely informing parents of decisions and keeping arms length from them.



Justin Moodie

There are these classic structures where parents can theoretically engage: coffee with the principal, PTA meetings, Foundations, and so on. It's good that those exist, but not everybody can take advantage of them. We are seeing declined engagement from parents in recent years, not just in this district, but in most districts. Is that because parents are feeling more resistance from schools? Might this cause families to become apathetic about trying to continue engaging with schools? How do we create a space where parents get to voice their opinion and they know there's a legitimate response to their input? At the current board meetings, SDUHSD has a student board representative from each high school. That's an example of something that's working. Someone gets to actively represent the thoughts of students. Could we find the equivalent for parents? The more people we engage, the stronger our community will be. Our students could be watching a thousand parents and teachers come together to agree on shared values. That's powerful. That's the unified message we should be providing to our children.

7. Fun question: If you could time travel back to your own childhood with a small group of today's eighth graders, what would you like them to experience?



Ginny Merrifield

I would spend a summer on the beach, on the water, playing games and being truly kids, as I did on Long Island Sound as a teenager. Just playing, without the pressure to build a resume for college during the summer. There's no harm in preserving the innocence of children.



Justin Moodie

I'm from this community. My childhood was local. I was living here in Carmel Valley before McDonald's moved in. I would love to show students that edge of development where humans end and nature begins. It's harder to find now. The hills and canyons used to look different. We had tumbleweeds and deer here in Carmel Valley. The suggestion that one could find that in Carmel Valley would be difficult for a student to believe today. I would love for them to gaze upon the line where human impact ends and the coastal ecosystem begins, right here by our schools. That line has moved dramatically through the years. When we teach young people about environmental stewardship, it could be galvanizing for young students to appreciate how we have transformed nature in our immediate, local region.