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Opinion: How High Tech High helped transform education in U.S. and beyond

The San Diego institution is celebrating 25 years without textbooks



A student is working with power tools at Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High (Brett Spinnak)

By GARY E JACOBS
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Our story started with a simple idea: to better prepare young adults for the real world. A group of 40 companies in San Diego, aiming to attract engineers and tech workers, sought to create a school that would engage students, foster creativity and build community. I attended one of their planning meetings, stepping in for a Qualcomm colleague — and that meeting changed the course of my life.

We knew we needed a visionary to bring this idea to life, and we found that in Larry Rosenstock (now CEO emeritus). His passion for innovation, coupled with our willingness to take a risk, led to the creation of High Tech High in 2000. Jerri-Ann and I made an initial gift of \$3 million to fund the project and kick-start construction. That's how the Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High came to be — and it was only the beginning. We now have 16 schools at four locations in San Diego County.

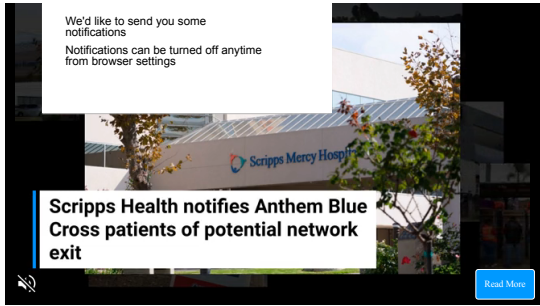
From the outset, High Tech High was about trying something different. We looked to the Danish model of high schools as inspiration, which combines high academic standards with practical, real-world learning. It's not just about absorbing information; it's about learning to apply it, think critically and know what to do when you don't have all the answers. That philosophy has become the cornerstone of High Tech High and has guided our mission to engage students deeply in their education.

One of our early challenges was building the school from scratch, and finding the right location was key — Liberty Station was a perfect fit. Previously used by the Navy for machinery training, we transformed the space into open, collaborative areas for group work, where learning happens everywhere.

The first years were a leap of faith. We welcomed 100 first-year students and 50 sophomores, and our faculty embraced a new teaching style without textbooks. It wasn't easy; by the end of the first year, half of the original staff had moved on. But as time went on, it became clear we were onto something — applications poured in, and our community of engaged learners grew.

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Jerri-Ann and I are often asked about our focus on project-based learning, and I always say this: It is a tool. What makes High Tech High truly unique is its culture — our commitment to equity, respect and personalized, authentic learning. By working in diverse groups, our students face real-world challenges and learn to collaborate with peers they might never have interacted with otherwise. This approach prepares them not just for college but for life.

Over the past 25 years, we've seen the impact of our work on public education. Each year, around 5,000 visitors come through our schools to learn from our model, from local educators to international delegations. Schools around the world are adapting what we do.

I'm proud to say that 25 years later, we are fulfilling our original vision. Our alumni are thriving in college and making a difference in their communities. Around 40 returned as High Tech High staff. We've stayed true to our mission: challenging students to think creatively, find their voice and drive change.

High Tech High's journey has been built by our students, staff, families and community. Together, we've created something special and as we celebrate this milestone, I look forward to how we'll continue to innovate and shape the future of education.

The High Tech High Foundation will host a 25th Anniversary Gala at 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 19, at Liberty Station. Join us to celebrate 25 years of innovation in education as we honor CEO Emeritus Larry Rosenstock. For more information, visit hightechhighfoundation.org/2024-gala.

Jacobs left the company his father co-founded, Qualcomm, in 2000 to focus in philanthropy. He is chairman of the board of trustees of High Tech High charter schools and of the board of the HTH Graduate School of Education and is the managing director of the Jacobs Investment Company. He lives in Del Mar.

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