

The College Review

The newsletter of Think College Now, a college-focused small public elementary school

THINK COLLEGE NOW

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Since the Beginning...

Jose Ruben Olivares brings fitting legacy to new role as TCN principal

When we set up our interview for this article, Think College Now Principal Jose Ruben Olivares confirmed the date – with one clear caveat. It was a big day on campus: We'd be meeting as students across the school prepared to take their writing tests, and Olivares would need to step out and visit every classroom.

"It's a priority for me to get to the classrooms and always be present for the kids," he says. "I wanted to tell them we believe in them and that they are going to do great."

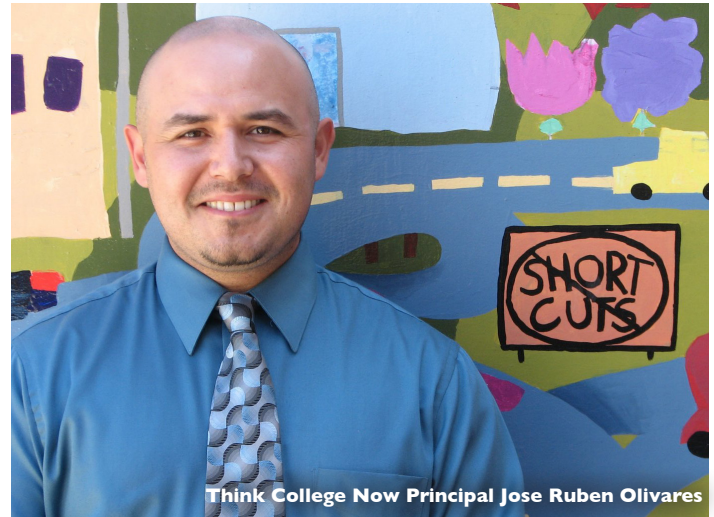
Given his long history at TCN, it's no surprise to see Olivares doing all he can to reach every kid: When the school opened in 2003, he was one of its founding teachers. But his commitment to the school's vision could be said to reach back much further, into his youth, long before he came to live in Oakland.

"I see myself in them..."

Olivares grew up in Compton, a city he considers similar to Oakland in many ways. He was also the first in his family to go to college, as several TCN alums will be. "The kids here at TCN are like the kids I rubbed elbows with when I was in school," he reflects. "I see myself in them, and share the experiences they're going through."

Olivares's teachers – all of whom he can still name – helped steer his hopes for the future. "Mr. Matheson, Ms. Konkol, these teachers were my inspiration. I hoped that one day I could aspire to be a teacher as good as they were."

During college at UC Irvine, he became an AmeriCorps volunteer and continued his path toward TCN as a K-5 tutor. "Looking at the kids' faces glow, that's when I really felt I could help kids understand



Think College Now Principal Jose Ruben Olivares

the work and be a teacher. AmeriCorps cemented the idea that [education] was my calling."

Olivares pursued that calling in his first full-time teaching gig after graduating in 1999. He says he realized "university can teach you theory, but the practice of teaching, you learn that when you're in the trenches."

When he moved to Oakland in 2003 and then-Principal David Silver offered him a teaching job at TCN, Olivares quickly signed on. "I wanted to impact students like me. Again, I see myself in the kids here. In that sense, I *am* TCN."

After six years in the classroom, Olivares decided to extend his reach, enrolling in UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute. While completing the program, he took on a new role as TCN's Operations Manager and Dean of Discipline and School Climate, working closely with Silver to learn the ins and outs of leading a school.

This year, when the opportunity to become TCN's next principal arose, he was ready. "I could not have made a better choice. Having been here since the beginning, I understand the values and hope to continue what we've accomplished in the past – and take TCN to the next level. Our goal all along has been to reach 90 percent proficiency in English, Math, and Science, and I truly believe we will."

His enduring connections to so many TCN students – and their families – have set him up for success. "Half of the kids in grades 3-5 now are kids I taught in the classroom," Olivares says, "so I have connections to so many of the families already. That's important, because family is key to students' success, and we're in partnership with them: It's teachers and parents working together to ensure each kid has success in school.

"As a principal, it's not just the 24 kids in my classroom. It's about having a positive impact on 300 kids now – every single one of them."



Olivares with his 1st-grade class in 2008

TCN Out Loud: Orators Represent School at District Contest

On stage at the district's Oratorical Contest, five Think College Now speakers looked out at a room full of students, teachers, and – most intimidating – a line of judges in the front row. Despite admitting to a case of butterflies as they waited to perform, when their turns came they made their school proud, taking home a handful of first- and second-place prizes!

"I made sure to do a lot of hand motions, and I got my voice *loud*," says 3rd-grader Jose, who performed a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. "I felt so good because I felt like I was doing the same thing as Martin Luther King. Also, I was representing my school and knew that if I did a good job, [the audience] would think TCN is a good school."

5th-grader Marianna delivered a lengthy excerpt from Robert F. Kennedy's speech on the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. "If you are someone who remembers a lot of things, then a long [speech] is good for you," she says. "Me, personally, I choose longer ones because I like practicing them. I practice every single night, one paragraph or two, so I can memorize it."

Like Jose, Marianna notes the importance of expressing yourself through more than the spoken word, using hand gestures and other physical motion. "In the Oratorical they look a lot for how you present yourself," she explains. "So it's important how you present every single thing you say."



From left to right: TCN Oratorical Contest winners Luzila, Marianna, Gabriella, Nija, and Jose

3rd-grader Luzila says her knack for oration revealed itself at a much younger age. "When I was just three years old, I kept talking and talking and talking," she says. Like the others, she has quickly developed nostalgia for the moment the winners were announced. "I was jumping up and down when I first heard," she remembers.

"[After I found out] I couldn't sleep!" recalls fellow 3rd-grader Gabriella. "I kept telling my mom and brother and I just wanted to talk more about it."

Nija, also in 3rd grade, won with a recitation of a Langston Hughes poem. He notes that the winners were careful not to rub it in. "The other kids tried their best too," he explains.

All the orators feel the experience will be valuable as they move into middle school and beyond. "I think it helps you prepare yourself because it gives you experience on how it's going to feel when you have to do reports in front of the class," reflects Marianna. "If you have stage fright, it helps you get rid of it, so you can do really well when you go forward."

SUPPORT THINK COLLEGE NOW!

We head into 2011-12 facing close to \$200,000 in cuts – roughly 12% percent of our already tight budget. The resources and activities that help us achieve our college-going focus – college tours, art supplies, after-school programs, and more – are all at risk.

You can donate by visiting www.thinkcollegenow.org/donate or by sending a check to:

"OSF/TCN," P.O. Box 20238, Oakland, CA 94620.

Thank you for supporting our students as they think college now – and in the future.

