



# INTERVIEW SAN JUSTO MAYOR

Mr. Nicolás Cuesta

## What was behind the city of San Justo's application to head up the Argentinian Network of Educating Cities?

In the 2019-2021 period, San Justo took on the sub-coordination of the Argentinian Network of Educating Cities (RACE, in its Spanish acronym) and was appointed coordinator in 2022. The task of coordinating, committing to, and working in such an active and dynamic network doesn't depend on the size of the town or city, but on the joint commitment to become an Educating City.

Three years on from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of this century's most uncertain and difficult times, we can clearly see the challenge it posed for the educating cities to take care of our citizens, maintain the quality of education, and provide new resources and mentoring faced with the imminent -and in some cases, forced- implementation of the digital world.

There are many reasons within the network for taking on such a responsibility. They include recognising the importance of cooperation between Educating Cities as a key tool for improving the development of local public policies, and taking advantage of the opportunity to tackle common and current problems together as Educating Cities on a nationwide level.



Each IAEC member city has a distinctive essence, which is precisely what makes the Argentinian Network active and dynamic, thanks to its members' passionate commitment to education. In a different context, on a nationwide level, these networks of cities are key to optimising results and bridging social, generational and regional gaps.

## How would you describe the city of San Justo? What are its challenges and strengths?

The City's strengths include its passionate commitment to education and community work to promote access to education. It also has an incredible range of educational and cultural services for the community, which reflects its concern for the holistic education of its inhabitants.



Some of our most successful educational policies include the "Mentoring Programme", with the recent creation of the "Mentoring from the Cradle" branch, the "Urban Educational Circuit", and the "Territorial Plan of Educational Rotation".

In terms of its challenges, San Justo is currently undergoing a rapid technological evolution, which entails a challenge in terms of access to and training in technology for the population. What's more, like many other cities, it's facing the need to adapt to new forms of teaching and distance learning, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with this challenge, we're developing public programmes and policies such as the Technological Inclusion Plan and its pilot project "Classroom of the Future", the introduction of children to robotics through a specially adapted way of teaching that stimulates the early development of mathematical thinking, and even a strategic link with universities and companies. This aims not just to bring electronic devices closer to the people, but also to provide opportunities and develop skills for an effective and responsible use, thereby making technology an ally.

In other words, San Justo draws on its strengths and tackles challenges by using and fostering cooperation between Educating Cities as an essential tool. We take on this responsibility with awareness and enthusiasm as an opportunity to learn and replicate successful policies, this time calling on the "Technology and Social Innovation: Fostering Sustainable People-Centred Cities" theme that we adopted from the Andong Declaration (2022) to reflect the reality of present-day Argentina.

During your term in office, one of your priorities has been the consolidation of San Justo as an Educating City. Which actions would you highlight? What steps are being taken to make this progress sustainable over the course of time?



In the last few years, San Justo Town Council has been focusing all its efforts on working together to build an inclusive city that is better prepared and has more opportunities to mentor inhabitants throughout their lives.

Each of the management tools we've generated responds to a double vision: analysis and measurement, both internal and towards the community, to compare what has been done and what still has to be done, with a view to showcasing the results and measuring the true impact of the public policies that we put in place.

As we already know, COVID-19 undermined the whole of humankind. But, in turn, it ended up underlining the importance of local governments in managing the quality of life of people, due to their closeness to the community, their local knowledge, and their ability to bring about change.



Here in San Justo, we believe that this ability should be enhanced through appropriate tools that provide access to local funding in order to scale up the actions which, with many restrictions and restraints, local governments have already been implementing.

In particular, due to our identity as an Educating City, we should mention actions such as "Mentoring from the Cradle", which sets out to guarantee access to and the availability of learning for newborns in our city. What's more, there are other initiatives such as the "Municipal Interdisciplinary System", a comprehensive and therapeutic programme for educational inclusion. The main goals of this are to pinpoint the variables that affect the all-round development process of children and address them early through the help of seven professionals, who implement an interdisciplinary clinical approach through psychological, speech/hearing and psycho-pedagogical treatments, as well as monitoring children at school, in the home, and in society as a whole.

The sustainability of all educating tools is based on community work and joint efforts alongside civil society institutions, which are not affected by changes in government. This optimises these actions based on the understanding of local demands and long-term sustainability, as they're appropriate initiatives implemented by local stakeholders. The council often proposes other solutions, but always does its best to provide the opportunities and tools available to help transform the local reality.

Given that you come from the world of architecture, could you highlight the extent to which urban planning is used to educate people?

In addition to being the Mayor of San Justo, I'm a lecturer in Architecture at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, which allows me to combine "doing", "saying" and "thinking". I believe that achieving inclusive, resilient, and safe Educating Cities with quality urban planning calls for an end-to-end and effective connection between disciplinary knowledge and practical needs, while covering the daily and everyday issues of people.

From an architecture point of view, I understand that public space is the most social and essential place for social and community interaction. This stems from the importance of public spaces and how they can be designed to foster education and social interaction. This perspective also helps me better understand what it means for a city to be an "Educating City" and how the Charter of Educating Cities addresses its values and principles.

The "Urban Educational Circuit" of San Justo has become an example of how public space can be used as a space for community interaction. This circuit features various sites that include the Ardillitas Infants' Garden, the Municipal School of Fine Arts, the House of Culture, and the Classroom of the Future.



Each of these services offers educational activities and programmes that are open to the community. What's more, the circuit has been designed to foster participation and dialogue, as each service is integrated into a coherent whole that reflects the city's identity.

In other words, we could say that the combination of my experience in architecture and my lecturing work gives me a different and strategic perspective when it comes to understanding and applying the principles of education in Educating Cities based on urban planning in the different spaces of our towns and cities.

**You took part in the 16th International Congress of Educating Cities, representing RACE. What lessons did you bring back?**

Taking part in the 16th IAEC International Congress in Andong as the representative of the Argentinian Educating Cities and mayor of the network's coordinating city was a unique and enriching experience.

The event highlighted the work that Educating Cities around the world are doing for and on behalf of education, showing the shared goal uniting them beyond cultural and geographical differences. What's more, the Congress underlined the importance of culture and the creation of public spaces for the assessment of the history and identity of cities through new technological tools.

I found the issue of technological innovation, focused on people and their rights particularly relevant, and as something interesting to think about here in Latin America. That's why the 6th RACE Meeting is covering one of the three cornerstones addressed in Andong, focusing on the specific needs and conditions of the Argentinian Educating Cities to face up to this challenge.

In short, this experience was an opportunity to learn and share knowledge with other Educating Cities around the world and continue working together for education and innovation in our country.

## What does holding the 6th meeting of the Argentinian Network of Educating Cities in San Justo mean for you?

It's a milestone for all the institutions and citizens in San Justo who are renewing their commitment as members of an Educating City, and for the City of San Justo in its leadership role within the network.

Our intention is also to make it a milestone for each of the cities in the network, whether they're taking part virtually or in person, and for the lessons provided by this opportunity to enrich and encourage the replication of ideas and/or working methodologies.



A promising sign if we take into account that we'll have special guests from Educating Cities in other countries, such as Medellín, Caguas and Viladecans, and even civil society stakeholders from Argentina such as the NGO Chicas en Tecnología and the Technology Hub of the City of Rosario.

In turn, it's a key moment in our coordination of the Network and for the Department of Education so that we can rethink our approach locally and show other cities our community and some of our key local policies. This is an opportunity in which we can appreciate successes and learn from our mistakes, and where we can think about other

visions and methodologies that other Educating Cities in Argentina bring to our city.

The theme of the 6th Meeting of the Argentinian Network is "Technology and Social Innovation: Fostering Sustainable People-Centred Cities". What role do you think new technologies can play in the development of Educating Cities? How do you work in San Justo to combat the digital divide and inequalities that can stem from ICTs?

When we focus on people, initiatives linked to technological innovation take on other aspects of social inclusion, such as technological inclusion.

There's no doubt that in our cities we need to develop skills for a technological world, which is constantly changing and evolving (or "innovating", as they'd say).

In this regard, the key role to adopt as Educating Cities in this necessary and infallible "inclusive" vision, integrated with education and technology, is to understand that technological inclusion "begins" through access to technology (whether an electronic device or software), but doesn't end there. Public policies, in addition to being sustainable and inclusive in terms of access to people with vulnerable social realities, need to contribute to the conscious and responsible use and development of human skills.

In view of the above, we're working locally on these approaches through initiatives such as the Technological Inclusion Plan, which addresses digital literacy as a key element in the city's development and growth.

This plan is made up of two important parts: Digital Education and Learning Communities. This programme sets out to make technology available to everyone, regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

In this sense, the council runs the so-called "Classroom of the Future", a public space located in the main square, which primarily sets out to integrate the educational community and citizens into digital culture. This space provides training and workshops in technology for people of all ages, allowing the local community to acquire the digital skills and competencies needed to operate in an increasingly digitised world.

In short, the San Justo Technological Inclusion Plan is an initiative that sets out to democratise access to technology and foster digital literacy in the city. Through digital education programmes and learning communities, the city is working hard to give all citizens the tools they need to adapt to an increasingly digitised world.

What's more, we offer training in mathematical thinking and robotics to all ages, as we know that the digital divide affects each generation differently. From early childhood to adulthood, we make sure that our citizens have access to the tools and skills needed to embrace today's educational challenges. We recognise that these barriers aren't just socioeconomic, but also depend on the needs and realities of each individual person, and we adapt to them to provide all-round and inclusive education.



San Justo is passionately committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this sense, you're taking stock of best practices and promoting a network of exchange and dialogue between different stakeholders. Is cross-cutting work easy in San Justo? And how is dialogue with other local stakeholders achieved?

Cross-cutting work isn't easy, but it's necessary and its results make it worth the effort.

Since before the launch of the 2030 Agenda, what we know today as the SDGs were being worked on, but in a less coordinated and structured way. The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs enables and redefines logic, order, and interconnection on a local level, which not only makes local initiatives more integrated, but also facilitates learning and speaking in a more common language. It's all about following a route of cooperation between local stakeholders, which makes it easier to replicate and learn from other successful actions found in the IAEC Bank of Experiences.

What's more, the centrality of SDG 17, and the priority order of each goal, make local governments take on another role on the international agenda, as they're the key players who need to shoulder this challenge in a community-focused way, with institutions, companies, NGOs and individuals from each town or city.

Specifically, our first local voluntary review, published in 2022, is not just proof of the city's passionate commitment to the international development agenda, but also proof that small communities like ours can measure up to metropolises and

intermediary cities thanks to professionalism, joint efforts, and conviction.

San Justo has managed to position itself as an active and relevant player on the regional scene, taking on the initiatives of the Sustainable Development Goals in each instance and space for discussion.

Our track record means that we've followed a special path on a national and international level: we were the fifth Argentinian city to sign an agreement with the National Council for the Coordination of Social Policies for the incorporation of the SDGs; the ninth to integrate the Argentinian Network of Cities against Climate Change, with our Local Climate Action Plan approved and forming part of its Executive Committee; we're one of the four UNESCO Learning Cities in Argentina; we're part of the Council of Mercosur Cities Network; and - since early 2022 - we've been proud to coordinate the Argentinian Network of Educating Cities.

This Local Voluntary Review, which we've presented to the world from our community, is the result of a shared effort to achieve a shared goal: the city that grows and develops "without leaving anyone behind".



San Justo works from the perspective of lifelong education. Can you give an example?

The government of San Justo works from the perspective of lifelong education with an all-embracing and sustainable approach. An example of this is the "Mentoring Programme", which contributes to the all-round development of the individual with an emphasis on equity, thereby preventing and reducing their exposure to situations of exclusion and social vulnerability.

The Programme guarantees inclusive access to formal and informal education and creates comprehensive links through the educational, cultural, and sports mentoring established between local government, beneficiaries and community stakeholders. What's more, the Programme's target population is found on the eastern outskirts of the city, which meet certain characteristics to define it as an area with high rates of social vulnerability.

The "Mentoring Programme" has multiple branches, including "Mentoring PYAMM", which works with older adults or the elderly, and "Mentoring from the Cradle", which works with newborns and infants. This means that the government of San Justo offers educational and support programmes to people of all ages, with the aim of enhancing the quality of life of citizens.

