

# Policy Dialogue

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## Urban School Reform: A Case Study

*Frederick (Rick) Hess, an education scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, led a team of experts in evaluating a seven-year comprehensive reform of the San Diego school system. He presented the team's findings at Pioneer Forum June 9, 2005. The Forum also included remarks by Nonie Lesaux, an assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and one of the San Diego review team members, and Thomas Payzant, Boston schools superintendent, who once served in the same capacity in San Diego. Excerpts of all three participants' remarks follow.*

### Overhauling a Major Urban School System

**Rick Hess:** In 1998, the San Diego City Schools launched one of the nation's most ambitious efforts in school reform. Superintendent Alan Bersin, former U.S. Attorney for Southern California and President Bill Clinton's border czar, sought to reshape the teaching organization and philosophy of San Diego, which is the nation's eighth largest school district. Bersin's tactics, his lack of an educational background, and his relentless commitment to wholesale change proved controversial, even as his efforts attracted a high degree of interest in San Diego and across the nation.



*The San Diego experience illustrates above all that even the boldest attempts to overhaul urban schooling are vulnerable to the institutional and organizational barriers that hamper these systems.*

—Rick Hess

The San Diego reform effort was driven by a strategy of setting standards, building the professional skills of teachers and administrators, and identifying systemwide instructional needs, then aligning resources and organizational structures to address those needs.

It had a mixed record of success. Between 1999 and 2004, the percentage of elementary schools scoring at the top rung of California's academic performance index increased by more than 35 percent. The number of schools scoring in the bottom category fell from 13 to 1. Meanwhile, the performance gap dividing white and Asian students from black and Latino students narrowed significantly. But high school achievement stubbornly refused to move. A number of observers questioned the rigor of the district's curricula and Bersin's confrontational approach to the teachers' union. In office, Bersin moved very aggressively. One year into his superintendency, he said there was no other way to start systemic reform: "You don't announce it. You've got to jolt the system."

The speakers' remarks excerpted here are available in their entirety online at [www.pioneerinstitute.org/hess2.cfm](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/hess2.cfm).

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## Lessons from the San Diego Experience

What have we learned from Bersin's widely discussed, and often contentious, tenure? For my money, the most interesting lessons concern his bold effort to remake the system's processes and its routines. The San Diego experience holds at least eight lessons about urban school reform.

**1.** The centralized, managed instruction model of improvement that Bersin and his chancellor of instruction, Tony Alvarado, embraced depends critically on personnel and managerial infrastructure and on quality curriculum. However, the relentless focus on Alvarado's Institute for Learning for training principals and faculty, and on building a core of peer coaches, often resulted in a lack of attention to infrastructure, management, and curricula. The proposed peer coaches, along with moves intended to assign faculty strategically, ran afoul of the collective bargaining agreement. In addition, a human resources operation relying on outdated technology and inefficient practices inhibited district efforts to speed up hiring, improve recruiting, or render staffing more flexible. With regard to curriculum, despite seven years of work developing a carefully calibrated professional development model for literacy, by 2004 the district still had not established a coherent curriculum for reading in English. Consequently, while teachers were using the prescribed methods, there was remarkably little attention to the quality of the content.

**2.** It's important to keep in mind that the managed instruction model that Bersin and Alvarado brought to San Diego is built entirely on our pedagogical and curriculum understanding of K-4 literacy. They took the routines, the pedagogical devices, and the ways of teaching that have been proven pretty effective in K-4 literacy, and they said, "These will work K-12; they'll work across the breadth of the curriculum." But they weren't really modified in an appropriate way for 9th and 10th graders or for science, mathematics, or history instruction.

**3.** Bersin strengthened his hand in pursuing reform by embracing the California accountability system and, later, the No Child Left Behind metrics. Bersin welcomed the California Academic Performance Index, seeking to use the results to identify troubled schools, and to target professional development and resources on those schools. San Diego slashed the number of low performing schools during Bersin's tenure by more than 90 percent. But these reforms never reached their full potential, either in terms of identifying low performing schools or reallocating resources.

**4.** Bersin came in with a lesson as U.S. Attorney that leadership is the key. From day one, Bersin and Alvarado

focused on building a core of leadership coordinators across the district. They focused with a fury on the quality of school principals. They terminated more than a dozen principals at the end of the first year. After six years, they had replaced more than 90 percent of the principals in the district. More than 50 percent of the principals in place in 2004-05 had gone through the training institute that Alvarado designed.

**5.** Dramatic efforts to improve high schools may conflict quite directly with other changes. In 2004, when the Bersin team adopted a model of high school reform that featured a portfolio of smaller, more personalized environments, an outside observer could see a potential clash with its six-year-old emphasis on centralized managed instruction. The flexibility that allowed faculty and small schools to modify curricula in accord with the school's specialized mission, the emphasis on giving faculty a voice in curricular decisions, and the resulting inability to standardize content all meant that coaches working with faculty in these schools encountered math, English, history, or science teachers in a dozen small schools who may be teaching a dozen different curricula in a dozen different ways. Coaches can mentor all of these teachers on pedagogical technique, but they're going to encounter great difficulty applying the kind of uniform content expertise that the Alvarado model takes as a starting point in building elementary literacy.

**6.** Even leading districts struggle with creating the infrastructure necessary to let educators take advantage of the technological tools and opportunities of the day. In San Diego, where Bersin sought to recruit and import high-quality business operations staff, the district's progress on technology integration remained uneven. Building a technological infrastructure that can support school improvement requires commitment from the instructional staff from day one. It requires recognition from the superintendent and the school board that infrastructure questions are not side issues or things that we can "get around to" but are critical to empowering school personnel, making human resources operational, making accountability effective, and re-engineering district processes.

**7.** Some thoughtful observers have questioned whether Bersin's style was unduly confrontational, particularly when it came to the union. What such critiques tend to downplay is that any effort to radically re-imagine the way an urban school district does business in the 21st century is going to be painful and conflictual. When faced with a powerful union—strongly attached to certain ways of handling staffing, hiring, school leadership, and accountability—it's not clear, at least to me, that Bersin could have pursued his agenda without conflict.

8. Perhaps the biggest lesson from San Diego is how limited the possibilities are for radical improvement of urban schooling, short of structural change to personnel systems, technology, accountability, leadership, and compensation. For all of their sweat and struggle, Bersin and his team were continually scrambling to circumvent immutable arrangements that tied their hands when they needed flexibility. State statute and contract language governing teacher hiring, school assignment, compensation of principals, faculty and employees, and work rules all limited the district's ability to build the workforce it wanted.

Bersin began his tenure with remarkable advantages, including his dazzling local and national context, personal charisma, negotiating and management skills, public service credentials, fundraising success, and a socioeconomic profile of a district that is actually one of the most conducive to achievement in all of California. The San Diego experience illustrates above all that even the boldest attempts to overhaul urban schooling are vulnerable to the institutional and organizational barriers that hamper these systems.

### Underlying Principles of Reform

Finally, let me take a moment to talk about three principles that are essential to driving improvement in school systems: transparency, accountability, and continuity.

**Transparency:** It's important to remember that America's public schools are supposed to be just that: public schools. Yet community members, parents, researchers, and even district personnel often find it difficult to obtain ready information from defensive urban districts. Urban districts have often been managed like fortresses under siege, denying access to all but hand-picked outsiders, friendly scholars, and folks who are on the right page. The result is that educators and district leaders find themselves isolated, their claims treated with skepticism, and their efforts undermined by an alienated public. The San Diego review marked an important step in making that district more public in the most profound sense. By inviting researchers and observers into the district and by giving them unfettered access to district leaders, schools, and employees, the system modeled a desire to keep faith with its public and to be accountable for its efforts.

**Accountability:** Accountability is not simply about collecting data and monitoring performance. It's also about the adults entrusted with education taking responsibility for their actions. This includes school boards, superintendents, administrators, and teachers. But it also includes civic officials, parents, and other community agents who choose to involve themselves in the educational process. I don't care how noble their intentions are, those who would bear the mantle of educating our children have to be willing to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

**Continuity:** School improvement is arduous, controversial, and usually frustrating work. Producing sustainable changes in attitudes, behavior, and expectations is not the work of a season or even of a year; it's a process. The same is true, of course, of improving any large, unwieldy organization. This isn't to apologize for schools or school districts; it's just to recognize that we shouldn't be unreasonable in the demands we place on them.

A five-year or a ten-year commitment on the part of both the district and the community is essential for sustainable improvement. We're inevitably going to disagree about how to improve education. We're going to debate the merits of competing strategies, how to interpret results, and what can reasonably be expected from our schools. However, if we pursue school improvement, and particularly urban district improvement, in the spirit of inquiry and public accountability, even our disputes can prove useful and illuminating and beneficial. Ultimately, a steadfast commitment to transparency, accountability, and continuity may give cities a fighting chance to build 21st century schools that are beacons of opportunity for all.

### Focusing on Language Minority Students

**Nonie Lesaux:** Who are the students in the schools? What does academic performance look like, particularly from students from diverse backgrounds? When we looked carefully at those children who come from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, who are a growing population of what we call *language minority learners* in the schools, we found the difficulties that we face in educating learners, and the challenge of giving kids strong literacy skills, are exacerbated for the very children who need them the most.



*Children entering schools who are not proficient in English are the most vulnerable and most sensitive to quality instruction and have perhaps the lowest outcomes in our schools across the nation.* —Nonie Lesaux

The children entering schools who are not proficient in English are the kids most vulnerable and most sensitive to quality instruction and have perhaps the lowest outcomes in our schools across the nation. These issues run, of course, far deeper than San Diego. These are the challenges of urban districts. But I'll use San Diego as the case study.

In San Diego, for about 30 percent of students, English is not their native language. The great majority of those students, just over 50 percent, are native Spanish speakers,

mostly due to the proximity of the U.S.-Mexico border. But there are 64 native languages in the San Diego school district right now. The great majority of those learners are clustered in only 15 of the 187 schools, where we also have low-income backgrounds. These are the schools that have the most difficulty keeping teachers and getting high quality resources and instruction. So it's not necessarily just about language.

When I set out to look at the progress and the success of Bersin's reform for minority learners, it was an interesting time. The reform took place at the very same time that we had one of the most public and political debates about these very learners. It was put to public vote in 1997 with Proposition 227. Would we teach these kids in English, or would we teach them in Spanish? The overriding vote was that we will teach them in English. As Bersin was coming in with his reform, we had this major shift to just English instruction. These kids would be educated in English starting in kindergarten. So there's an interesting coincidence there with policy and the context of these learners.

Generally, we found it's much easier to work with younger kids from a literacy perspective and have an effect on very young kids very early on with their reading skills. We have a curriculum that around fourth grade takes a turn whereby language is infiltrated in every domain. In mathematics and science, we have highly academic language; we have lots of terminology; we have lots of conceptual ideas; we have figurative language. These are the challenges of educating learners from diverse backgrounds—literacy is much more about language and vocabulary and having kids be able to work proficiently with text in all domains in order to get their skills. We saw a lot more improvement in the academic performance of English language learners at the K-3 level than we did at the middle school and the high school levels. It is very difficult to have an impact on middle and high school learners, to move their language and literacy skills to proficiency and have them be what we would consider academically successful.

The caveat that I will mention—and this is a problem in the field in general—is that if we don't look at these students longitudinally, we're actually looking at a revolving door. These learners lose their classification when they become fully English proficient. In the data tracking systems, they're no longer considered English learners. One of our strongest recommendations was to track kids over time. In all urban districts, we should be able to look at the trajectory of English language learners. Arguably, we have the most to learn from those kids who have a successful academic experience.

The second finding concerns the balanced literacy program. When designing a literacy initiative, there's a deci-

sion to be made about what kind of materials we want for teachers. On the one hand, we can choose a scripted-type program, where we give teachers lots of materials, we standardize a curriculum, we standardize practices, and we ask them to focus on discrete skills. This is a narrow view of what we consider literacy.

On the flipside, we have the opportunity to teach teachers to focus on making meaning in the classroom, to give them principles of instruction that they then apply across all areas, not just in that reading time. This approach is based more on language than on discrete skills—what we might think of as phonics versus kids having lots of time and experience engaging with authentic texts. San Diego chose a balanced literacy design with their peer coaches working very carefully and intensely with teachers to give them skills to think about their teaching across subject areas. That's an excellent design for English language learners. We want them to be immersed, with lots of language, lots of vocabulary.

The tradeoff is that this model is highly dependent on the teaching force. When you have high teacher turnover, and new teachers coming in, the challenge is to bring them up to speed quickly enough. If you don't have a set of materials, it's more difficult to standardize practices and the quality of delivery of instruction. Students in under-resourced schools, and from minority backgrounds, are much more vulnerable to a program like that.

The universal reform process was an excellent starting point for English learners. We did see the gap begin to close. We recommended providing a set of curriculum materials, even if we're going to work from a principle-based paradigm. New teachers feel much more comfortable with a set of materials. Many principals tell us that their teachers would be happier with an actual set of materials they could at least use as a starting point. There's certainly a need to standardize practice, particularly for English language learners.

## On Educational Funding and External Factors

**Thomas Payzant:** I'm in a special position here because I was superintendent of the San Diego City Schools from 1982 to 1993. There was a gap before Alan Bersin took over in 1997-98. I've been in Boston now for almost 10 years. I want to begin by saying that I wish that there had been enthusiasm in the funding community for providing the dollars that were provided in San Diego, which were significant, to enable what happened there to happen here.

There is very little work being done to look at systemic reform in urban school districts. This is important work and allows for some very deep conversations and learning about the connection among policy, research, and practice. If we had had the same kind of review in Boston, there would

have been a lot of similarities in the substance of the work, the goals that drove it, and the beliefs about accountability and results. The main differences are process and approach. I want to talk a little bit about that.

The educational and political contexts in which city school districts operate are constantly changing. This may be axiomatic—everything changes sooner or later. But in education this change process usually involves major shifts in educational philosophy along with significant changes in leadership. Everyone may agree on the obvious goals—that all children can learn, all schools should improve, and achievement must be high in order for students to have a high school diploma that will make them ready to go on to continuing education and have opportunity in life. But the major strategies to achieve these goals may change completely from one decade to the next, even from one administration to the next. And the challenges always are in terms of sustainability. What should be sustained and what should be changed?



***Systemic school reform cannot be bargained district-by-district with any kind of coherent results. Legislatures are going to have to take on some of these issues [to] bring some coherence across the state.***

—Thomas Payzant

The overall focus of the work in San Diego in recent years is similar to what we've been doing in Boston—standards-based reform and intensive focus on improving instruction, organized district-wide professional development as a major change lever, the use of data—especially student performance data—to drive classroom practices, and school and district accountability.

There are two major levers: the quality of instruction in the classroom, number one; school leadership, number two. That's been our theory of action in Boston—mine since arriving in October 1995—and what has driven the reform work here. The great challenge facing all school leaders is to get the balance right between that which is managed and directed centrally, and that which is more bottom-up. I've learned that sometimes you have to be very directive and top-down and manage with tight coupling. At times you won't get very far with that unless you have a real strategy for getting the people who do the work—day-in and day-out in the classrooms—to buy in to why you're doing what you're doing and provide them with the support on how to do it.

Bottom-up strategies may be more inclusive, but change takes longer, and people outside the schools or district become impatient. Top-down strategies are often the result of political impatience and tend to run into incessant political opposition, at least from some groups.

I think Rick has really nailed three important things about this whole effort. I completely agree with the transparency issue. You've got to share the data and information, and educate people about what you're doing and why—and do it at various levels, recognizing that in the public arena of big urban school districts there are special interest groups for everything. You've got to be able to manage all of these special interest groups that may support a piece of what you're doing as long as that special interest is being addressed. The transparency is in being able to talk about this publicly rather than cutting deals with the special interest groups.

Accountability, no question about it. We've benefited over time here from a unified political landscape, and that's huge. There was a clear line of accountability from the mayor to the school committee to me as superintendent of the schools. The change from an elected to appointed board in Boston was one of the huge shifts that had to occur to move forward with a coherent systemic agenda for improving all of the schools, and not just a few.

And the continuity piece. I've had the good fortune of having a long tenure and beating the odds. But it's not all about superintendents. You've got to have continuity of leadership on the governance side of the house, and on the executive side of the house. We've got a mayor who's committed to public education, who stayed the course. And we've got a school committee that he appoints. I've had the same school committee chair for six years. What a difference that makes. I have the opportunity to stay around both to do the work and be accountable for the results.

One more comment: I was here in 1965 getting my doctorate at Harvard, and I did my qualifying paper on the passage of the Massachusetts Public Employee Collective Bargaining Law. Little did I know then what an impact that and similar kinds of legislation around the country would have on my career in education. My own view is that systemic school reform, and not just in urban districts, cannot be bargained district-by-district with any kind of coherent results. Legislatures are going to have to take on some of these issues and address them through legislative policy, which will at least bring some coherence across the state. That's what it's going to take. In strong union states, it's very hard to get even a conversation going about these kinds of changes, but that's one of the critical levers that has to be pulled.