

An Interview with Frederick M. Hess, editor of *Urban School Reform: Lessons from San Diego*

Q: *What is the book about?*

A: The book evaluates the San Diego City Schools' bold reform effort, launched in 1998 and spearheaded by Superintendent Alan Bersin. A former U.S. district attorney for Southern California and President Bill Clinton's "border czar," Bersin sought to revolutionize the teaching, organization, and philosophy of the nation's eighth-largest school district. His tactics and relentless commitment to sweeping change proved widely controversial in San Diego, even as his efforts attracted national attention to the city's schools.

Bersin's stormy tenure in San Diego comes to an end this June, giving us the opportunity to take a long, hard look at the lessons learned during his seven-year fight to transform a troubled urban school system. Bersin departs as the dean of the nation's big-city superintendents, having engineered the longest-running, continuously led urban reform effort in the nation. *Urban School Reform: Lessons from San Diego* distills the hard-earned lessons of Bersin's tenure.

Q: *There are a lot of books about urban school reform. Why read this one?*

A: Unlike previous texts on urban school reform, which usually focus either on particular approaches to schooling or on telling a political story, *Urban School Reform* explores both. Where most studies focus on the cultural challenges of reform or on particular approaches to teaching, *Urban School Reform* takes a comprehensive look at the entire San Diego effort. The authors of the fifteen essays analyze the politics, governance, high

schools, school leadership, teaching practice, information technology reform, school choice, human resources, special education, English language instruction, charter schooling, and accountability.

Q: *Why look at San Diego?*

A: In the era of No Child Left Behind, with urban school districts across the nation being held to a new standard and with many struggling under the accompanying demands, San Diego's experience holds invaluable lessons—good and bad—for national, state, and local policymakers, as well as for educators.

Q: *Did Bersin's reform effort succeed?*

A: The San Diego experiment has a mixed record. Bersin's tenure has been marked by some visible successes. Between 1999 and 2004, the percentage of elementary schools scoring at the top rung of California's statewide Academic Performance Index increased by more than 35 percent. During the same period, the number of schools scoring in the bottom category fell from thirteen to one. And the performance gap dividing white and Asian students from black and Latino students has narrowed.

However, there have also been areas of little evident progress. High school achievement indicators refuse to move, and some observers have questioned the rigor of the district's curriculum and wondered whether Bersin's approach to the teachers' union was unduly confrontational.

Ultimately, *Urban School Reform* is less focused on labeling Bersin's tenure a

“success” or a “failure” than on examining a host of reform initiatives and drawing out lessons for urban reformers everywhere.

Q: *What was the nature of the San Diego reform effort?*

A: The San Diego reform effort was driven by a strategy of setting standards, building up the professional skills of teachers and administrators, identifying system-wide instructional needs, and then aligning resources and organizational structures to address them.

Ultimately, this reform strategy was formalized in a document called the *Blueprint for Student Success*. Adopted by the San Diego school board in March 2000, this document set out three strategies to promote student growth: prevention, intervention, and retention. The plan was to improve overall learning while preventing school failure by assisting students who were falling short of standards, and by holding back students for whom intervention had been ineffective in order to help them catch up through accelerated instruction. The *Blueprint* emphasized strong instructional leadership from district staff and school principals, intensive professional development, additional time for low-achieving students, special attention and resources for low-performing schools, and the use of high quality instructional and curricular materials.

Q: *What is the biggest lesson to take from San Diego?*

A: The most important lesson is that districts cannot reform their educational systems by focusing only on curriculum, classroom, and pedagogy. Coaching and training teachers and administrators alone will not change the culture of schools hampered by seniority rules, restrictive staffing policies, outdated human resources departments, or ill-equipped principals. It is ultimately this educational

“infrastructure” which will help determine whether reforms targeted at the classroom are successful.

Q: *What particular topics are addressed in the volume?*

A: The book is divided into three parts. The first section addresses governance, leadership, and the politics of reform in San Diego. The chapters include an analysis of the tensions within the San Diego Board of Education, the “toxic” relationship between the superintendent and the local teachers union, and the management strategy of the Bersin administration.

The second section examines various dimensions of the Bersin instructional agenda, including the district’s approach to professional development, its efforts to transform school leadership and enhance the principal cadre, its strategy for improving low-performing schools, and its move to embrace small and more specialized high schools—what is known as the “portfolio” model of high school reform.

The third and last group of chapters considers efforts to overhaul the district infrastructure. These essays explore the themes of accountability and reforms in hiring and human resources operation, as well as the uneven efforts to keep up with information and communication technology. The section also includes studies on charter schooling in San Diego, parental choice, English language instruction (for nonspeakers), and the district’s ambitious effort to overhaul special education.

The book ends with a reflective essay by Bersin that follows a thorough assessment of the academic results of the district’s reforms. In the hope that they could be useful for would-be urban reformers, Bersin shares his reflections on the various battles, analyses, and lessons learned from his San Diego experience.