



San Diego City Schools: Comprehensive Reform Strategies at Work

This Brief is based on the following
CTP Research Report:

San Diego's Big Boom: District Bureaucracy Supports Culture of Learning

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The popular perception of school bureaucracies has been one of obdurate entities wrapped in red tape and insensitive to the “real world” of the classroom. More recently, some researchers have examined central offices as potential active partners in school reform, capable of becoming learning-centered. The two aspects, however, have not merged. Making it more difficult to visualize districts as a potent support for instructional improvement, researchers have often focused either on structural (e.g., bureaucratic) features of the district or professional support features, but not both.

The optimum situation is one where both characteristics work together – where bureaucratic influences and practices support classroom learning. Case studies of small and mid-sized districts have attempted to understand central offices in such a light, as organizations that are reflective and capable of new ideas rather than entrenched in standard operating procedures.

This study examines such a transformation in the country's eighth largest school district, the 140,000-student San Diego City Schools. An unusual leadership arrangement allowed the district to build and nurture new instructional supports based on research, create significant changes both in the central office and at school sites, and forcefully direct a process that replaced traditions with effective learning practices.

The data for the study come from fieldwork during the first three years of an attempt by new leadership of the district to change a culture that was “stuck” with unacceptable academic results. The district had followed a typical bureaucratic organization. Area superintendents exercised jurisdiction over a cluster of schools that had different resources, capacities, and outcomes. District supervisors rarely interacted with each other. A popular, long-time superintendent was followed by his deputy, whose major concern was to hold the line. A fractious teachers' strike and business leaders' criticism of the district for being too bureaucratic led to a new majority on the school board that called for significant reforms.



The school board selected a non-educator – the local U.S. Attorney – to head the district. While Alan Bersin had the confidence of the community and a dedication to issues of equity, he needed a partner who knew the ropes of school district politics and especially of curriculum and instruction. He immediately chose Anthony Alvarado, who had moved District #2 to the second highest performing community district in New York City, out of 32 districts, in his 10 years as superintendent. Alvarado assumed the role of Chancellor of Instruction in San Diego at nearly the same salary as Bersin, an indication that the two expected to be co-leaders of reforms.

Alvarado's views about teaching and learning, which earned him a national reputation, were clear and simple:

- The best way to improve student learning is to deepen teaching practice and to orient district decisionmaking to instructional needs.
- District administrators have particular roles in supporting learning in schools.

Together, Bersin and Alvarado developed a new look for the district bureaucracy, one that showed a commitment to better teaching and learning based on solid instructional strategies. Bersin took care of the political, organizational, and business aspects of running the district. Alvarado managed the instructional aspects.

A Change Theory in Transfer

Relying on the theory of learning framework Alvarado brought from District #2, the two administrators identified system-wide instructional needs and aligned district resources, organizational structures, and policies to address them. The bureaucracy was to organize around instruction, and do so by investing strategically in teachers' work. There was a strong research base for its initiatives, including the importance of:

- Long-term, professional learning networks for teachers and principals
- Opportunities for continuous reflection and refinement of practice in communal settings
- Organizational configurations and deployment of resources that advance a coherent reform agenda
- Challenging teaching and learning standards tied to assessment tools through which teachers could diagnose student learning according to the standards.

The two leaders and a small group of internal and external reformers used this research to develop a system based on three strategies: driven by standards, focused on building the profession, and tailored to the specific contexts of each individual school. Central office policies and practices would support instructional needs above all else.

The Beginning: Supporting Instructional Changes

Alvarado's belief in the crucial role of principals as linchpins for change within schools led almost immediately to the dismantling of the area superintendent arrangement and the creation of seven heterogeneous working groups of about 25 principals each, known as Learning Communities. These were headed by principals selected for their strong instructional leadership. These instructional leaders worked closely together to design their new roles and plan their coaching work with principals. They received training from the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) at the University of Pittsburgh, linking them with efforts in other urban districts around the country.

The principals in the Learning Communities learned about exemplary instructional practice and how to support teachers in several ways. They attended monthly all-day meetings where they discussed reforms with central office administrators, observed classrooms, worked with experts on relevant issues, and analyzed data. LRDC

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professional development for the principals integrated its Principles of Learning with the district's new Literacy Framework. A second strategy for principal learning was the "Walk-Through," copied from District #2. About twice in a semester, an instructional leader would visit each school in his/her Learning Community to observe 10-15 classrooms with the principal, looking for evidence that teachers were using the information/strategies made available to the principal. The instructional leader and principal debriefed after the WalkThrough; a follow-up letter from the instructional leader specified what was observed and what needed to improve.

In the meantime, Bersin focused on building community support for the changes, mounting a comprehensive communications initiative. Every central office position was analyzed as to its role in supporting teaching and learning, and within a year the superintendent recommended eliminating or consolidating 104 central office jobs.

Going Deeper with Changes, Tying Them Together

The next stage of change in San Diego fine-tuned the framework for learning, increasing the transformation of the district's bureaucratic functions into support for enhanced instruction across the system.

Principal professional development changed into an in-house arrangement. A District #2 administrator, Elaine Fink, was recruited to direct an Educational Leadership Development Academy that trains principals and instructional leaders and runs an administrative mentoring program.

Additions to the reforms included placing experienced staff developers in schools to work with teachers, a literacy course for secondary school students (Genre Studies), redesign of summer school to be an intense learning experience for teachers and students, extra support for schools with large numbers of failing students, and adoption of standards and instructionally based assessments. By the third year, these various initiatives were linked together by policies and funding under a comprehensive reform strategy known as the Blueprint for Student Success.

The staff developers, highly qualified teachers assigned to each school, coach other teachers and principals on techniques aligned with the district's reforms. Alvarado and colleagues from LRDC and District #2 worked with the instructional leaders, who worked with the principals. The literacy department within the Institute for Learning worked with site-based coaches. Together, principals and coaches helped teachers deepen their practice in the context of each school.

The plan triggered reluctance on the part of the San Diego Education Association, which was concerned about the selection and supervision of the site-based coaches. A mediator worked out a compromise, and as the second year of the reforms began, nearly 100 certified and trained literacy peer coaches were placed in two-thirds of the schools. Another 200 coaches came on board a year later. The coaches worked with the principal and staff to design professional development aligned with the Institute's philosophy, pedagogy, and Literacy Framework four days each week. On the fifth day, they received professional development themselves. Peer coaches worked with a handful of volunteer teachers at the elementary level and with teachers implementing the new Genre Studies course in secondary schools (for students who had performed poorly on the state's reading assessment). The coaches also worked with teachers at newly designed intensive summer school programs, focused on students below grade level.

Eight elementary schools whose students were the lowest performing in the district became Focus Schools and received considerably more resources. These included more funding, extra peer coaches, four full-time math specialists, extra instructional days, enhanced parent training, and a pre-school program. Almost a dozen other elementary schools that were struggling academically also benefited from additional full-time peer coaches and increased per classroom allocations.

The district office also adopted assessment tools to supplement SAT-9, believing that the latter was not helpful in diagnosing student learning needs. It first introduced literacy assessments, followed by math; the assessments were used for diagnosing student problems and for promotion/retention decisions.

The Blueprint, adopted by the school board on a 3-2 vote, wove together all of the reform initiatives and came with a large price tag. At least \$62 million were needed to finance the reforms in 2000-01, or more than six percent of the district's operating budget. Several federal and state funding streams provided a major share of the cost, and Bersin redirected more than half of the funds saved in the district reorganization toward the peer coaching network. One of the most controversial sources of funding came from the dismissal of 600 teacher aides in Title I schools. The district also took back school sites' discretion on the use of Title I and integration monies, requiring them to be spent on certain reform strategies.

Results and Reactions to A Directive Approach

Superintendent Bersin often said publicly that "you can't cross a chasm in two leaps." With this attitude, he and Alvarado sought to bridge organizational procedures and student learning, quickly. In the superintendent's opinion, "You've got to jolt a system, and if people don't understand you're serious about change in the first six months, the bureaucracy will own you." This strategy has its pluses and minuses.

Based on observations, interviews, and focus groups, the study found that, after three years, discussion about instructional change was the norm among principals, teachers, and administrators. Practice was changing, and the evidence indicates that the focus on professional development was affecting student performance. In addition to rising SAT-9 scores (along with student averages across the state), more schools scored above the state average. Students in the Genre Studies classes made above-average gains in literacy.

Such swift, comprehensive changes, however, can create problems. Principals appreciated the professional development designed for them and its equalizing effect across the district. But it was time consuming, and the reforms had not given them extra help with the non-instructional demands on their work. They felt pressured to produce results (indeed, 15 site administrators were reassigned to the classroom after the first year of reform because they had not shown sufficient instructional leadership). Because of complaints about not

meeting differing needs, the principals' Learning Communities had become divided by grade levels by the third year.

Like the principals, teachers agreed with the overall goals of the reforms, but they tended to express more negative feelings toward the implementation. Many considered it top-down or disagreed with certain policies such as eliminating what they considered successful programs in their schools or conflicts with what they considered good practice. This dissatisfaction led to requests to see the research base for the reforms; but an action rooted in dissatisfaction produced a serendipitous result— it encouraged teachers to become more interested in linking research to their own practice.

In the central office, managers acknowledged that the basis of operating had changed. Instead of allowing the amount of money to determine program and policy decisions, instructional needs governed budgeting. The cutback of personnel, however, took its toll on those left. Many resented losing colleagues and/or assuming other people's work, and there was considerable fear and distrust directed at those making the changes.

The Meaning of the Story

In San Diego, the reform leaders used strategies grounded in research on teaching and learning to align the organizational structure of the district with instructional improvement. They sought to balance top-down direction with quality support for teachers across the district, acting swiftly but sometimes without involving those affected by the reforms. Their actions often created fear and resentment, especially in the teachers' union, and led to a split school board. The instruction was sound; the politics were unstable.

Still, San Diego went into policy territory usually avoided by large urban districts. It used the tools of the bureaucracy to craft a district-wide professional learning culture based on research, performance data, and feedback on teaching practice. Its "boom" strategy, the antithesis of the usual incremental efforts to gain buy-in, was followed immediately by specific support structures, giving the leaders a chance to root all parts of the system in common design principles about instruction. The case study, however, does not

answer questions about how to maintain the momentum in a fragile political environment. The story is not over.

Lessons for Other Large Districts

The San Diego case study contains themes, some obvious, some not, for large-district reform, including:

- Changes either through a “boom” strategy or through incrementalism have trade-offs that reformers need to consider.
- Strategies grounded in research and refined in practice can be transferred from one place to another, but the leadership needs to be intimate with the details and know where compromises/adjustments are needed.
- Building public support for the changes is as crucial, in a politically volatile situation, as is building professional support.

- Teachers and principals respond to quality professional development when they recognize that it directly influences/improves their classroom/school outcomes.
- Ongoing, expert help needs to be as close to classroom realities as is possible.
- Dismantling and rebuilding efforts within a district need to go hand in hand, with the latter firmly focused on teacher and principal support.

San Diego City Schools leaders, according to the study’s conclusion, spent the first few years remaking the bureaucracy to support instruction throughout the system. At the same time, they sought to create “a professional learning culture throughout the district in which members interacted with others around research, performance data, and teaching practice and through which the larger system learned to incorporate feedback it received.”



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