



This Brief is based on the following
CTP Research Report:

**Building Instructional Quality:
“Inside-Out” and “Outside-In”
Perspectives on San Diego’s School
Reform**

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Linda Darling-Hammond
Amy M. Hightower
Jennifer L. Husbands
Jeannette R. LaFors
Viki M. Young
Carl Christopher
Stanford University

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Building Instructional Quality and Coherence In San Diego City Schools: System Struggle, Professional Change

Persuaded that quality teaching is the most important way to raise student achievement, the new leadership of the San Diego, California schools initiated a focused set of instructional reforms to “jolt” the system from bottom to top beginning in 1998. The core of the effort—a massive investment in attracting good teachers and supporting all principals and teachers with intensive, focused professional development—draws on research about learning, especially from the cognitive sciences, and theories about teaching that contend “student learning will increase when powerful interactions occur between students and teachers around challenging content.”

The San Diego reform resembles a similar initiative launched in District #2 in New York City by former superintendent Tony Alvarado, who then became Chancellor of Instruction at San Diego, joining San Diego’s new superintendent, Alan Bersin, the former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of California. What was especially unique about this duo’s approach was the speed of their action on reform strategies, the tight focus on improving educators’ expertise and instruction, and the total alignment of policies. This included enveloping state policies and funding into the district’s reforms, turning what could be barriers or excuses into additional levers to improve teaching. It also meant a sharp paring down and radical redesign of the central office, which has also centered its work on teaching and learning in the 140,000-student system.

In just four years, major improvements in instruction and achievement were evident in the elementary and middle schools where reforms were focused. However, changes among high schools were more difficult to enact. As new efforts are launched to redesign high schools, the precepts about investment



in teaching remain the same, but the strategies are increasingly tailored to different environments for change.

Despite data showing impressive gains in student achievement, the San Diego experience has never been free of tensions. Moving quickly to use centralized authority to create “the environment for a different kind of teaching,” as Alvarado describes the effort, meant ignoring the traditional idea that change requires participation and “buy-in” from all interested parties. The rapid removal of principals considered inadequate to lead instructional reform created tension and initial mistrust from some quarters. Community groups, from advocates for classroom teaching aides whose jobs were eliminated to well-educated parents who objected to changes in the secondary science curriculum, made their disagreements public. A persistent 3-2 split on the school board favorable to Bersin has been politically delicate to maintain. Nonetheless, teaching practices are changing and student scores on external assessments are going up.

Interviews of educators at all levels of the system, district-wide surveys of principals and teachers, and case studies of three middle schools developed over a five-year period examine the interaction between the “micro” (classroom) changes and “macro” (top-down) policies that characterize San Diego’s efforts. The study examined certain age-old tensions when top-down meets bottom-up:

- How strategies address both *systemwide needs* (including equity and quality) and *local differences* between (and within) schools or districts. These strategies include differences among grade levels, subject matters, teacher distribution and local labor markets, and considerations of income and knowledge distribution,

among others, particularly as these affect the capacity or will to implement state and/or district policy.

- How agents maintain a commitment to *locally defined goals* in the face of district or state policies aimed at *crosscutting, externally defined goals* that seem to require re-direction.
- How policies and agents seeking to redefine professionalism as *collective responsibility* for knowledge-based practice rather than *individual autonomy* attend to questions of principled knowledge, local context, and shared authority.

These tensions flow throughout the various initiatives and changes instituted in San Diego. They touch all aspects of the system’s efforts to strengthen instructional quality and were especially evident in one of the most visible reform strategies—to recruit, retain, and develop high-quality teachers and principals for the district as quickly as possible. These efforts included:

- An overhaul of recruitment, hiring, placement, and evaluation to recruit and retain high-quality teachers and principals in the district, while weeding out weak staff members;
- A massive investment in intensive professional development, including institutes, workshops and on-site coaching in every school, focused initially on developing teachers’ and principals’ expertise in literacy instruction, and later branching out into mathematics, science, and other subjects;
- A redesign of administration, replacing area superintendents with instructional leaders working closely with principals on improving the quality of teaching in each

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building and charging principals with focused evaluation and support of instruction;

- A much more centralized approach to providing curriculum and teaching guidance based on research on learning and teaching, including the development of special courses and district-wide strategies for literacy development as well as aspects of mathematics and science instruction;
- An effort to develop a culture and shared expertise to enable professional accountability.

Professionalization

An emphasis on the professionalization of teaching included making the conduct, analysis, and critique of teaching much more open and public. This was, of course, a major shift in norms from the private presumptions about teaching that have dominated school systems in the past. Furthermore, whereas District 2's work, for example, had been incremental over more than a decade, San Diego sought to change these norms and practices quickly. Bersin predicted recently that the story of change in San Diego will be about the new transparency of teaching. "It is a public province of feedback, discussion, interaction, peer review, and constant improvement much more akin to the way in which traditional professions have operated but which has not operated in education," he said.

These kinds of processes of collaboration around teaching are intended to strengthen practice from the ground up; however, perhaps paradoxically, the institutionalization of new norms—and new staffing—came from the top down. In addition to dramatically increasing and transforming professional development, the district changes its personnel policies.

To hire more qualified teachers and lower pupil/teacher ratios, the school system reduced central office personnel (Bersin had promised to cut 5% immediately), consolidated projects and eliminated their directors, and transferred resources previously used for paraprofessionals to

full-time certified teaching positions. New leadership in the human resources office aggressively recruited promising teacher education graduates and experienced teachers from other states, worked with local universities to fill high-needs fields, and streamlined the hiring/data process.

As a result of these actions, the district opened schools in the fall of 2001 with almost all positions filled by credentialed teachers (only 17 out of 1,081 vacancies held emergency certificates as compared to several hundred in previous years). By comparison, in the state as a whole more than 50% of beginning teachers were hired that year without full credentials. At the same time, a new professional accountability system led to the "counseling out" of principals and teachers who could not meet more rigorous standards.

Professional development was completely revamped, given an academic focus, and increasingly embedded in classroom practice. The first component of this tremendous investment built the capacity of principals to develop and monitor high-quality teaching in their schools. The 175 principals in the district were assigned to one of seven "Learning Communities," each headed by a trained central office "Instructional Leader." The latter had replaced the traditional assistant superintendent positions. They were chosen because they had shown high levels of instructional leadership. The Learning Community groups convened during monthly principals' conferences, visited local classrooms, held discussions with experts, and jointly examined student performance data with central office administrators. The Instructional Leaders also conducted "walk throughs" with principals at their schools, sometimes as frequently as once a month but always at least three times during the school year. The belief underlying instructional capacity-building among central office and site administrators was that instructional alignment requires shared knowledge—up and down as well as across the system.

Another component of professional development focused on reaching every teacher with consistent, high-quality support. About 150

classes a year are offered during summers and intersessions, usually at school campuses. In addition, a network of trained and certified peer coach/staff developers spend four days each week in their assigned schools to establish “norms of practice” around literacy instruction; the fifth day is for coaches’ own professional development. As the basis of all learning (and test performance), literacy became the vehicle for changing classroom practice, as it had in District #2. The district’s reading strategy takes a balanced literacy approach, giving equal emphasis to decoding skills and phonemic awareness and to literacy comprehension and expression. The Literacy Framework, used across the district, outlines specific teaching techniques and stages of development. After the third year of the reforms, the district added math as a focus of reform; at the secondary level, new “Genre Studies” courses, later labeled as blocks, accelerated literacy instruction for struggling students.

As with the approach to all the reforms, Alvarado, who created the district’s Institute for Learning to manage instructional change, insisted that the literacy frameworks and teaching strategies constituted a professional reform based on research, not a hierarchical one. “We’ve organized into frameworks what the profession knows about instructional work,” he told principals. “When you speak and work with (your staff), they have to understand that it is coming as a function of the profession, not as a function of the district demanding it. If an outside force is focusing me to do something, then I’m an automaton. If I’m responsible for using professional knowledge, then I have a big role in accessing that knowledge and implementing it.”

This professionalism also includes accountability on the part of principals and teachers. Instead of state policies that rely largely on rewards and sanctions to improve student performance, San Diego’s theory of change relies on professional accountability for high-quality practice to move students forward, especially those who have struggled most to learn. In turn, this requires educators to be responsible for self and peer learning. This kind of professional

accountability assumes a reciprocal relationship between the district and its employees. Oriented around instruction and improvement, the district provides the supports for professionals to change their practice: all principals participate in learning opportunities, all schools receive professional development, and all teachers are expected to engage in it. In turn, professionals are expected to engage in well-grounded practice and continually to seek out additional knowledge.

Changes in Organization and Funding

The instructional leader position in the central office was just one aspect of the redesign of the school’s administration. Bersin not only downsized central administration, he also focused everyone’s role on instructional improvement. Each central office employee was asked: “How do you support teaching and learning in the classroom?” Those who couldn’t support the priority were either terminated or shifted, resulting in the elimination of 282 positions and the redistribution of more than \$11 million from central office to school sites. Moreover, 600 of the district’s 2,800 instructional aides were let go, and the savings was invested in teachers and peer coaches.

The superintendent reorganized the central office (from five area superintendents) to three divisions—the Institute for Learning, Administrative and Operational Support, and the Center for Collaborative Activities. Further reorganizations added special education support to the Institute for Learning. Several hundred small and large categorical programs, funded from different sources, were redirected to support professional development or were terminated. Two years after the reforms began, the superintendent proposed and the school board adopted a Blueprint for Student Success in a Standards Based System, which codified the new uses of funds. Between 2001 and 2003, the funding under the Blueprint, using Title I and other federal, state, and foundation funds, increased from \$61 million to \$111 million.

Another important policy aspect of San Diego’s reform agenda is how the leaders of the

effort used state—and sometimes federal—funding to achieve their goals by consolidating sources of funds and focusing them on major initiatives. The district also leveraged state policies toward its own programs. This was true of the Literacy Framework, which promoted deeper and richer expectations than the state’s Reading Initiative. The district also leveraged the state’s Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program to augment its onsite peer coaching plan for literacy at the elementary level, and kept another state program, Peer Assistance and Review, more separate so that it would not impede the literacy effort. At the central office, managers reported that there had been a perceptible shift away from letting the availability of money dominate decisions to having district-wide, articulated instructional needs drive the budget.

There was also an attempt to ensure that district goals drive the improvement processes in schools. As in most states, California’s accountability plan tends to circumvent districts and target schools directly. The most underperforming schools receive state funding to support implementation of improvement plans. San Diego officials avoided separate, disconnected agendas in these schools by selecting one firm as an evaluator of its 42 schools in the program and ensuring that the approach of the evaluator was consistent with the district’s theory of instruction. In essence, the district’s policies actually sharpened state interventions into a more rational performance-based accountability system. The district also intervened with schools under threat of state takeover, winning approval of waivers that allowed self-monitoring efforts.

Early Results

Between 1998 and 2001, student performance on the state assessment (SAT-9) increased substantially. While scores across the state improved during this period, San Diego’s scores rose more steeply and its participation rates in testing also increased during this time. By 2001 more than 98% of students were included in

testing, among a student population that is primarily composed of low-income students and students of color. The district’s goal of moving students out of the bottom quartile of test scores was obviously succeeding.

At the school level, while most educators voiced agreement with the substance of the reforms, tensions regarding the district’s centralized approach appeared in principal and teacher comments. Most principals agreed with the changes, but some were uncomfortable with the amount of scrutiny of their work, and high school principals felt the literacy reforms failed to address many of their needs and problems. Principals’ commitment to the changes increased over time, however, especially the support for building their capacity as instructional leaders.

Reaction among teachers was more mixed. The context tended to pull teachers in opposite directions, with the union, which had been a contentious factor throughout the Bersin-Alvarado regime, showing real skepticism in its official comments, but with teachers expressing appreciation for the quality of professional development. The union had focused on gaining more control for teachers through participatory governance, but the reforms sought to give them power through professional learning.

While a minority of teachers in national surveys report spending more than eight hours in professional development on a given topic, 79% of San Diego teachers spent more than eight hours in professional development on reading. In addition, 75% of the district’s teachers engaged in regular collaboration with other teachers, and 61% participated in mentoring or peer coaching—evidence that teaching was becoming a more public endeavor. Even though most teachers agreed that the district held high expectations for schools and invested in high quality professional development, many still mistrusted the district’s motives and disagreed with the centralized approach. The idea of distributive leadership—with the district, principals, and teachers all having a role—was slow to take hold.

This mistrust contributed to deteriorating relationships between the district and the San Diego Education Association. Criticisms of the Blueprint were countered by Bersin and Alvarado, who cited statistics on the lack of progress being made by students prior to their arrival. The district answered union demands for explanations of the research base for the reforms with information and local exemplars. While the political road to reform has been rocky, the study documents a steady increase in the consistency of teaching practices and more comfort with the practices being modeled.

The Case Studies

Case studies of three middle schools found different levels of implementation of the San Diego reforms, primarily due to different capacities within the schools for change. While the district might mediate state contexts, the school does the same to district (and state) contexts, and how and how much depends on their teaching and learning environments.

One middle school incorporated middle school elements, e.g. houses and advisory groups, but teacher turnover was substantial. The more traditional junior high school lacked collaboration, student personalization, and a commitment to self-learning among staff. The third school also had middle school elements but a much more stable teaching force and commitment to professional development. Professional development varied from primarily workshops in the more traditional school to collaborative research and teacher networks in the third example.

The reforms made substantial inroads in the first two schools, less in the third.

All three schools improved their literacy scores, even though classes were becoming more homogeneous. Teachers did not uniformly endorse the literacy initiative, but collaboration did increase. School-level implementation of the literacy initiative depended on the stability of site principals and peer coaches, the literacy background of site leaders, site teachers' experiences, and the way each school organized

opportunities for teacher and student learning. The school that had been most team-oriented previously but with the most variability in staff qualifications gained stronger staff and increased performance most steeply. The school with the most traditional departmentalized structure and the least opportunity for team planning had the most difficulty gaining traction with the reforms, but gradually began to make progress in both instruction and the development of a more personalized collegial structure.

Despite differences, the study found growing professional accountability in all of the schools. There was increased professional peer support and collaboration to improve instruction. The schools showed greater accountability for teaching through formal and informal observations and evaluations. The schools increased their use of student data to hold teachers accountable for their teaching. Finally, the principals and teachers showed a growing sense of accountability to each other as professional colleagues as well as to the district and their students.

Stepping Up to High Schools

Despite all the strides made at elementary and most middle schools, San Diego's high schools made only modest gains and remain low performing. In addition to the fact that the literacy initiatives seemed most appropriate for lower grade levels, high schools are large, complex social institutions with extensive departmentalization and more stubborn isolation among teachers. In new efforts to redesign high schools to become more personalized and more instructionally powerful, district leaders seem to be adopting a more collaborative approach that emphasizes experimentation rather than a single approach enforced centrally. This approach is relying more on within-school expertise and inquiry-based strategies, such as establishing study groups designed around common reform issues.

Summing Up

While the path has been rocky, in many respects the district's theory of learning, theory of teaching, and theory of change are succeeding, although to different extents in different parts of the system. Alvarado's has been a systemwide approach. "If you do something right, you have to do it across the board," he said. "Otherwise, the other part of the organization continues, and it eats away at the innovation." The overall results suggest that:

- Substantial success is evident at the elementary level and there has been a noticeable change in the middle schools, in terms of both teaching practice and student outcomes. There have been effects of the reforms in all schools, no matter their capacity. However, the impact on high schools is in a large part yet to come.
- School's responses to district and state reforms have varied, depending on their capacity.
- The district's reforms have created costs as well as benefits. The costs have been incurred especially with respect to local participation in decision making and increased homogenization of some practices.

- The district is becoming more comfortable with negotiating flexibility in implementing the Blueprint, as long as it conforms to professional practice and equity goals.
- Principals and teachers do not want to go back to previous versions of individual autonomy that permitted idiosyncratic and often ineffective practice. The norms of collective responsibility appear to be taking hold.

San Diego has been especially successful at incorporating state policy into local reforms, even for high school improvement. In some cases, its efforts have actually improved upon state policies and initiatives. For example, its literacy initiative is instructionally richer and its accountability strategies more focused on the improvement of practice than the State's reforms, which San Diego has re-characterized and subsumed in its efforts. San Diego is betting on making professional learning so strong and coherent that the knowledge base and skills of the profession will make local schools able to forge their own meaningful learning and teaching agendas—from the inside out.



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Contact Information

Michael S. Knapp, Center Director

Miller M201, College of Education
University of Washington 353600
Seattle, WA 98195-3600
Email: mknapp@u.washington.edu

Michele C. Ferguson, Center Manager

Miller 203C, College of Education
University of Washington 353600
Seattle, WA 98195-3600
Phone: (206) 221-4114
Fax: (206) 616-8158
Email: ctpmail@u.washington.edu

Sally Brown, Communications Director

Miller 404B, College of Education
University of Washington 353600
Seattle, WA 98195-3600
Phone: (206) 543-5319
Fax: (206) 616-8158
Email: salbrown@u.washington.edu

Web Address

<http://www.ctpweb.org>



Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
University of Washington Box 353600
Seattle, WA 98195-3600

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