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URBAN SCHOOL REFORM
Lessons from San Diego

Edited by Frederick M. Hess

In Urban School Reform: Lessons from San Diego (Harvard Education Press, April 2005), editor Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and a team of twenty-three education experts assess the ambitious reform agenda undertaken by the San Diego City Schools during Superintendent Alan Bersin’s seven-year tenure.

Since 1998, Bersin, who previously served as U.S. district attorney for Southern California and as President Clinton’s “border czar,” has overseen one of the nation’s boldest and most controversial efforts at urban school reform, seeking effectively to reinvent the nation’s eighth-largest school district—its teaching, organization, and very philosophy. His relentless commitment to across-the-board change proved controversial in San Diego, even as his efforts attracted national attention. Bersin’s contentious term will end abruptly this June, making now an ideal time to examine the lessons learned in the course of San Diego’s experiment.

Unlike previous texts on urban school reform, which typically focus on particular approaches to schooling or on telling a political story, Urban School Reform—comprising fifteen evaluative essays and Bersin’s own reflections on San Diego’s experience—explores both the substance and the politics of reform.

Hess, author of Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform and one of the nation’s leading scholars on this topic, explains, “Where most volumes focus on the cultural challenges of reform or on particular approaches to teaching, Urban School Reform plumbs the entire San Diego effort—scrutinizing politics, governance, school leadership, and teaching practice alongside reforms in information technology, school choice, human resources, special education, English language instruction, charter schooling, and accountability.”

“Whatever one thinks of the particular strategy Bersin adopted or the results of the San Diego experience,” Hess continues, “the ambition, scope, and sustained focus of the reform efforts have produced invaluable lessons for would-be urban reformers everywhere. In the era of No Child Left Behind, when the challenges of urban schooling have ascended to a new level of urgency, educators, policymakers, and parents owe it to their students and children to study the hard-won lessons of San Diego.”

“However,” Hess notes, “the most important lesson in the volume is that districts cannot reinvent how they approach questions of curriculum or classroom simply by focusing on instruction. Training alone will not change the culture of schools hampered by seniority rules, restrictive staffing policies, outdated human resources departments, and ill-equipped principals.”

Urban School Reform: Lessons from San Diego gives us the opportunity to identify—after a seven-year effort—what measures are necessary to reform an entire school system.

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