

A REPORT TO CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK

conversations

A Theory of Action for High School Reform

A Conversation with **Alan Bersin**,
California Secretary of Education and
Former Superintendent of the
San Diego City Schools

Prepared by Collaborative Communications Group, Inc.

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Washington, DC

Schools for a New Society

An Initiative of Carnegie Corporation of New York

Throughout its more than 90-year history, Carnegie Corporation of New York has been committed to improving education and ensuring all students the opportunity for full participation in our democracy and our society.

The Corporation believes that if this goal is to be achieved, high school reform in urban communities is an urgent need, from an economic, social, historical, and moral standpoint. In that context, the Corporation is dedicated to revitalizing America's high schools by focusing on district reform. It believes that preparing all of today's high school students to succeed in our complex, knowledge-based economy requires more than one or two good schools: we must have in place entire systems of excellent schools.

In October 2001, Carnegie Corporation, with additional support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, committed \$60 million to *Schools for a New Society* (SNS), a five-year, seven-city initiative involving 140,000 students in more than 100 schools. The goal of SNS is to reinvent the high school experience so that schools become places with high expectations, leading to high achievement, for all students.

In each of the SNS sites, community-based organizations serve as core partners with the school district. The school district–community partnerships are:

- Boston Public Schools – Boston Plan for Excellence, Jobs for the Future, Boston Private Industry Council
- Hamilton County Department of Education – Public Education Foundation (Chattanooga)
- Houston Independent School District – Houston A+ Challenge
- Providence Public Schools – Rhode Island Children's Crusade for Higher Education
- Sacramento City Unified School District – Linking Education and Economic Development (LEED)
- San Diego City Schools – American Institutes for Research
- Worcester Public Schools – Clark University (Worcester, MA)

In addition to direct support to the communities, the initiative includes funding for technical assistance and evaluation. A technical support team – drawn from the Academy for Educational Development, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, and the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University – collaborates on providing expertise and tools to support change at the school and system levels and to engage the community in the transformation of high schools. SRI International and American Institutes for Research conduct the national evaluation. Collaborative Communications Group provides communications support, specifically to the education community.

Alan Bersin left the San Diego City Schools in June 2005—after seven tumultuous years as superintendent of the 141,000-student system. Formerly a U.S. Attorney, Bersin and his chief academic officer, Anthony Alvarado, in 2000 launched an ambitious reform effort aimed at strengthening instruction throughout the district. The effort, known as the Blueprint for Student Success, produced gains in student achievement, particularly in the elementary grades but also attracted strong opposition from the local teachers' union and its allies on the school board.

In 2001, San Diego became one of seven cities to participate in the Schools for a New Society Initiative, sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York to redesign high schools.

Kris Kurtenbach and Gloria Frazier of Collaborative Communications Group met with Bersin on the eve of his departure. In a conversation that lasted nearly five hours, Bersin reflected on the purpose of high school reform, how he would change San Diego's theory of action for high schools—and the political and governance contexts in which the reforms occurred. He also described what he expected to be sustained after he left the system.

A Theory of Action for High School Reform

Collaborative Communications Group: Let's start with the context. What was your theory of action for the school system and how did you move to high school reform?

Alan Bersin: I started out neither as an educator, nor terribly knowledgeable about education. At the outset, I relied on [Tony] Alvarado, whom I checked out and with whom I developed a deep relationship. The theory of action was—and continues to be seven years later—that the critical path for improving student achievement, particularly for poor kids, is to improve the quality of teaching. Other people will talk about other elements of the San Diego reform, but our central focus was how to improve teaching at scale. Our challenge was to take what Tony Alvarado and Elaine Fink had done in District 2 and multiply it four times in terms of scale. By the time Tony left [in 2003], one of the matters that we had come to disagree on was how that theory of action should best be applied in the high school context. Our massive investment in professional development and principal leadership was applied to the high school from the outset but with much less traction and much less success than we saw at the elementary level, particularly in the primary grades.

Indeed we faced a very conscious decision, early on, about whether or not we would focus on K-8 and not move into the high schools. My initial inclination, politically, in terms of the change process, was to focus on K-8. I thought we could best improve high schools, which we don't really know a lot about, by improving the capacity of students who would enter ninth grade. It was Tony who said, "This has to be K-12." He was very clear that we needed the same theory of action to apply in the high school context. Tony convinced me that the most sure-fire way to improve K-12—including the high schools—would be by improving the quality of teaching across the board.

As a result, when the Blueprint [for Student Success]—our school reform strategy—was announced in March 2000, the academic programs, as well as the resource allocations to support them, were K-12 in scope. The success, however, even in the short term, was clearly in elementary schools, not in the high schools.

The strategies directed to our high schools during the first four years clearly did not produce acceptable results in terms of student achievement gains and, therefore, were a failure. The Blueprint as applied to secondary schools, while having a role in creating culture changes that set the stage for later changes, was ineffective. And for that reason, we did not succeed. In K-8, we were very confident that the theory of action applied strategically was the right one, and the data reflected this almost immediately. From this perspective we just needed continuity. The reform needed to survive long enough so that principals and teachers who had changed their behavior could see the results of their changed behavior reflected in student work. Changes in teacher beliefs and attitudes would follow in turn from what was happening in the classroom. This did not take place in our high schools. But since we heard no other proposal for change—not from the community, not from the union, not from the university—we had a point of view and we stuck to it until something better presented itself. And that paid off in terms of creating the conditions and generating the momentum for change in the high schools.

I have been accused of many things but never of sticking with an idea out of some theoretical attachment to it. Our bottom line required concrete results. Kids in high school were failing. My view was: We must be very open to listening to others—Carnegie or Gates or others.

So, in terms of funders, you knew that you needed space to get a game plan together before others joined you?

AB: Yes. We actually did that in high school. I will say, with eternal gratitude to Carnegie and Gates, they were good critical friends and helped us make the midcourse correction we needed to make when our initial strategy did not bring us the results we expected. Constanca Warren [of Carnegie Corporation of New York] and Jean Thomases and Leslie Rennie-Hill [of the *Schools for a New Society* technical-support team] were terrific. They really stuck with it and asked the right questions, pressed the right way. They really understood what we were trying to do. The value was the questioning and being tough-minded.

The data opened the gates for you to listen. What were some of the first ideas that came in, that gave you something to work with in your head?

AB: Small schools and then the small learning community concepts. We needed to understand how that related to K-8 and how it related to our theory of action about improved teaching. The formulation that made the most sense to me was: The theory of action was right, but the difficulty in high school is that we do not have conditions for improved instruction. So if we were to go to improve teaching significantly in high school, we needed first to create conditions for that to occur.

And that involved contesting a point about which Tony was always very clear: It's not about structure; it's about instruction. His view was that if you focused on structure—redesigning high schools or small learning communities—all of that stuff that high school people were so eager to talk about—all you would get would be endless meetings and very little progress. Because it's about the teaching, stupid; it's not about the structure of schools. My friendly amendment to that view is that unless we restructure schools to create the conditions for improved instruction, it will not happen in the typical high school.

And, first and foremost, that involves creating relationships among teachers—so that faculty know one another—and then between faculty and students so that every faculty member does not work with 175 students a day but could only connect professionally and, in terms of a human relationship, with 50 or 60 students. That was a very important initial insight for me, a kernel of common sense.

At that point, the second concept was differentiation. San Diego City Schools has demographics considerably different from most large urban districts. One of four of our students is white; more than one of three is middle class of all ethnicities. We have communities that are very pleased with their high schools, in places such as Patrick Henry in San Carlos, Point Loma, La Jolla and University City. Why were we refusing to accept the notion that there are different circumstances that would call out for different approaches? In these high schools, 70 percent to 80 percent of the students are being educated to the satisfaction of their families. The issue here is young people who are not supported by the instructional program and who drop out or remain far beneath grade level. That's a different problem than the one we faced at high schools like Crawford or San Diego High, where 80 percent to 90 percent of students are not succeeding.

You don't really have a portfolio approach to K-8?

AB: I think the difference is that in the high school you really do have to create the conditions for improved instruction. I think the evidence in K-8 shows that managed instruction has actually produced the results we're seeking. Look at the API [Academic Performance Index] rankings: We've gone from 25 schools at API-1 to one. That's remarkable. In the elementary schools, we moved schools out of the bottom deciles through a common instructional program. In the secondary schools, the surest way to remove schools from the academic cellar was to shut them down. This occurred on a limited basis with Lincoln and McDowell, and then with Gompers and Keiller, which reopened as charter schools.

For failing high schools, because of the nature of scale and the nature of the relationship between teacher and student and among teachers and students and parents, we need to change the structure by closing them down and reopening them in a different form. Believe it or not, structure does matter at first.

Regarding the changes in employment at the system level, do you think you have the right people “on the bus” now?

AB: I’m not satisfied with our high school leadership. In San Diego by 2005 each one of the 25 high school principals was selected by our team to be on our team. I would say we have, without question, one of the greatest K-12 principal corps ever assembled. I really believe that.

Still, I’m not satisfied with high school leadership. And that suggests to me that maybe we’re defining the job incorrectly. When you identify people for positions, and you change personnel and you’re still not happy with the quality of leadership across many individual leaders, maybe the job description is wrong. The problem may be as much with expectation as it is with performance. That’s a sense that’s been growing on me for a while.

That seems reasonable, given that you don’t yet have as clear a map of where you want to go with the instructional piece of high schools.

AB: I don’t think it’s instructional. I think the issue of scale presents the problem. For example, it’s clear to me that high school principals need not be principal teachers or instructional leaders, as I believe they must be in elementary school. It would be odd for a non-traditional superintendent to shy away from the notion that maybe our high schools—the large high schools—could have non-educators as principals. A retired Navy captain, for example, might be the head of the school to whom an instructional dean and several operational chiefs would report. I don’t think the job of a high school principal is necessarily instructional leadership, in the same way that it is in K-8. Excellent leadership is paramount; excellent leaders know how to build teams to meet and achieve goals.

Another point is clear to me: There seems no reason for educators to monopolize operations management in high schools. Why would we want to pay the traditional non-instructional vice principal \$70,000 or \$80,000 or \$90,000 rather than hire a CPA at that salary who could be the business manager? Block schedules wouldn’t be so difficult for a CPA to manage, let alone information technology, let alone budgets and so on.

I think in the context of high schools, we really have to re-look at organizational roles and get the right people on the bus, in Jim Collins’s phrase. Since we haven’t beaten a path to instructional improvement and increased student achievement in high schools, I think there’s room for a complete redesign of the management structure within schools in addition to restructuring failing schools themselves.

There are changes we could make in the administrative structure right away that would make these more effective organizations focused on teaching and learning. We could make sure that schools were more supportive of how we might reorganize classrooms. What do I mean by that? We might move away from 100-year-old Carnegie units, for example, and really integrate student work and study in ways that produce better results for kids.

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In addition to differentiation and creating the conditions for instruction, the third major change in our approach to high school reform came from the realization that students in high schools are a lot more important variables in the process of their education than they were at elementary school. Teenagers must become engines of their own learning, or this whole enterprise can become a fool's errand. If we don't engage the young people, we're looking for trouble. Engagement can come by improving significantly the quality of instruction. But it also comes from applied curriculum and life experiences that pull students in by connecting them very concretely to the reason for their learning—algebra, for example, in the context of carpentry.

That's going to require a major redesign of the teaching process. Small schools mean nothing unless they improve the conditions for instruction. I would bet on small schools. Even when we get through the whole restructuring issue, there's going to be a huge issue of connecting all kids to their learning. Right now, most middle-class kids do well, at least by their lights, in the large comprehensive high school. But I would argue that they're being shortchanged, although not as much as kids at the lower end of the income scale. High schools for the most part are not connecting their students to their future or to the world or preparing them properly for adult life.

The crisis of the American high school, together with contemporary pop culture, may account for a very interesting phenomenon: Many of our young people are lost from 18 to 26. Our 26- to 32-year-olds, on the other hand, appear to be the best motivated in the world. That's why 60 percent of our 1.8 million students in California's community colleges are 26 or older. And that's why we're seeing the development of an entire educational system outside of public education—the Phoenixes, the Nationals, and the Corinthians. By the time our young people become 26, they actually get motivated. They know what they have to do, and they get down to work. Unless they are so lost that they don't, and end up in prison. But many kids who are dropping out of high school are finding themselves later on, along with many who are getting the high school diploma. So how do we move some of this motivation and engagement down?

That leads me to another subject: What is the purpose of high school reform? I am almost certain, without knowing right now what the better foundation might be, that our constant talk about college readiness—that the purpose of high school is to prepare students for college—is not terribly helpful. Then we soften the rhetoric because we know that it's also not terribly realistic. So we say that we want kids to be ready for higher education or the workplace. This talk turns out to be very self-defeating. I think I know how we got here. The mission statement about “college for all” comes in reaction to our racist and tracking past, in which we had three tracks: the academic, the business and the GED. Racism and classism, as much as anything else, determined where students were placed. I saw it in my own high school. The system routinely put a lot of kids on the third track, which provided a minimal education. People of color reacted over time to that discrimination. *Brown v. Board of Education* rejected it and called for equal educational opportunity. And now because we have not delivered on that promise, we have resorted to the political correctness that everyone is going to be on the top academic track. We hereby declare that high school will be about the academic track to college.

I believe that state of affairs has had some unanticipated consequences, proving the old observation that “hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue.” In order to be politically correct, we have now inadvertently said in effect that high school doesn't matter, in and of itself. At the turn of 20th century, five percent of American young people went to high school. We now have 98 percent attending high school at the beginning of 21st century. But because we've lowered the standards of high school to accommodate a mass attendance, and because we're reacting to the inequities of the past, we've actually devalued high school altogether. A high school education doesn't get you much, even if you get it. One-third of our students are leaving high school between the ninth and 12th grades. Of the two-thirds who graduate from high school, more than one-half require remediation when they go to college. Fewer than one in four of our students who begin high school end up eight years later with a four-year college degree.

For me, when we talk about high school, we should be discussing an experience that is dedicated to high-level literacy and mathematics, critical thinking, clear communication and character development for every young person. Or at least to offer that to every teenager and to make sure that everybody who graduates from high school does so with those skills and qualities. And then we might be a lot less oriented to high school as a preparation phase in the manner of James Conant's view. We say: We prepare our students for college and for the workplace. I think part of what we want to do with high school reform is to reinvent high schools to make them a very meaningful experience for academic and intellectual growth and social development on their own terms.

It's a critical point. This is the hypocrisy: We say to our communities that every kid is going to college. We look at it like every kid is going to be a brain surgeon. That's what public education is expected to accomplish. This is not the world as it is or even should be, nor will it ever be like that. It would be a very boring place. We need to stop devaluing high school by considering it merely as a stepping-stone to somewhere else, just as we need to stop sorting kids on the basis of race and class that serves to perpetuate the academic achievement gap. The two problems may be tied together after all.

What would be the business response to this notion?

AB: I think that the business segment of society would be delighted if in the first instance we actually delivered a true high school experience that graduated every student with at least a 10th-grade literacy skill and an eighth-grade knowledge of mathematics. Which is what we test for! And then over time, as we improve our capacity for teaching and learning, we jump that standard up and raise the bar. If you offered a deal today to Lou Gerstner, that we would have 90 percent of teenagers in America graduating with 10th-grade literacy skills and eighth-grade math skills, he'd accept that deal today.

The business view is not in accord in with my notion that high school ought have significance on its own terms, in addition to serving as a bridge to higher education or the workplace. Let's assume that the 30 percent of kids that high schools are serving well now—or reasonably well—that those kids start leaving high school after the third year and avoid an often unproductive senior year. What do you end up with? You end up with an institution that's really dedicated to the problem of improving basic skills. Maybe it permits us to focus our core high school mission on getting that level of skill and character to everybody. When students earn a certificate of mastery or they have attained a competence level that says they're ready for community college or four-year college, they go. This scenario leaves high school serving a bridge function for the most part. Is this what we want?

So you're thinking of how to build high schools to operate in a democracy?

AB: In the interest of equity, yes, and for the purpose of promoting lifelong learning. We haven't organized around the knowledge of what paths kids are going to follow after they leave high school, the lifelong learning, the number of jobs they are going to have—the kind of research and analysis that [Harvard economist Richard] Murnane does. What occupations are our kids moving into and from where are they coming?

What's so interesting about the small schools? I guess I'll amend the theory of action to state the matter outright. It's restructuring to improve the quality of instruction, but it's also about improving student engagement. At the level of high school, it's got to be about connecting kids with everything—with adult society, with themselves, with their friends, and with their future. And then eventually building institutions that can serve a variety of ends building on this foundation.

There may be a sequence here. And it is certainly going to take 25 years, a generation, to do this. But I'm now comfortable, given our experience of seven years, that small schools are just a first step. The convergence I'd like to see at five years, 10 years and then 15 years out is around both the quality of instruction and the quality of student engagement. This goes back to building the existence proof. This is going to take a while. Seven years is but a footnote in the history of school reform.

High School Reform Strategies

What were the strategies you used to get to teaching quality?

AB: We focused on five paths:

- First there was a massive investment in and reliance on instructional leadership. We had to focus on the principal as the instructional leader and prepare principals to assume that role. The most important change sprung from principals assuming that new role—operating within learning communities with colleagues, under the guidance of an assistant superintendent (our instructional leaders), with good support. We had an unwavering focus on the principal as the key change agent at the school level and what it would take at the system level to prepare principals and teachers to be instructional leaders at their school sites.
- The second was building up knowledge and skill within the system and on the part of individual teachers by investing in the creation of a professional development infrastructure. In the beginning—and here we’re talking about the first four years—we aimed at pumping knowledge and skill into our school system and relied primarily on outside consultants to introduce and to build up a quantum of knowledge among our principals, vice principals and teachers. As a result, we built up capacity so that professional development opportunities became available by the end of year three to teachers virtually every day in most schools. By managing instruction (in Don McAdams’ phrase) through a systemwide approach to pedagogy and content, our principals and teachers created a district learning community with the potential to improve student achievement at scale.
- The third path was to build into the school year extended-learning opportunities for kids who need additional time and instructional support. If you want to fast forward a bit, the research by PPIC [the Public Policy Institute of California] shows that the most effective programs we had after four years were the after-school programs, the hourly programs, which proved more effective than summer school. The evidence clearly endorses extended learning opportunities as a key lever for improved student learning.
- The fourth dimension was to build modern environments for teaching and learning. We focused on repairing schools, building modern laboratories and media centers, and providing teachers with resources to establish well-stocked classroom libraries.
- The fifth critical path, the one which we really could see emerge this year, was effective parent and teacher voices. This is the democratization of public education. It’s what happened most dramatically at Gompers and Keiller [two San Diego middle schools that have become charters] but also across the district. In essence, after power relations within the system were changed, largely involving the union and district leadership, the key relationships became those at the schools. Parents did not go to the designated, often self-appointed, people who traditionally showed up at school board meetings. In the same way, the administration no longer relied exclusively on the union to express how teachers felt because teachers spoke and acted for themselves with their principals at their schools.

Let's talk about how you built will within the school district. You had a philosophical framework, which was your Blueprint. What were the strategies for building will with different stakeholder groups within the system?

AB: I would argue that the Blueprint was actually nothing more than a resource-allocation strategy that invested in those five critical paths, which we have known about in the education world for a generation. Since the beginning of standards-based reform, we've known it's about the principal, it's about the skill and knowledge of the teacher, it's about the time that students need differentially to meet the definite standards, it's about modern equipment and facilities, and it's about authentic parent involvement. We've known about those keys for a generation. But what the usual system does not do is actually allocate resources to support teaching and learning in this way, by wrenching dollars out of unproductive uses and directing them to strategies that most educators have known are best calculated to improve student achievement.

Why do you think that didn't happen before you?

AB: It is a common phenomenon for school districts to avoid the political conflict that comes from reallocating resources. That's why we have all these programs basically maintained by boards of education regardless of their educational utility. Title I compensatory education programs, and many of the magnet and immigration programs that grew out of *Brown*, are prime illustrations. You can still go back to virtually any urban school district and find them. There are geological layers of programs, layered one on top of another, in which you get political constituencies tied to and surrounding the fiscal allocations. And much of the rest of the story then becomes about protecting the employment interest of adults rather than advancing the educational needs and interests of children. The reason that those programs remain fairly stable is that most leaders in the education sector don't like to go and break up existing arrangements and disrupt the political accommodations that have formed to perpetuate them. We pulled \$50 million out of unproductive uses in San Diego. That disrupted many longstanding programs and had adverse employment consequences for many people.

And a shift in allocation of resources shifted the nature of power?

AB: Yes. Reallocating resources necessarily realigns power relations. These restructurings, which happen routinely in other sectors, almost never happen in education. There is an absence of political will.

What changes that you made in central office will stick, and what would you continue to focus on if you were staying a couple more years?

AB: We had a series of organizational changes over the seven years. I saw it as a process. If you look at our organization right now, you'd see the former chief academic officer is the chief administrative officer. We put under one central office roof curriculum, transportation, finance, human resources. And by doing that, we emphasized the service dimension at the central office and underlined the fact that the role of the central office is to assist schools to improve instruction.

Most districts separate out the business side of the house from the instructional. We did so at first. In the past couple of years, we placed together and aligned the central office curriculum and business functions, in effect saying to the system: "It's very important as we delegate more authority to school sites that the central office be turned into a service organization, serving schools, and headed up by people who maintain a constant focus on improving instruction." The key aim was to encourage people to invest in and support instructional decisions at schools.

When Matt Malone [a special assistant to the superintendent responsible for new small high schools] came in, I had to position him outside the bureaucracy, reporting directly to me, to ensure that he had enough clout to create these 14 small schools in the time frame in which they had to be created. Had he been located in the bureaucracy, having to negotiate with the central office, he and his team of small-school leaders would never have gotten the schools up and running. He would have gotten ground down in the process, notwithstanding a group of committed, generally quite cooperative central office leaders. Process would have trumped results.

What strategies did you use to build public knowledge and will internally about the resource allocations of the Blueprint?

AB: The political energy for the Blueprint was generated through the social promotion issue and from publicizing the number of dropouts from high school. So while we ended up having less impact on high schools with the Blueprint, the sense of urgency and moral purpose—in terms of catalytic effect in galvanizing our decision to move ahead and reallocate resources from unproductive uses toward more productive uses—came from the adverse impact of social promotion on our high schools. The way in which we focused the issue was to look at how we lost 30 percent of our kids between the ninth and 12th grades. I remember when I saw that data. I had pushed for it and wasn't satisfied with the reported dropout data. When I saw the numbers, I then asked that a bar graph be created to show the drop-away from each of the grades. You could see that hardly any children left the system until the 10th grade. And then in the 10th and the 11th grades, we see this massive exodus from the system. So while roughly 10,000 students started our ninth grade, we rarely graduated more than 6,300 to 6,400 students.

The question was: What was happening to our students? The answer emerged clearly that in K-8, because of the nature of teacher involvement with students, teachers know their students and often their families; there are fewer students in the classroom and more nurturing by elementary teachers of younger students. Parents tend to be involved in K-5. Parent involvement drops out by high school. Teachers discovered over time that if they held students back, they weren't typically seeing any difference in outcomes, because we weren't doing anything differently the second time around. Teachers knew that kids tended not to progress after being held back. So we passed the kids along as a matter of social promotion.

And then you get to the high school, and teachers would have 175 pupils, instead of 20 or 35. Teachers would find that students who were significantly below grade level in literacy and math skills couldn't respond, couldn't pass tests, couldn't participate in class, couldn't do their homework. Then they would deal with discipline problems presented by many of the same kids. And teachers then did individually what you would expect. Students were given the failing marks their performances merited. Kids who had been passed along would be turning up with four or five Fs in ninth grade. We would then see a precipitous, dramatic, staggering increase in the number of kids who left the system. Those

were the realities that we showed on charts to demonstrate the urgency for the prevention measures, the intervention strategies and the retention policies, K-12, contained in the Blueprint.

It all stemmed from the ultimate horrible costs and wounds inflicted by social promotion and the loss of so many students for their want of learning and our lack of effective teaching. In a real sense, what happened in high school was the driving political force for dealing with those issues preventively and immediately in K-8.

In a real sense, what happened in high school was the driving political force for dealing with those issues preventively and immediately in K-8.

As you think about the whole district, what would you say were the unintended consequences of moving from a focus on K-8 into high school reform? And which of those unintended consequences do you think had the greatest meaning for system-wide change?

AB: What do you mean unintended? Very little was unintended.

(laughter)

My decision to approve the science sequence change without proper community preparation was an error. The substantive change was important and right but the timing and implementation were flawed. I did not fully gauge how extreme the reaction would be from teachers and parents in wealthy communities, particularly La Jolla. Several teachers organized opposition around the notion that physics should not be taught broadly or early on in high school. In my view, this coupled elitism with bad science. The unanticipated consequence here eventually led to the autonomy agreement with La Jolla High School, which has had its own unintended mixed results, good and bad.

On the whole, however, my thinking changed. I count the science sequence, the introduction of active physics, as one of the great accomplishments in our high school reform effort: We have 10,000 of our ninth-graders taking physics when most school districts have only a handful of privileged kids getting to take physics at an advanced level. That, combined with the pedagogical importance of introducing students to science through physical science (as contrasted with biology in the traditional approach), I consider an important innovation, instructionally as well as politically.

It sounds as if privilege has always been a key word for you as you sort and make decisions. In that, your language suggests that you want to ensure that privilege is not setting up the rejection of others or lack of access for others.

AB: Equalization of opportunities and strategies that build capacity and reinforce equality. These goals absolutely embody high value for me.

How does that play out when we say to you that the high school system—and you described it—is a privileged system? In almost all urban districts, somewhere between 30 percent and 50 percent of students are dropouts. And of the ones who are still in school, some 50 percent are in a technical program. So talk about how you think about privilege in the context of high school?

AB: I don't think that we can address the equity issue—let alone the excellence issue—without recognizing that there is the need for significant, significant readjustment of power relationships inside high schools.

The interesting point about San Diego is that I think we're actually seeing that change already in part because of the tumult that took place in the system as a whole. The work John DeVore [high school reform administrator] is leading and the way in which teacher leaders have emerged in the small school redesign effort both demonstrate that teachers have moved and are in different places culturally than they were in the beginning.

I think the question for a more general application is whether or not we could have actually done what we're doing now in the high schools or even begun to do that in years two, three and four. Or not. In which case, Tony's view—or prejudice, depending on your perspective—may in fact be validated. But I think it's pretty clear that the power relations that protect privilege for a proportion of students and faculty at some of our high schools must be addressed. And the longer we try to avoid seeing that side of the issue, the longer we are going to wait for progress.

As you now look at scale at the high school level, how do you see that closely knit, tight high school culture that has to break loose? Is this just another superficial fix that we don't need, or can we change the outside world?

AB: Culture is the last layer of covering. You've got political combinations and fiscal allocations that make the status quo—particularly in high school—wrapped as tightly as the inside of a Major League baseball. It's a very tightly knit set of arrangements.

This presents a really interesting question. The issue is whether a change in beliefs and attitudes is a necessary vehicle to changing behavior, or must behavior first change in order to change beliefs and attitudes? In my experience, it's the latter sequence that works. In the context of high schools, we clearly learned that we needed to invoke teacher and community participation, but we needed to overcome certain barriers beforehand. I believe the Blueprint, as applied to high school, is partly what has led to the culture change that is reflected in what is taking place now.

You've focused on differentiated instruction. How does the Carnegie concept of portfolio of schools relate to the way you tend to think about that approach?

AB: That concept was a big contribution to the discussion. I think the Carnegie folks were helpful, right from the beginning, in saying, "Alan, what's the relationship between small schools and small learning communities in the comprehensive high schools?" But for me, that was not the problem that it posed for many others, because, again, I view the process of change as sequential. I never considered small learning communities—having ninth and 10th grades in comprehensive schools loop and focus on special supports for the students who needed them—as constructing a path parallel to small school redesign. Rather, I see these twin developments as fraternal and presenting an opportunity for eventual convergence. But people would be much more comfortable if the convergence were something we could see in two to three years as opposed to what I'm positing, which is that you have to leave time for the convergence to take place. The convergence is always around excellent instruction and students deeply engaged with their own learning. But the problems that people have to solve to get there would be different along the way, depending, of course, on the place from which they started.

If I hear you right, you're saying: In five years, I'm not going to be surprised if I see small schools in some of the comprehensives. Or, I may see small learning communities happening within them.

AB: Yes, that is one distinct possibility. At a minimum, we're going to see much better teaching in small schools. In the first year, people say: "Oh, my goodness, you're got Matt Malone who stands for restructuring. You've got John DeVore, who stands for improved instruction and a standards-based system. How are you going to force the conversation between the two of them?" And my response is: Of course there has to be professional respect and civility between them. But their conversation is actually not so important in the first year—because in fact they are working on different facets of the issue. John is working on building up units of study. He's got his impact teachers; he's got his ninth- and 10th-grade plans. This is about improving teaching in small learning communities but being much more standards-focused. Matt is focused on how to get schools open—it's much more structural.

We don't have the luxury for small schools in year one to invest very deeply in improving teaching. My sense is simply by getting faculties of those schools committed to this exercise of talking to one another, by that alone, teaching is going to improve.

The Politics of Opposition

But what enables us to do this across a system?

AB: I think the portfolio of schools notion is a good conceptualization, where you have several key non-negotiable central objectives, coupled with multiple paths to get there. Part of this also is that until we confront the twin issues of school board governance and labor union dominance, a lot of the rest of this is just avoiding the discussion of what it will take to get broad and deep reform across entire systems. This sector avoids that discussion relentlessly. You talk about having an 800-pound gorilla in the room, and nobody wants to talk about it. We have two of them—and they are related.

I believe in school boards, but I believe in appointed school boards, not elected school boards. The problem is that there is no political accountability for failing high schools. In an interesting sort of way, that issue may be tied to the conversation about bottom-up change. Until there is a recognizable political accountability for the lack of success of high schools, we won't have the political will to change—because we won't generate the changes that are necessary to create the will, which comes from leadership of people who are genuinely accountable for results.

Elected school boards aren't currently accountable?

AB: When school boards set rates for real estate taxes, people paid attention to school boards. When that function disappeared as a result of equalization and when real estate taxes went up to the state for redistribution, the situation radically changed. School board elections, particularly in the large cities, became invisible because no one really knows or pays a lot of attention to who runs for that office, except for the groups of people inside the system. And the only people organized sufficiently inside the system to play a political role are union leaders. So we've got the dreadful combination of the external community not paying enough attention—because school boards, by and large, don't set the tax rates anymore—and public sector unions representing employees paying too much attention and having much too much influence.

Until we confront the twin issues of school board governance and labor union dominance, a lot of the rest of this is just avoiding the discussion of what it will take to get to broad and deep reform across entire systems.

It again raises questions of governance.

AB: Governance is what it's all about. Historically, public education has been served very well by school boards because school boards are a link to democratic legitimacy. It's been a very productive link. But now it's not a good link because of the way school boards are elected, the attention that's paid to them and the way campaigns are managed and financed. The school board in the large urban system no longer gives us an honest reflection of democratic community in the ways that it used to.

So we have to figure out a way to link public education to democratic legitimacy in different ways. I don't think mayoral control is any panacea. But at least people know who the mayor is and can hold him or her accountable.

You have some major and complex change happening in the school system. What lessons might you have for other systems about the internal communications that helped people in the system understand those complex changes?

AB: The most valuable communication takes place at the school site level. That's not to discount the communication that takes place with the media from the center. There was a lot more training of principals to communicate with their school communities with significant support in terms of materials and templates. We have an electronic communications system now, but it was simply not there seven years ago; e-mail was much less effective—that entire infrastructure has been vastly improved. Pushing communications down to the school level and out from there was the basic strategy.

We just don't get very deep reporting from reporters and editors who believe that covering a school district means sitting at school board meetings ...

How to educate people concerning education reform is a difficult issue, for the degree of difficulty expands for all the reasons that have changed the nature of journalism and the role of media in this country. We just don't get very deep reporting from reporters and editors who believe that covering a school district means sitting at school board meetings and reporting on conflicts that arise without analyzing or investigating the policy differences underlying the disputes. Particularly in San Diego, we had a local reporter who was never pushed by her editors. If our theory of action is right—that the main action is going on in the classroom, among teachers and students in the instructional core—she missed it. And as a consequence of that—whether it was laziness or lack of understanding—that story never got out to the community through the main newspaper in town. And this was from a paper that at the editorial level and the ownership level was very supportive of change and continues to be very friendly to reform and public education.

This situation with the newspaper itself produced additional problems because the electronic media pick up on the print media. And the electronic media are attracted to conflict that can be presented in sound bites. The consequence is the overall lack of depth in public education reporting. Every once in a while you get a New York Times-level article on school reform, but that's once in a blue moon—even in the New York Times, by the way. Absent consistently good information and analysis, our communities gain little understanding.

What effect did this have on your tenure?

AB: The reason that superintendents in large urban areas turn over every 30 months or so is that the politics of opposition—usually led by the union but not always—is intense. Union opposition is effective in the absence of other communications vehicles. And the relentless pounding creates a drumbeat that eventually leads to dismissal.

Interestingly, what happened in San Diego—if you go back and you read the attacks that started in year one and then continued in year two, year three, year four, year five, year six and year seven—and this I only see in retrospect—two things happened: Because the attacks were unsuccessful in achieving the usual result, they got less and less restrained and more and more vicious. They turned so vicious and they lasted so long, in rags like [the union's] *The Advocate*, that rank-and-file teachers stopped paying attention. They started to ask: What is this? Many teachers were embarrassed by the rhetoric and the vilification. After it had gone on for so long, it became divorced from most teachers' everyday reality. They couldn't associate with the attacks, because they did not square with the positive experiences teachers were having in their schools and classrooms. At this point, the union leadership's continued diatribes turned most teachers against the union.

We must ignite a much more honest discussion about the obstacles that school boards and unions present to the reform agenda. If we don't deal with school boards and unions, can we ever get to a place where conditions for quality teaching and learning exist as a rule for our children rather than as an exceptional circumstance? It's not about, "Omigod, if we can only talk our union partners into accepting this." That's not the way the change process works.

But that might have been the initial way you thought about it.

AB: It was. But the world talked back to me. Justice [Oliver Wendell] Holmes always pointed out that life is much more a matter of experience than it is of logic.

You also dealt early on differently with advocacy groups and student populations compared to most districts. You did not meet with individualized groups unless they were willing to talk together about student achievement.

AB: We did that through the Academic Achievement Council in the early phase. We said we're not going to look at African-American underachievement as different from Latino underachievement. Seven years ago there were dozens of committees that purported to address underachievement, but in a completely fragmented manner. During the first year, I'd ask in order to highlight the issue: "Now what's the Salvadoran view on this?"

What has been the impact of that decision?

AB: We limited separate interaction and insisted on collective consideration and focused on the problem. I think this helped to underline problems of underachievement as common across specific racial and lower socio-economic groups. I think that's happened. The professional advocacy groups (the Chicano Federation, the Latino Coalition, and the African American Educators), those traditional arms of communication, I considered not the voices that would lead to change. They had not in the past and would not in the future. They are the presences in local communities, often very much on the surface, with which the school establishment bargained "buy-in." People would say if so-and-so of the Latino Coalition agrees, then the Latino community is with us. If the *Voice and Viewpoint* editorialized, then the African-American community is with you. What does that mean? Not very much at all.

Those groups haven't disappeared. So how does it look now, seven years later?

AB: The parents and community, people that came out to insist on the restructuring of Gompers and Keiller as charter schools, for example, were not affiliated with those organizations. Instead, the organized groups in the community followed the parents. That's why it succeeded. In fact, a couple of the board trustees who were opposed to the development were themselves allied with the traditional organizations. It was the authentic emergence of grassroots voices that led to the change and literally compelled the unanimous vote of the board in support of the charter school petitions.

Given that example, how is it possible that we would ever have large-scale social change in America?

AB: The usual story concerning the San Diego reform is the picture of a confrontational, top-down, hard-line superintendent who took on the teachers' union and took no prisoners. This is not a completely unfair description of what happened once I realized that there was no middle ground to be reached with the union leadership and its two allies on the board. But the interesting question is: Was the polarization the result of genuine policy differences, and if so what were these? Or is the friction solely because of the way the superintendent and his team approached change? If you looked at my previous career, it was basically coalition-building, consensus-building and settling disputes. But I also had to try lawsuits. So when the fight came, I didn't shy away from standing up for what we believed in.

The failure here was the inability to craft a large civic following. Part of that was the problem of civic capacity-building in San Diego, generally. But that would be a cop-out if I rested it there. Consider a place like Boston, where there is real civic support and civic capacity, and where [Mayor Thomas] Menino blocks politically for [Superintendent] Tom [Payzant]. They represent quite an interesting political combination. Yet Tom Payzant is the first one to say: "The only change I would make is that I should have moved much faster." What was the advantage of having all the civic capacity and the support of the mayor and then not capitalizing on that support to drive the reform straight through the opposition? That's a question you'd have to ask Tom.

In San Diego, we leveraged outside political support to make internal changes. We did so with the expectation and in the hope that teachers, principals and parents inside the system would be won over by seeing positive results of the changes, which had been mandated, reflected in their students' work and development. And that winning of the hearts and minds internally would have to take place before the external support—upon which we levered the internal changes—evaporated.

As I said to my father a while ago: I think we won, but it was a photo finish—a victory by a nose.

Why did the political support wear out in San Diego, even though it lasted longer than it typically lasts?

AB: I think that's a tribute to the three members of the school board [who supported me], who, while accused of being rubber stamps, had a reform point of view that they were willing to stand up for. And I believe that the level of conflict that it took to change the power relations inside the system, at end, proved too much for the community to bear.

People's attitude was: Enough noise and enough news of conflict. Ultimately that led to people tiring of the conflict without regard to the underlying reasons for the conflict. Without getting much deeper into the analysis, to understand why in the circumstances it could not have happened any other way, even some of my closest friends in town will say: "Why didn't you try to get along better with the union leaders?" That really misses the point. I can get along with anyone. That I couldn't get along with the constellation of forces opposing change and needed to fight a war with them speaks volumes about the nature of the challenge. And that's true in virtually every large urban school district across the United States, certainly in California.

So the public needs to muster the will to live through conflict. It goes back to your point of getting the visceral selves connected to it.

AB: Exactly right. The public didn't understand the impact on their own lives and that their families had a big stake in school reform. They were getting tired of reading in the newspaper and watching on the evening news—oh, there they go again—but did not grasp that in fact the end game here was crucial to the social and economic foundations of our community. That point has never been accepted, here or anywhere else.

You had 20 core key civic leaders that were in for the first hard waves in the first four or five years. And then, it was as if the reforms were interrupting their own work. Somehow they couldn't stay in there. Were they not seeing enough pay-off at the high school level?

AB: I don't think it was at the high school level. I think it was much more of a question of, God, reasonable people can disagree but they can't disagree for this long. And therefore there must be something wrong with how Alan and his team are handling this. I think that was really it.

At the outset, there were probably 50 civic leaders who were standing up and taking credit for generating energy to change the school system: It's time for change, let's support the superintendent. You could count on them. But at the end, after seven years, really only a handful of civic leaders were there. Part of this was reform fatigue to be sure; part of it also unavoidably was the unraveling of San Diego's civic culture that began with the pension crisis and continues with the mayor's recent resignation.

In seven years I've put on a few barnacles. I believe I can be dispassionate about much of what has occurred. You're going to see an interesting reaction in the next couple of years. I think people are going to conclude that they actually like most of the changes still taking place as a result of the reform. This comes from the teachers. That's why when the new school board came in and tried to change small schools, which three or four of them did right off the bat, they got push-back. They came in and sought to go back to half-day kindergarten. Four hundred teachers came out and said, "We don't want that. We don't want to go back to basal readers. No, we don't want to go back to kindergartners and first-graders who cannot read and write. We want balanced literacy and our youngsters ready to learn." That's a huge change.

External Levers for Change

What at the national level would make your job as a superintendent implementing high school reform easier over the next three years?

AB: No Child Left Behind is a critically important accountability tool. We have to adjust the measures, which determine program improvement status, but it's a crucial tool to embrace. It should be used at the high school level across the nation as we do already in California.

Why is every school district now focused on student achievement, teacher quality and closing the achievement gap? A lot of the talk is there but also now a lot of effort. We were out there pretty much alone seven years ago. Improving teaching at scale through districtwide investment in managing instruction was a novel idea. Now everyone wants to do it. The question is: What can we do at the federal level?

I think the accountability focus is the right role for the federal government. We remain constitutionally very much in the healthy grip of a federalist system that has served us well, by and large. This history suggests that we operate public education as a local matter through local communities, except in cases of utter academic bankruptcy, where counties and states must intervene.

Is there a high school leverage point that a coalition of visionary superintendents could be using nationally?

AB: The Aspen [Urban] Superintendents [Network] considered a joint statement about what it would take to address the mal-distribution of teacher resources in under-performing school districts, particularly in non-performing high schools. Five or six superintendents in major cities would publish a major article signed by all of them in their cities' principal newspapers. I think that could be very useful in generating some focus by opinion leaders nationally on this keystone inequity involving teacher quality. We need a common buzz about that.

So it would be useful to find new strategies for leading visionary superintendents to impact the political arena?

AB: If we managed to focus attention on this particular obstacle to high school redesign, if that ran in each key newspaper nationally and if there was adequate follow-up locally, I think people might see the point sufficiently to generate a tipping point. Then we'd start to do things the way we do them in this country: We'd schedule a legislative hearing in Ohio or before a congressional committee. The issue would begin rolling.

I believe that much of the answer politically is going to take place within the Democratic Party. Ponder the following for a moment: What do Arlene Ackerman, Roy Romer, Arne Duncan, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, Alan Bersin and Joel Klein have in common, other than being heads of large school systems? They're all Democrats, and they are all at war with the union leaderships in their districts.

For me, this presents an issue of first priority for the Democratic Party and potentially one of life and death, or at least of victory or defeat. That makes it very difficult because the current mechanics give disproportionate political power within the party to unions, particularly public sector unions in places like California. Party power grows basically out of money and legs. This fact of life raises the same sticky wicket we face in school reform: How can and should we get people to change when it's not in their short-term interest to do so?

That's when the conflict arises. It is a political battle. Then you either win the battle or lose it. [David] Lloyd George said it best: "One cannot leap a chasm in two jumps."

Do you see a national venue where that subject is broached?

AB: I don't see it happening anywhere.

The philanthropic world, after being enamored of collaboration and consultation as processes without reference to results, in the last five to seven years has realized that reform was stuck. Funders have come to acknowledge that it's just not in the nature of certain stakeholders (often the unions but not always and never exclusively) to understand short-term sacrifice in the interest of the long-term health of the franchise. As in much of American life, short-term interest usually trumps long-term gain.

Foundations offer a potential venue to discuss frankly the change process and the political choices we face. But most foundations still back away from candor here, perhaps for obvious reasons. Some still insist that if you don't have the union at the table, they're not interested in playing with you. But we haven't yet found the language of the middle ground that says: Here's how you do it, here are the ground rules. Instead we're left with: Oh boy, wouldn't it be nice if we would invite them and they would constructively participate?

This is the horrible dilemma of our sector. Look at places in which the relationships between the union and the district are considered to be the best—Cincinnati, Rochester at one time, Roger Erskine in Seattle. If you look at all of those districts—which really had constructive relationships—and if you asked whether sustained student achievement occurred in any of those places, the answer would be no.

What, then, is the payoff? Even if the conventional theory of collaboration is actualized, where is the breakthrough that everybody promises us would take place if only we could make this happen?

What's the better approach?

AB: I believe that Joel Klein's interaction with [United Federation of Teachers president] Randi Weingarten in New York may prove very informative. Randi Weingarten understands the importance of linking union objectives to improved student achievement. She and the UFT in New York carry the legacy of Albert Shanker.

I think our inability to give a crisp answer to your question is the prime issue in this sector.

How has the state been either a barrier or a catalyst to your reforms?

AB: The state's influence one way or the other is way exaggerated by district people, including myself at times. The barriers at the state level, when you hit up against them, are usually waivable. Frankly, these barriers are not as constraining as people claim. Except for money. The absolute amount of money is an obstacle, particularly when the funding is allocated routinely to unproductive uses. The revenue streams now have considerably more flexibility in California. Districts can invest in programs calculated to improve student achievement if they combine the will and skill to change the status quo.

Unions and school boards are such a constraint that the state may, in fact, turn out as the only mechanism that can change those institutions. That will only come when we generate a lot more public knowledge of how each of these institutions often stands in the way of school improvement. Transparency, accountability and competition are the keys here. The lack of information and the deficit in public understanding here are debilitating.

If we can't negotiate an incentive, or a system of incentives, to get quality teachers where we need them the most, if we can't negotiate these through a collective bargaining agreement, then the only way to achieve this is to have the state mandate a special negotiating zone for non-performing schools. In this zone, legislation would override both the single salary schedule and seniority.

If we don't provide incentives, people aren't going to stay in the tough schools. If we don't change the way we honor and reward existing employees who succeed there, we are not going to be able to get good teachers in the schools—at least not in the numbers that our children need. Right now, hiring teachers in August for start in September is madness. We do it routinely. All of these—salaries, work rules, teacher hiring methods, existing contract norms, transfers and differentiated pay—must be put on the table and talked about, not academically but seriously and practically.

The national discussion says that the way to get people to understand why these changes are necessary and to support the increase in revenue is to engage people within sectors and then across sectors. What's your response to that?

AB: I think the theory is exactly right. Remember an interesting facet about the San Diego reform. We were the only one of the Carnegie grantees that didn't really have community engagement. We chose UCSD [the University of California, San Diego] initially as the intermediary, and then we switched over to New American Schools when we made the mid-course correction in our theory of high school reform.

It's fair to say that Tony's experience had led him to be distrustful of community involvement and engagement, which he had come to believe would always ultimately reflect power relations that did not work well for children. Tony's passionate about social justice, but he never understood that community engagement may be the only way to get there, decisively and in sustainable fashion.

That's why I'm so excited about what we witnessed at Gompers and Keiller, in terms of parents understanding the issues deeply and then stepping forward. Grassroots emergence that overcomes false consciousness exemplifies what I think Carnegie would like to see happen in high school reform.

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People regularly ask me, “What would you do differently in San Diego?” And I say: I would have worked a lot harder in building a civic support base. And we did work hard at it. Why that didn't happen and why we couldn't do it is an instructive story about San Diego and about our deficiencies and also about the opposition, which was much better geared to politics and communication. That's what the CTA does and does well. Dissident board members were on the phone every day to the media. They cultivated, in a much more effective way than I did or our team did, the media.

This is not by way of excuse but by way of explanation. We were also occupied in changing a school system. Observers as disparate as Machiavelli and Teddy Roosevelt have noted that opposing change is always an easier political task than

propelling it. Attacking change agents and waiting them out are proven tactics for defending the status quo. Why is building civic capacity for change so darned difficult? We are conservative by nature, which places a premium on inertia. Talking about community engagement and having several hundred people come to our Parent Congress meetings was as far as we got—until the breakthrough with “program improvement” (PI) schools. We're putting our foot forward in the direction we'd like to go, but it's so ephemeral. There's something here deeper than just our incompetence.

That's what Saul Alinsky might teach us: This is about real organizing. The experience we've just had with these PI schools—the parent and teacher voices—what happened is extraordinary. I have a feeling that like most other matters of genius, it's not as complicated as we've made it. It's basically taking time, patiently, to help people understand and then internalize why their schools are failing. And then having them work through the issues, very sequentially, to find the solution.

It only took nine months, with meetings every couple of weeks in the beginning and then more often as the deadlines approached. The bonding of people around the work was remarkable in very much the same way it has happened among principals and teachers in our schools that are succeeding dramatically—like Dewey, Benchley, Central and Hardy Elementary, among dozens of others. Great education is about productive reciprocal relationships. We can't create them by wishing them into existence or by fiat. Relationships have to grow out of real work. It's the same for kids and for adults. So we don't have to reach agreement that we like one another before we start the work. In fact, chances are that we may dislike one another until we start the work, and out of the work comes our common purpose.

No Child Left Behind gave us the reason to start some extraordinary discussions in San Diego among parents, teachers and school leaders. It was extraordinary. In year four, schools that fail to make progress have to restructure, which means they can get a new principal, they can remove all of the teachers, they contract school management out to a university or the union, or the school can be closed and re-opened as a charter. The state can take over the school as a fourth option. The fifth option is a catchall, any of the above.

No Child Left Behind requires parent and teacher involvement in the restructuring. We started two parallel processes in San Diego. First, we put out a request for proposals to invite external organizations to tell us how they would revitalize and reorganize the school. Second, we started a work group at every school under the leadership of the principal to develop an internal proposal.

Four of the eight schools decided to go charter. Eighty percent of the parents at the elementary school, and 75 percent of the middle school parents signed charter petitions.

The work groups started with a basic question: What would you wish our school to look like? All the predictable things were said. "Why isn't our school like that?" The most common factor was faculty churn, which involved 50 percent to 70 percent teacher turnover a year at these schools for years on end. Even when you trained the new teachers, once they got sufficient seniority, they'd bid out if they survived at all in the system.

The dialogue unfolded: "Why can't we keep teachers here? Why do we have to take poor teachers?" That's the way the work rules operate. Teachers with seniority have a right of first refusal: They can come into the school and bump less-senior teachers from their jobs. And by the way, the single salary schedule keeps us from offering any kind of incentive to keep people at the school. And it doesn't allow non-economic bonuses, either. What would it take for the district and the union to waive these collective bargaining provisions?

A waiver request was made by several work groups, granted by the district and refused by the union. Are there any options? Parents pursued the answers with skilled facilitation. When they hit a wall, they asked a new question.

No Child Left Behind gave us the reason to start some extraordinary discussions in San Diego among parents, teachers and school leaders.

In the absence of contract change, the only option is charter. A large percentage of parents at three schools signed the charter petition. Parent leaders mobilized and just went out and gathered the signatures in two weeks in December. A new school board was elected, came in during January and changed the rules for charters. The new majority said to parents: “You don’t get the school facility unless 50 percent of teachers sign the charter petition.” This was 50 percent of the permanent status teachers. Lo and behold, more than 50 percent of the permanent status teachers signed the charter petition.

We asked them if they were persuaded by the parents. In some cases, yes. In most cases teachers understood perfectly well that unless there were incentives to keep teachers, starting to build faculty continuity, a learning community, you’d never see a change in the school.

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What does this have to do with the overall high school reform and engagement? This process was not neat; it took a year for people to congeal around a set of values. It took superb teacher commitment and commitment at the parent level. It started with excellent principals, who were leading the discussion. Tom Mitchell, our outreach director, did a heck of a job creating the framework. Tom is an extraordinary facilitator and was able to give people voice. Brian Bennett provided invaluable technical assistance, as well as passion, regarding charter issues.

I suspect the short answer is that you cannot do this from the top down, although it must be supported from there. Then the problem with our high schools that Carnegie’s helping to change is that the effort is organized through our district office, and you can’t ignite the same kind of parent and community involvement from there. You get involvement, but it is neither authentic nor deep.

I don’t think there’s anything necessarily magical about it. But it is very difficult to accomplish. It’s poor people themselves at the grassroots getting at what the problems are at their children’s high schools. That’s what it’s going to take for change to occur. Remember the false consciousness that operates here with teachers and with parents: “Schools stink in this district, but our school is great.” That false consciousness must be overcome through discussions with teachers and parents about how their schools work. People will change, but only after they become dissatisfied. Unhappiness fuels change.

Look at the difference here at Gompers, Keiller and King when teachers and parents banded around common knowledge and an honest statement of the problems facing their school. What emerged from that relationship built around inquiry was real understanding.

If the *Schools for a New Society* initiative were to continue for another three years, what is it you would do differently about how you would move out community engagement?

AB: Do you remember the time five years ago when we had the first San Diego Dialogue forum on high school reform with Chuck Nathanson [former executive director of the San Diego Dialogue]? The union seized the forum; they dominated the microphone through a series of pre-planned speeches that in effect took over and ended the meeting. That’s a perfect example of what happens all too often in our education world. That’s when I concluded that collaboration in this context would be a recipe for paralysis and stopped engaging in that form of outreach. That’s when we acknowledged within our leadership group that fighting a war at the center with CTA would be a necessary element in the San Diego reforms.

This is what I see in retrospect: Our expectation was that if the change process could be sustained long enough, we’d get a change in the culture. And that’s what’s happened here. The union leaders—they brought this fate on themselves—don’t have any following to speak of anymore in San Diego. They managed that end themselves through the choices they made and failed to make.

If we are talking about fundamental change at the high school level, we must, at a minimum, at least consider the charter option. I'm not a great fan of charters if they don't succeed for students. However, in the same way we talk about creating the conditions for improved instruction and engagement, we need to consider the conditions for significant change at the high school level. I don't believe that the current set of constraints embodied in the traditional American high school fosters an environment conducive to the radical change needed. Charter freedom in the right circumstance can ease school restructuring. It also, generally speaking, helps to create the competition necessary to place the existing monopoly at risk.

So you're banking on external leverage for system change?

AB: We're so weak in the public knowledge and understanding base. It's such an "inside baseball" game right now that we don't have critical levers at work, except in those bright shining moments. That's why I attach so much significance to Gompers, Keiller and King.

Here's a comment on philanthropy: Carnegie likes to see itself as a catalyst. Gates is a catalyst. It's a remarkable reflection of the weak knowledge base in our sector. Gates has effected a virtual revolution in the way we think inside the education world about high school reform through the "mere" expenditure of \$750 million in the last six or seven years. That's an enormous amount of money, but it's actually a pittance compared to what's being expended in public education.

We have a more than \$1 billion annual budget in one year in San Diego. Gates spends \$750 million over seven years, and everybody is talking small schools, showing how weak our whole structure is as a matter of self-confidence. If you can have that impact, that's encouraging to a catalyst. But if you look at the investment patterns of Carnegie and Gates and every other funder, the new theory of venture philanthropy is that they want to be a catalyst for change, and they want districts to institutionalize the change they are advocating. We're going to make an investment, but we want you to be able to build that into your base. We want you to sustain it. That's not an unfair expectation—so long as it works for students.

One important challenge of our work is to create the existence proof of what we want to see emerge—a bit like Dewey's laboratory school in Chicago. But then we must be a lot more systematic about understanding it and replicating it.

What might be another contemporary example of this? We would have to spend time organizing the community and creating a deep base of support. And then we have to build a school to the specifications we know but usually cannot implement by reason of existing barriers. I'm trying to persuade the Walton Foundation people: Take Gompers and Keiller and turn them into inner-city schools that are models of what parents and teachers can and should do, freed from all the usual constraints. I'd invest enough money to pay starting teachers \$60,000. The program officers asked, "How could you ever sustain that?" And I replied: Why are we talking about sustaining capacity as a prerequisite to investment? If we made that grant for five years, and the schools showed what we could accomplish if we paid teachers \$60,000 for starters, why wouldn't that create the conversation around why we have to raise teachers' salaries in exchange for the kinds of commitments and results we're going to be demanding of teachers in those schools? Combining the idea of venture capital with the requirement of sustainability might keep us from building what we're all trying to create in the first place.

Our expectation was that if the change process could be sustained long enough, we'd get a change in culture.

The phase before this phase of philanthropy never asked for any result or any evidence.

AB: Sustainability is one element of accountability. To make sustainability the exclusive point of philanthropy is as fruitless as what we were doing seven years ago.

It strikes me as well that another problem with philanthropy, as currently practiced, is that the number one problem with school systems, including ours, is the lack of capacity. Foundations, consistent with the way other relationships are developing in the sector, need to directly provide capacity—not through fly-by-night consultants, but rather through, what I call “accountable consultants.” This means that people with skill, knowledge and expertise would come into the system and take on operational responsibility to get a job done. It might be six months, 12 months or 18 months in duration. As project managers teaming up with district talent, their accountable consultants would be responsible for accomplishing a specific objective, agreed upon by the funder and the district, and would be responsible for developing and leaving capacity behind in the district.

What’s the language around philanthropy of the future?

AB: To reiterate: I think philanthropies should seek to build some laboratories and invest in others. They should view the investment not in terms of what’s sustainable or “to scale” but for the purpose of demonstrating optimal solutions for teaching and learning. Have we ever seen an existence proof of an entire school that had all the quality elements that we could identify built into it—a school that was completely organized around student learning and excellent teaching, incentives to pay teachers to stay in tough schools and so forth?

That isn’t going to happen at scale, not at first if at all. My sense is that until we see competition—again, charter schools are only a vehicle, not an end—you won’t see change at scale. People inside the system will have to experience deeply the risk of loss before they can accept the degree of change required. We are not likely to reach the tipping point—to get from vicious cycles of failure to virtuous circles of confidence and success—unless we create and nurture competition. It is not within the nature of a monopoly to relinquish the advantages of monopoly status voluntarily.

The example I use is the automobile industry in late 1970s. Japanese and German competition threatened to put Detroit out of business. Labor and management responded jointly to the challenge—and thrived for a generation. Once the monopoly is gone, survival demands continual innovation. The auto industry in 2005 is back on the brink of another critical juncture. But it has the experience of genuine collaboration in the past to guide the sector to greater productivity.

In public education, by way of contrast, the monopoly hangs on, dinosaur-like, suffering the slow but steady erosion of public confidence. The dinosaurs were the most powerful creatures on earth the day before they disappeared from the planet and were never seen again.

Reflections on Leadership

Why is it important that you were here for seven years?

AB: Continuity of vision and effort. Nobody is indispensable. Nonetheless, maintenance, development of capacity and expectations and providing people with room and time to grow into change requires continuity. This is not an easy period of transformation. When I refer to people's employment interests and desires and their strong instinct to protect themselves, I don't sneer at that reality. I don't think there's anything evil associated with it. It's the way life works. If you don't give people a chance to change and incentives to change, if you don't call out their better nature, they won't change. And this takes time.

If you think you can smash that process of change into a two-year period, you're wrong.

We have completed the first phase of the reform in San Diego and it took every bit of seven years. I believe it is a 20-year process that proceeds in stages. There is a definite sequence here that we need to grasp and describe.

How did your training as an attorney support your work as a non-traditional superintendent? How does your ability to sift lots of information support your role here?

AB: Some saw it as a downside. For me, the legal training and litigation experience were assets. There's a fair amount of complex chess-playing involved. Leaders must view the change process in a multi-dimensional way and be able to project which pieces you're going to move and how you're going to move them. And also be able to understand what's going to happen when you move them. The litigation and trial training certainly were of use there.

A second relevant fact is that my law practice, particularly in the latter years, was to engage huge business deals, Fortune 500 deals, that had hit the fan and splattered all over the room. My job as a litigator was to go into that room with some very smart and creative people who had designed and implemented a very complicated business transaction that had failed miserably and literally exploded. And it was my responsibility, historian-like, to put the pieces back together again to understand and then explain what had happened and why. In the course of being a sort-of historian of large-scale business and organizational failure, I came to understand a lot about dysfunction, miscalculation and why and how things and people make mistakes, commit errors and fail. It was very useful

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preparation for the superintendency of a large urban district to have gained professional insight and experience in life by reconstructing failed deals, figuring out why they failed and who was accountable. It was terrific training for coming into a dysfunctional situation. I formed an understanding, relatively quickly, of what our team had to do to pick up the pieces and how we might recombine them to get to a constructive end.

Do you think education is more dysfunctional than other sectors?

AB: Yes. I have never seen a service sector—and I'm now proud to be in education—that combines fiscal allocations, political accommodations and cultural views in such manner as to produce results that are so oriented toward the providers' employment interests rather than to the needs and desires of the customers—our students and their parents. The world seems topsy-turvy, upside down.

If in fact the purpose of our schools is to educate children, then many of our districts and our schools are dysfunctional enterprises. There is a certain amount of logic, however, in the situation. The results we get are easily predictable given the system that we have designed and operate. It's dysfunctional and inequitable only from the standpoint of children's educational needs and interests. If we look at the status quo from the perspective of power relations existing within the system, it's actually quite aligned with those relations.

The best example I can offer comes from a recent experience in San Diego. As part of the structural change required to create the conditions for better teaching and learning in secondary education, we agreed to reconsider whether we really wanted to start high school or middle school at 7:30 in the morning—in effect trying to teach calculus or algebra to kids when they're fast asleep.

So, for the first time—this was my last year as I was transitioning out—I agreed, instead of just mandating a change in the bell schedules, that we would constitute a broadly representative committee to look at bell schedules and bring to bear all of the research that shows indisputably how later start times serve teenage learning enormously.

The committee came back with 51 reasons why it wouldn't work. For me that was a further demonstration of how, in the interests of adults, the system could completely ignore the evidence that shows that if teenagers come to school later, it is better for the safety and security of the teenagers, as well as for their learning. But all of that had precious little, indeed absolutely no, impact on the group of "stakeholders" who came together to explore what bell times would be best for the district.

You wonder why after a couple of experiences of that early on, I concluded that it was quite unreasonable to ask people, in a system that serves their needs quite well, to change that system fundamentally on behalf of values they support rhetorically but not actually. Is this dysfunction? I'm not sure. But whatever it is, it is not a system that even remotely puts children first.

I'll leave it to you to determine how many of the problems of high school reform are traceable to this political reality.

What kept you here for seven years?

AB: Strong support at home from my wife and children, coupled with a very passionate focus on the prize for San Diego's students, were the keys. When you see educators changing, and the results of that change reflected positively in their students' work and development, it's very inspirational and it's very supportive. Just at the time when people thought I was getting discouraged and weaker from all the nonstop attacks, I actually was getting stronger in my conviction that this was a worthy task and that we would succeed because the minds of our teachers had been won and their hearts would not be far behind. Then, in addition to abstract ideals, I started attaching to specific people who embodied in their own transformation what this process was about. And in the course of that experience and those relationships, I was transformed myself.

In what ways?

AB: I have a lot more understanding about leadership, a lot more ability to really distance myself personally from the ugliness that often is attendant to the change process. In the beginning, when I came out of the U.S. Attorney's job, I couldn't believe the political thuggery I saw in the public education context. Now I understand it and am not negatively affected by it. It doesn't knock me off-center. I don't go home and brood over it.

The best tongue-in-cheek advice I gave Joel [Klein] was, Joel, you must stop reading the paper every day to see how people react to the changes you're leading. The only stories I read are second-day stories on the subject. If it doesn't last to a second-day story, don't worry about it. A very thick skin will come in handy.

My passion is even more pronounced now. I'm a stronger and more constructive leader and a better leader than I was seven years ago. But the question our sector has to ask is whether the whole series of accidents that made me the right person at the right time for San Diego City Schools is a reliable mechanism for developing leadership capacity for arguably the most important determinant of a community's future quality. We really can't rely on an uncertain alignment of stars as contrasted with an infrastructure that routinely will produce leadership up to the task.

Leadership absolutely counts. The question I'm raising is this: We have numerous examples of CEOs who come in and do turn-arounds. But very few who could do this and get it sustained by the next generation of leadership in public education. That's because it is so pre-eminently political with no insulation and with no real board of directors to protect innovation.

What would you do if you were to stay for another three years? Where would you be taking high school reform?

AB: For several reasons it's timely for me to leave now because the change-agent period is over and the first-stage work is done. A successor has an excellent opportunity to come in and build on the strong foundation that now exists. For example, as a result of the King, Gompers and Keiller charter development, only a totally ineffective union leadership would not negotiate changes in the work rules to respond to the issues the parents and teachers raised. I believe that some members of the board are going to force that discussion. In many ways, San Diego has an opportunity to build on the reform and carry it forward. I'm hopeful.

It would only have been another couple of years to reach that 10th year when there would be less uncertainty about what's going to happen with a change in leadership. There is a reason why change agents don't get to the Promised Land. My time here is over. Joshua needs to step in. That's the new superintendent's job, to take quality instruction and improved student achievement to the next level.

What would I do if I were my successor? I'd protect and strengthen the supports to the instructional core. I'd support mightily further progress in the primary grades, and I'd focus big time and energy on secondary schools. I would be sure to institutionalize support for the new small schools and charter schools. I'd be sure that the new Lincoln delivers on our promise to the community. I'd work on completing the first phase of the technology infrastructure. I'd endeavor to heal the wounds caused by a tumultuous change process without sacrificing the values that have increased both equity and excellence in San Diego City Schools.

What would I do if I were my successor? I'd protect and strengthen the supports to the instructional core.

The difficulty is—and this is the difficulty for the national Carnegie effort—we have to be careful. We don't know quite yet what we're doing in high school reform. College for everyone, AP for everyone is the Lake Wobegonism we embrace in the absence of real equity. We haven't talked about the changes required to re-invent vocational education so that it has an effective and honored role as an important pathway for many of our young people. I consider that a major requirement, in concerted partnership with community colleges.

What is your sense of why it's so hard to have this conversation? We have a national initiative called *Schools for a New Society*. Why don't we re-create the dialogue about what a "school for a new society" is? Why is it so hard to do that?

AB: Because it's hard for people to imagine fundamental change, let alone implement change. Most of my reading over the past five years has centered on the early constitutional period. I'm in the middle of Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* now. I've gobbled up everything that's come out recently on the period of Revolution, the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. We forget that after the Revolution, Washington faced a troop rebellion. The entire Congress fled Philadelphia as the capital of the United States because 400 armed soldiers marched on the city. They wanted to get paid after the Revolution. But there was no ability to pay them because the Articles of Confederation didn't provide federal taxation authority.

I want you to put yourself in the context of that time and that Congress. Hamilton was the first to recognize that the Articles would have to give way to a new constitutional arrangement and moved forward with Washington's essential support.

It's very hard to imagine that world, what it looked and felt like. People still don't give up what they know until you can project more clearly what it is you're going towards and what it is you want them to accomplish.

Isn't this the role of visionaries, to start to project this?

AB: That's right. We don't have a clear vision of our preferred future yet. Just getting the discussion itself going has been such a massive undertaking. The discussion today focuses on the urgency of replacing failure for so many students with something else. That's an important first step. The problem is we haven't yet succeeded in getting the right priority attached to finding and forcing a solution. We're not yet over the hump where the sense of urgency around kids of color and poor kids commands center stage. That's what's new, and that's what makes this so difficult in the context of American history. This ultimately is about race and class, which are our toughest issues to address and have been since the Constitutional Convention itself. What seems clear is that the issues, having gotten on the table, will not be pushed off.

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The beauty of what's happened since *Brown v. Board of Education* is that the reform of public education became an irrevocable part of the American agenda. American history is a march toward equal justice under the law, and every generation has the obligation to hand over the society to the next in at least slightly better shape than it received it. The big question in my mind is whether we are ever going to be able to mount the massive investment that it's going to take—as in World War II and in the Cold War—whether or not we are going to have the political will to devote the resources—the time, energy, guts, heart—to solving this issue, which is a domestic issue centered on race and class rather than a matter of external national security. I just don't know.

Among other reasons, the tragedy of 9/11 is that the whole political reality has now switched, so that we may end up defining this generation's challenge in a way that might result in leaving the same kids behind who have been left behind through all of American history.

I'm worried that our knowledge base remains very weak. And the only way we are going to overcome the knowledge deficit in terms of education is by making huge investments in learning research. We have to invest in learning issues in ways that we invest in medical issues. We have never done that and now may not again in this generation.

Why do you think the investment level has never been at the place it needs to be?

AB: The shortest answer is race and class. When I say short, it's because we've never been able to confront, let alone solve, issues of class division in this country, because we have not acknowledged it as an issue either legally or politically. One reason public education is so important to American democracy is that it has been the vehicle through which we've kept our ideals close enough to reality to retain popular support. Our people have accepted the idea of equal opportunity as central, rather than equality itself. Public education has permitted everyone in America to dream about bettering their lives and those of their families. If this becomes hollow and empty, merely a myth, we will be far worse off for that result as a people, as a community and as a nation.

If we were really to address this issue of political will, to address these ideas in national dialogue, what kinds of things would we be doing?

AB: We're starting in that direction. This is not going to work as an appeal to substantive equality. That's not the way American history works. This is about convincing people that it is in their self-interests not to leave 40 percent of our high school students on the street, unprepared to succeed. Somewhere along the line, our people must understand that the social and economic foundations of this country now rest on educating all of our children to high levels. And not simply rhetorically. Getting our pensions paid and being able to compete in the world are at stake in our struggle to change public education for the better. This is very much what [Thomas] Friedman was writing about in his *The World Is Flat*. What people must internalize is that they don't have to love black and brown children but they do have to ensure that they're educated. That's what the justices realized in *Brown v. Board of Education* without knowing exactly how the world would change.

The proudest legacy of our team in my view is, it's fair to say, that the work of the San Diego City Schools has been set on an irrevocable course to address the educational inequities that exist in our community and that the system will not survive in its present form if that mission is abandoned.

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