

The San Diego Story

Alan Bersin's six long years at the helm

**Tilting at Windmills:
School Reform, San Diego,
and America's Race to Renew
Public Education**

By Richard Lee Colvin

*Harvard Education Press, 2013, \$29.95;
296 pages.*

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Reading this account of Alan Bersin's successful, by the test scores, but highly contentious time as school superintendent in San Diego, 1998–2005, I could not help but think back to an account of another successful superintendency, that of Pat Forgione in the Austin, Texas, public schools, related in Larry Cuban's book *As Good As it Gets* (see "Lessons from a Reformer," *book reviews*, Fall 2010). The challenges were similar: substantial gaps between black and Latino and white and Asian schoolchildren, school systems in disarray, and school boards looking for strong leadership. The remedies that the new leaders proposed and implemented were also similar: bringing in the best consultants, introducing new curricula, removing and replacing the principals of poorly performing schools, adding math and reading coaches, requiring summer staff training, bringing in charter school organizers to manage the worst-performing schools. Yet San Diego became notorious for the fierce resistance of its teachers union, abetted by school board members, to any and all efforts at change, whereas there is hardly any reference to the role of the unions in Cuban's account of Austin. Cuban,

writing in 2010 of Forgione's success there, notes, "his performance matched that of big-city superintendents... such as Carl Cohn of Long Beach, California, Beverly Hall in Atlanta, and Tom Payzant in Boston." Bersin is striking for his absence from this list: Carl Cohn, who succeeded him in San Diego, did not last two years, apparently driven out by the atmosphere of incessant and poisonous conflict that prevailed even after Bersin left.

Bersin was one of that group of reforming superintendents who were being brought in at the time from outside the world of education to manage big-city school systems, the most

**San Diego became
notorious for the
fierce resistance
of its teachers union
to any and all
efforts at change.**

prominent being Joel Klein in New York City. School boards and mayors thought these leaders could do what those professionalized in the world of education could not. Bersin, Colvin tells us, the son of "Russian immigrants" (better described as Eastern European Jews) in Brooklyn, had "benefited from a rigorous public school education" (though there is no mention of

his attending one of New York City's examination high schools); gone on to Harvard, Oxford (as a Rhodes Scholar, in the same class as Bill Clinton), and Yale Law School; and enjoyed a successful legal career culminating in service as the U.S. attorney for the Southern District of California. Clearly, only his desire for further challenging and serious public service could have led him to consider the superintendency of the troubled San Diego public schools, the eighth-largest school district in the United States. Two members of the five-member school board, strong supporters of the teachers union, were doubtful about him, though Bersin was a Democrat and should have been considered sympathetic to unions.

Bersin jumped into the job with remarkable vigor. Months before taking office, he engaged in an extended effort to educate himself on the problems and prospects of urban-school district management. He "brought in a consultant to map out the various district offices and what they did.... To counter the instinctive wariness [that accompanied his appointment] Bersin did all he could to assure everyone that student achievement, good teaching and equity were his primary concern.... [He] formed a transition committee that included the head of the teachers union, the nonteaching employee unions... administrators... and representatives of parent and ethnic communities." The main interest of the transition committee seemed to be to voice complaints, and it met only once. He interviewed 20 of the district's top leaders, received many solicited and unsolicited messages, reflecting

what he called “a deep sadness, a disturbing fatalism at the root.”

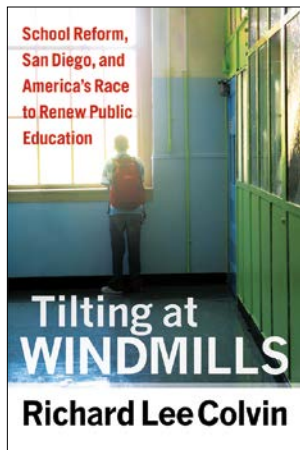
He flew to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to consult with faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and learned of Tony Alvarado, the former New York City schools chancellor and head of District 4 on the East Side of Manhattan, where he had had remarkable success in

raising achievement in a district dominated by minority students. Alvarado was planning to take another job, but Bersin, with the energy that characterized all his actions, persuaded Alvarado to head instead to San Diego and become his director of instruction.

Changes were introduced immediately, and the battles with the union began. Improving literacy was the central target, and Alvarado believed in trained literacy coaches to help teachers. “There was already a provision in the contract under which the district was to set up a system of peer coaches that would largely be controlled by the union.... The union leadership insisted that all teachers were essentially the same and that any credentialed teacher, by definition, was qualified for the role of coaching his or her fellow teachers.”

Alvarado insisted that the literacy coaches be expert in the methods that he had found most effective. The union believed that they should help teachers in whatever methods they used. The union would not accept changes on which it was not consulted. The matter went into negotiations that lasted eight months. Bersin realized that “if we negotiated everything we’d never get anything done.” And he and Alvarado would not accept the status quo as defined by the contract.

Alvarado believed principals should be focused on instruction and should be regularly observing classes. The union



thought that teachers should be informed in advance before principals came to their classes; unannounced visits made them nervous. Principals were also made nervous by the new demands. At the end of Bersin’s first year, 13 principals and two vice principals were placed on administrative leave, and the manner in which this was

done raised a storm: each was summoned to the district office and given 30 minutes to remove personal belongings from the building, while a school district police officer watched. This may have comported with corporate practice, but it was unheard of in the world of education.

**If this is what
it takes to
reduce achievement
gaps, how often
can we expect it
to happen?**

Thus the battle lines were set in the first year. But the school board majority (three to two) steadily supported Bersin. A “blueprint” he proposed in year two, as achievement lagged, increased the hours of literacy training, with additional time and summer school for those falling behind, and added more programs for the same purpose, to be paid for by centralizing control of Title I funds and eliminating other programs (such as some magnet schools). Union opposition intensified. Teachers jammed into school board and community meetings, disrupting

the proceedings, and denounced Bersin as a dictator. After six years of intense effort, when Bersin proposed under the No Child Left Behind law that charter school organizers be asked to make proposals for some of the worst-performing schools, a school board member called him a “Gauleiter,” which she “(inaccurately) said were ‘Jews who worked for the Nazis [to shepherd] their own people into the trains’ to the concentration camps.”

Bersin persisted for six years, in time gaining the support of some teachers and principals. A 2005 study by the Public Policy Institute of California found the improvement in reading “so definitive that San Diego’s efforts are well worth a look by other school districts in California and the nation.” Achievement gaps were narrowed significantly. But this was for elementary schools: similar efforts in high schools did not show the same results.

Colvin worked closely with Bersin in writing this book, becoming a friend of the family, as Bersin says frequently. Other treatments of Bersin’s time as superintendent are more critical, in particular one by Diane Ravitch in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. But her major sources were the union officials. More neutrally, Larry Cuban and Michael Usdan, in *Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots*, noted that “continual conflicts made reforms slower and smaller bore than they could have been and had to be.” At times, Bersin acted peremptorily and roughly, as in the case of the principal dismissals.

But reading this account one wonders how the intense conflict could have been avoided. And if this is what it takes to make modest improvements in achievement levels and reduce achievement gaps, how often can we expect it to happen?

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University.