

**Independent Evaluation of the Superintendent
Year 2002-2003
San Diego Unified School District
From
Board Members John de Beck and Frances O’Neill Zimmerman**

November 18, 2003

This evaluation of Alan Bersin covers the fifth year of his tenure as Superintendent of San Diego City Schools and has been prepared by two of the five members on the Board of Education. We acknowledge improvements here as well as our continuing concerns about the management of the school system and the education of its 140,000 students. We choose each year to issue this independent assessment to the public.

Assessment: Ineffective.

Accentuating the Positive

• **Improved Test Scores**

There is evidence that San Diego students are doing better on state tests. This Fall fewer of our schools are ranked in the basement category of API 1. And after three full years of “Blueprint” emphasis on English-language literacy and (more recently) on mathematics, there is evidence of beginning positive change in the achievement of children of color in relation to their Anglo counterparts (the so-called “achievement gap”). Millions of dollars and work-hours have been spent to achieve this good result, but it should be noted that its price also includes a school experience shorn of enriching science, music, art, field trips into the larger world and, sometimes, even recess.

• **Peaceful Extension of Teacher Contract**

Contract was continued pending changes in cost to district of health benefits. Since rising health insurance costs are a fact of contention between employers and employees these days, we expect to see this issue re-emerge as a serious problem to be solved, especially in light of continuing budget deficit.

• **Reliable Management and Citizen Oversight of Proposition MM Bond**

There has been good management of the repair, rebuilding and building of new schools under the provisions of publicly-funded Prop MM. Thanks for this accomplishment goes to Lou Smith and his staff and to the all-volunteer Citizens’ Oversight Committee led by Gil Johnson and Dorothy Leonard.

• **Freer Communication between District Staff and Board Members**

Reduced fear, on one hand, and ire, on the other, produces better working relationships and better decision-making.

- **Chancellor of Instruction**

Since September, controversial Anthony Alvarado has left the district payroll and the title “chancellor of instruction” as been dropped.

- **Golden Handshake**

This retirement opportunity should have been let to bidding, but it served employees who were eligible to take advantage of it, and it provided cost savings to the district in a deficit budget year. We could have replaced retiring teachers with the many highly qualified staff developers and others who work outside classrooms and are already on the payroll. Such action would have reduced or prevented the current district deficit.

- **Finance Personnel**

Turmoil in this crucial department was finally resolved with the departure of greenhorn managers, retention of one retired CPA and school finance expert as a consultant and assignment of another experienced CPA school finance expert to head the operation. This would be important at anytime, but is essential during a budget crisis.

- **Chief of Staff**

Our initial skepticism about this position five years ago has given way to admiration and appreciation for the work of this highly competent, honest and loyal retired U.S. Marine, Colonel Terrance Smith. Terry will leave us in December for full retirement to Tucson, Arizona. His work exceeded expectations and he will be missed.

Eliminating the Negative

- **Superintendent’s Management Style**

The Superintendent’s dictatorial and adversarial management style, along with his penchant for secrecy and surprise, continue to impede productive working relationships with the Board minority, with regular citizens in the community and with school district employee groups. The Superintendent’s word is not considered reliable – a serious shortcoming in the leader of any human enterprise.

- **District Budget**

The budget remains opaque and eludes lay comprehension. We need zero-sum budget-building every year and an experienced citizens’ advisory group to shepherd the process. There is still no transparency in the budget process of this school district.

- **Ethics Code**

A simple and workable ethics code for the Board was proposed and vetoed over the last year by the Board majority – presumably with the assent of the Superintendent, who promised but never delivered an alternative. Failure to protect against ethics infractions or conflicts of interest in a routine manner erodes public confidence in the administration of this school district.

- **Coca-Cola**

Board Member Zimmerman believes the decision to design and push through an exclusive contract with Coca-Cola to “benefit” our cash-strapped schools and its secondary students does not serve the health or well-being of our kids – which should be our first priority. This action was taken in San Diego while California’s two other large school districts -- Los Angeles and San Francisco – voted to ban such unhealthy products from all their schools, despite financial woes similar to ours. Board Member de Beck acknowledges this viewpoint, but believes it is not the responsibility of the district to monitor and mandate the beverages students drink. Therefore, he did not oppose the contract with Coca-Cola and he supported part of the proceeds being dedicated to funding student athletic activities.

- **Student Life**

There is no doubt that fewer learning opportunities exist for students in our public schools today than five years ago. The contention remains unproved that a basics’ diet of literacy and math that virtually excludes variety in elementary grades and many electives in secondary school is necessary to produce literate and numerate future workers of the new world. Music, art, languages and employment skills still matter, and literacy and math can easily be incorporated in those subject areas. Our students deserve broader exposure to the world than they are getting under the narrow “Blueprint.”

- **Employee Life**

The superintendent has negatively affected employee relationships by establishing disparate pay schedules for administrators in this district. This practice is perceived as unfair and improper and should be remedied. Many district employees retired last spring and many others lost their jobs to staffing cuts caused by budget shortfalls. The fiscal crisis continues and more job-cuts likely will occur. This administration is perceived to be flirting with outsourcing many types of work – replacing regular employees with contract labor. This is essentially what we have been doing in the academic area by spending millions on outside consultants for “staff development” in literacy and math, instead of developing local talent to provide such expertise. We believe outsourcing practices will weaken the school district’s self-sufficiency and destroy the sense of connection to the enterprise of teaching and learning that comes from full-time employees’ commitment. Despite the superintendent's crowing yesterday that there will be no layoffs, the district faces an unprecedented budget shortfall this year, essentially caused by spending down our reserves and bleeding district resources for redundant staff development.

- **High School “Reform”**

This activity is being funded by private foundations, designed behind closed doors and foisted on the community. Board concerns and community wishes are peripheral. Repeated calls for openness and conversation about direction in this crucial area have been ignored. This is a classic example of high-handed management and abuse of the public’s trust that is characteristic of the superintendent's leadership style.

- **Race and Human Relations**

The majority of students in our district are children of color. It is extremely important for them to have role models with whom they can identify among their teachers, principals, district administration and Board of Education. In the last five years this administration has failed to press for equity in the recruitment, appointment and advancement of African Americans and Latinos to positions of authority.

- **Stonewalling**

Last year this administration thwarted the publication of the Independent American Institute for Research report on our controversial “Blueprint,” because of the report's content. Subsequently the administration dropped the contract with AIR. Criticism is always treated as an enemy: the superintendent never seems open to learning from it. Such behavior does not speak well either for the “Blueprint” or for the confidence of this administration in it's own creation.