
Carl A. Cohn

Co-Director of Urban Leadership Program and
Clinical Professor in School of Educational Studies,
Claremont Graduate University

Nominated by:
Keith Ballard

Explanation of Contents

Biography This is a brief overview of Dr. Carl Cohn's professional accomplishments.

Saving Grace This lengthy feature sums up Dr. Cohn's professional history and essentially explains what all the fuss is about. A fitting introduction to anyone unfamiliar with Dr. Cohn's accomplishments, it contains statistics and a chart illustrating how Dr. Cohn transformed the Long Beach Unified School District in California—historically one of the most troubled in the nation—into a system that is now considered one of America's finest school systems (an accolade the district uses to this day).

Q and A with Carl Cohn While at the helm at Long Beach, Dr. Cohn explained the sometimes-unpopular decisions takes and his plans to implement them prior to taking the post of superintendent.

Q and A: A second question and answer session, this in-depth feature has Dr. Cohn discussing a variety of issues related to modern education. The piece is a useful primer in introducing Dr. Cohn to an unfamiliar audience.

What D.C. Got From the Wizard of Long Beach Dr. Cohn never accepted the job with the District of Columbia Public School system. As this article acknowledges, however, his very interest in position forced positive changes.

Dialogue with Tom Blair This in an interview that sees Dr. Cohn reflect on his tenure at Long Beach, his unique—and sometimes controversial—philosophy on education and his leadership plans at one of the largest districts in the nation.

Student Dress Codes Drawn from an academic journal, this article illustrates Dr. Cohn's impact on education. It may not be a stretch to say that by implementing dress codes in Long Beach he permanently altered the national dialogue on dress codes.

Press Release from the U.S Department of Education Announces Dr. Cohn's appointment to the National Technical Advisory Council.

Board Gets Lesson in Success Perhaps one of Dr. Cohn's most impressive features is his enthusiasm for sharing his expertise with other districts.

Line Game *The Freedom Writers*, a 2007 film, is based on the experience of a teacher in the Long Beach system serving under Dr. Cohn. The teacher, Erin Gruewell, and Dr. Cohn coordinated a lesson plan that has been disseminated to districts all over the

country. This is that lesson. It's referenced in the film and has been published in a book coauthored by Dr. Cohn.

Middle Ground Study Another example of Dr. Cohn's recent work, this treatise focuses on middle grades and how they are critical to a student's academic success.

Broad Prize Review Board Dr. Cohn's participation in a gathering of the county's academic elite.

Quotes Inspirational and educational, this compilation shows Dr. Cohn's gift for imparting wisdom in a few words.

Carl A. Cohn

Biography

Education

Ed.D University of California Los Angeles, California, 1981

Biography

Carl A. Cohn is Co-Director of the Urban Leadership Program and Clinical Professor in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. Dr. Cohn's distinguished career in education has spanned over thirty years. Throughout this time, he has worked in a variety of educational capacities; such as a teacher, counselor, professor, superintendent and Federal Court monitor. Earning his Ed.D in Administrative and Policy Studies from the University of California Los Angeles, Dr. Cohn has personified the valuable role of a research practitioner, expanding the field of education in a variety of ways.

Dr. Cohn played a pivotal role during his career in the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). Focusing on urban affairs and educational policy, he served as an Administrative Coordinator, Director of Attendance, and Superintendent from 1992-2002. In 2000, Dr. Cohn was America's longest serving urban superintendent and during this tenure he made the school district a model for high academic standards and accountability. During his tenure as Superintendent, the LBUSD achieved record attendance, the lowest rate of suspension in a decade, decreases in student failure and dropout rates, and an increase in the number of students taking college preparatory classes. Through exemplifying this commitment to leadership and improved student achievement, he won the McGraw Prize in 2002, and the district won the Broad Prize in 2003. In 2002, Dr. Cohn served as Clinical Professor for the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California and went on to become an Independent Court Monitor for the Los Angeles Federal District Court. From 2005-2007, Dr. Cohn served as the Superintendent of San Diego Unified School District and recently served as a Leader in Residence at the College of Education at San Diego State University before joining the Claremont Graduate University faculty.

Further utilizing his expertise, Dr. Cohn has worked as a faculty advisor for both the Broad Superintendents Academy and the Harvard Urban Superintendents Program. Currently, he serves on the boards of the American College Testing, Inc. (ACT), the Freedom Writers Foundation, the Western Governors University and EdSource.

Among his many publications and research projects, Dr. Cohn co-edited the 2004 Teachers College Press publication, *Partnering to Lead Educational Renewal: High Quality Teachers, High Quality Schools*.

Carl A. Cohn

Saving Grace

Saving grace?

Carl Cohn, once an aspiring priest, brings a distinguished track record from Long Beach schools to his new job as superintendent of an often-fractious San Diego district

**By Maureen Magee
and Helen Gao**
STAFF WRITERS

September 4, 2005

Carl Cohn had carved out the perfect sequel to a standout career as a big-city superintendent.

But something was missing.

After a decade steering the Long Beach school system, Cohn taught aspiring education leaders at USC. He was a sought-after consultant who tutored school boards and districts nationwide. And he had plenty of time for his wife, their two children and his beloved Dodgers.



SEAN M. HAHNEY / Union Tribune

"When you are studying to be a priest, saving souls is supposed to be what you're all about," said Carl Cohn, the San Diego Unified School District's new superintendent. "You can see how that gets translated to saving kids."

Even so, every successful lecture or workshop Cohn delivered came with a nagging, unsettled feeling. He knew only one thing would satisfy him – a return to the profession he had left three years earlier.

"When you are studying to be a priest, saving souls is supposed to be what you're all about," said Carl Cohn, the San Diego Unified School District's new superintendent. "You can see how that gets translated to saving kids."

There was no shortage of job offers, including an opportunity to run public schools in the nation's capital. As it turned out, Cohn only had to look 100 miles south to San Diego, where another superintendent's ouster provided him the opportunity he had been searching for.

"I'm 59. If I'm ever going to do this again, do it now," Cohn remembers telling himself before deciding to take the job.

Cohn will help kick off the new school year in San Diego on Tuesday, a month before his official start as superintendent.

California's second-largest school system may need Cohn more than he needs it. While test scores have improved in San Diego, the district is struggling to recover from seven years of intense academic changes, management shake-ups and teacher unrest.

So why would Cohn risk marring a national reputation to work for a district known for political instability in a time of budget woes?

Cohn's answer, simply that his work is not done yet, can be traced to his days as a young seminary student aspiring to become a Catholic priest.

"When you are studying to be a priest, saving souls is supposed to be what you're all about," Cohn said. "You can see how that gets translated to saving kids."

Cohn, a Long Beach native, is the fifth of six children raised by a single mother. He attended parochial school and left home at 13 to enroll in the seminary.

Conflicted by the sacrifices of the priesthood and moved by the turbulence of 1968 – when the nation was rocked by assassinations, riots and anti-war protests – he turned his attention to public education, taking his first teaching job at Dominguez High School in Compton.

"Walking out of a seminary and into a very troubled high school was almost a seamless transition," he said, recalling that first job as a history teacher. "It allowed me to take with me the idealism I had about becoming a priest to the rescue of young people."

After two years in Compton, Cohn started what would become a long career in Long Beach at a school just blocks from his childhood home.



HELVIN CEPEDA / Union Tribune
Carl Cohn got acquainted with school district staff members at a board meeting in July. Cohn previously headed the Long Beach school system, which has been hailed as a national model for urban education.

Cohn left the classroom in favor of the counselor's office at racially charged Poly High School. His wardrobe then was a far cry from the collar; he sported a huge Afro and colorful clothes that appealed to his young, urban students.

Instead of taking confessions from Catholics, Cohn listened to students talk about struggles keeping up their studies or getting along. His intense listening skills later would prove to be one of his trademarks.

"Rather than coming into a place with ready answers and solutions, I try to listen and to find out what's really going on — especially when it comes to conflict," he said. "I always thought I was particularly suited to being a counselor."

Shawn Ashley was a student at Poly High when Cohn arrived as a counselor, and he remembers Cohn being popular at a time when most school employees thought being an authority figure meant keeping a barrier between adults and students.

Cohn rose steadily through the ranks of the Long Beach Unified School District, from counselor to attendance director to regional administrator to, finally, superintendent in 1992. Ashley followed Cohn into education, and years later he would be recruited by Cohn to become the Poly High principal.

Ashley tried to turn down the job, but Cohn talked him into it.

"He said, 'Shawn, we don't always get what we want in life.' It didn't take me but a semester before I realized I was in the right place," Ashley said. "His style has always been of this fatherly figure."

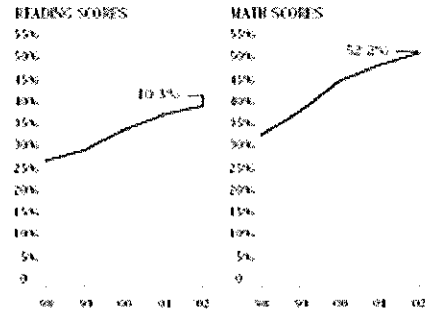
Cohn has a way of winning people over. During the decade he was in Long Beach, he made few enemies. The district's policy requiring elementary and middle school students to wear uniforms drew critics and lawsuits, and his fight to prevent Lakewood's secession from the Long Beach district created bitter feelings, but he is generally beloved in his hometown and respected by philanthropists and academics alike.

It is hard to ignore the parallels between Cohn's Catholic upbringing and his work in public schools, although he is hard-pressed to call himself a practicing Catholic these days. He still attends Mass on Christmas Eve and Easter.

The uniform policy, which mirrors the tradition of parochial schools, would make Cohn a nationally known educator. The dress code did more than spruce up the way students look. It changed their behavior.

The Cohn factor

Percentage of students in the Long Beach school district who scored at or above the national average on state standardized tests during Carl Cohn's last five years as superintendent.



Districts by the numbers

SANDIEGO		LONG BEACH	
DISTRICT	Enrollment: 135,000 second largest district in California	DISTRICT	Enrollment: 97,000 third largest district in California
BUDGET	Annual budget: \$1.06 billion	BUDGET	Annual budget: \$919 million
FACULTY/STAFF	Faculty/Staff: More than 11,500	FACULTY/STAFF	Faculty/Staff: More than 8,000
SCHOOLS	Number of schools: 115 elementary schools; 23 middle schools; 27 high schools; four schools with atypical grade configurations; 10 alternative schools; and 34 charter schools	SCHOOLS	Number of schools: 51 elementary schools; 13 middle schools; 11 high schools; 11 schools with atypical grade configurations; one adult education center; and three charter schools
ETHNIC MAKEUP	43% Latino, 32% white, 14% Black, 17% Asian/Pacific Islander	ETHNIC MAKEUP	50% Latino, 18% Black, 17% white, 15% Asian/Pacific Islander
SPECIAL EDUCATION	Special education: 12%	SPECIAL EDUCATION	Special education: 8%
GIFTED PROGRAM	Gifted program: 17%	GIFTED PROGRAM	Gifted program: 7%
FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE MEALS	Free or reduced-price meals: 54%	FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE MEALS	Free or reduced-price meals: 66%
ENGLISH LEARNERS	English learners: 20%	ENGLISH LEARNERS	English learners: 30%

SOURCE: Various state and federal education data; Long Beach Unified School District

The Cohn factor (PDF)

Long Beach Unified officials said that within two years of adopting the dress code, fights, vandalism, drug possession and other student offenses dropped 71 percent. Attendance shot up. Today, overall attendance is at a 25-year high, averaging nearly 96 percent.

Rising to the occasion

Cohn took over the Long Beach school system in 1992, when the city was in a downward spiral.

A Navy base had just closed, and the city's largest employer, aerospace giant McDonnell Douglas, eliminated hundreds of middle-class jobs. Cohn was simultaneously confronted with growing gang activity, fallout from the Rodney King riots, budget cuts and growing student enrollment that included a significant refugee population from Cambodia.

Responding to Mayor Beverly O'Neill's call to create "a world-class educational system" to attract business, Cohn embarked on a series of educational initiatives, some of which succeeded spectacularly – like the uniform policy – while others fizzled.

Through it all, he maintained good relations with the teachers union. He visited schools with union leaders and invited them to executive staff meetings.

"He is very open. What you see is what you get," said Clifford Kusaba, who was president of the Teachers Association of Long Beach during the Cohn years. "He is very personable. He doesn't mind discussing and debating issues with you. If you disagree with him, he doesn't get offended."

Like former San Diego district Superintendent Alan Bersin, Cohn brought a renewed focus to literacy and teacher training. The Long Beach and San Diego districts both brought in coaches to work with classroom teachers to improve instruction.

Long Beach Unified required students who couldn't read by third grade to attend summer school. The district created a stand-alone preparatory academy for failing eighth-graders to help them catch up before sending them on to high school.

The prep-school concept was scrapped after a few years. While many students did well in the program, they struggled socially and academically in high school. Now the district is experimenting with an evening high school.

"We have not solved this problem. That's OK," said Lynn Winters, assistant superintendent of research, planning and evaluation for the Long Beach district.

"That's something that's Carl's legacy: You try it. You evaluate it. If it doesn't work, you try something else."

Another Cohn success story is a partnership he created with California State University Long Beach and Long Beach Community College to improve academic standards and teacher preparation.

"We coordinate all the programs in high schools and community colleges and work at the university, so students flow through, so there are no gaps in learning, and they don't have to repeat courses," said Robert Maxson, president of Cal State Long Beach.

Maxson credits the arrangement – now considered a national model – for cutting the number of university students who need remedial education and increasing the number of college graduates.

The results

While Long Beach Unified has been hailed as a national model for urban education, the district's overall achievement is lower than San Diego Unified's. But its test scores have risen faster, even though Long Beach has a greater population of disadvantaged students.

More noteworthy, and perhaps a testament to the superintendent's savvy communication skills, is that academic initiatives under Cohn were carried out without the political rancor that sabotaged the San Diego district's efforts under Bersin, now the state education secretary.

Last year, San Diego Unified scored 710 on the California Academic Performance Index, a statewide system for measuring achievement. Long Beach Unified scored 694. The scores, which range from 200 to 1,000, are calculated based on an array of standardized test results.

Between 2002 and 2004, the Long Beach district's scores jumped 51 points. The San Diego district's rose 36 points over the same period.

Even though Cohn left Long Beach Unified in 2002, the gains were credited in large part to the initiatives launched during his administration. In 2003, the Broad Foundation awarded the district \$500,000 for significantly narrowing the gap in the academic performances among different socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups.

City leaders in Long Beach have noticed the improvements.

"We have people moving into the district now, into the city, because of the school district," Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill said. "It makes an entire difference in the city, because businesses do not want to go to cities where their employees' children haven't got a district they are proud of."

Demographically, both San Diego and Long Beach are diverse, but San Diego has a far higher percentage of middle-class white families, whose children tend to do better in school. Long Beach has a bigger proportion of minority and low-income students, who historically bring to the table obstacles to learning – including poverty, language barriers and domestic strife.

Long Beach, the state's third-largest school district behind Los Angeles and San Diego, serves 97,000 students at 93 campuses and has an annual budget of \$919 million. In San Diego, 135,000 students attend public school in 213 campuses. The district has a annual budget of \$1.06 billion.

During Cohn's last five years with the district, between 1998 and 2002, the percentage of Long Beach Unified students passing the Stanford 9 test in math and reading – scoring at or above the 50th percentile – went up by double digits in most grade levels.

But when asked to name his greatest accomplishment, Cohn doesn't talk about test scores or education awards he has won. Instead, his biggest source of pride is that he was able to maintain peace and productivity on the school board.

"I think the school board staying united so that the rest of the organization could focus on the achievement gap – those issues related to student achievement without having the school board as a distraction – I think was a huge accomplishment," he said.

Cohn's experience with elected trustees is in stark contrast to what happened in San Diego during the seven years that Bersin was superintendent. The sharply divided board had a reputation for political infighting, and its meetings often degenerated into shouting matches. Bersin himself bickered with his critics during the televised sessions. He eventually fell out of favor with the trustees, and his contract was bought out a year early.

But, like Bersin, Cohn meddled in politics. Bersin was criticized for using his family and well-heeled allies to try to influence school board elections; Cohn engaged in the unusual practice of endorsing school board candidates in Long Beach. He said he has no plans to do the same in San Diego.

Although Cohn has yet to unveil an agenda for San Diego Unified, he has been clear that his first initiative would target the district's poorly organized and inefficient board meetings.

Cohn has said he plans to streamline the meetings. He also wants to keep order on the school board dais and keep trustees focused on academic issues. To prevent board members from straying into district management, the superintendent's territory, Cohn stipulated in his \$250,000-a-year contract a no-meddling clause.

What's ahead

Until Cohn moves into his Normal Street office next month, he will be dividing his time between San Diego and Long Beach, where he is tending to professional and personal obligations.

Although not on the payroll yet, Cohn is getting to know the city, the schools and the people.

Cohn plans to meet with as many parent, teacher and community groups as he can before proposing any bold changes in the San Diego district. He has hinted at what may lie ahead.

He wants to dispel the notion that charter schools are the only venues for innovation. His philosophy mirrors the prevailing sentiment on the school board, which is far more skeptical of those publicly funded, autonomous campuses than was the Bersin administration.

"There is just a lot of buzz around charters here – it's as if charters are the only option for change," Cohn said. "Other ways could be explored."

Long Beach Unified has sponsored only three viable charter schools. San Diego Unified has spawned 34 charters – and counting.

Cohn also wants to launch a "big-ticket discussion" about the cause and effect of the district's enrollment decline. San Diego Unified, like many other districts, has been losing about 2 percent of its enrollment each year since 2000, forcing officials to consider closing schools.

In addition, Cohn said he wants to focus on improving middle schools, an area that has been neglected and where test scores tend to dip. Better middle schools might entice parents to keep their children in the district.

Carl A. Cohn

**Q and A
with
Carl Cohn**

Q & A with Carl Cohn, Long Beach Unified Superintendent

Long Beach Superintendent Carl Cohn became the longest serving head of an urban district early in April 2000. Middle-school reform has taken place on his watch as part of a general effort to build a standards-based school system. Yet, as the following interview shows, Cohn credits others with the vision.

By Anne C. Lewis

Long Beach Superintendent Carl Cohn became the nation's longest serving head of an urban district early in April 2000. With more than nine years at the helm, he overcame odds that send most urban superintendents packing after an average of less than three years in the job. Middle-school reform has taken place on his watch as part of a general effort to build a standards-based school system. Yet, as the following interview shows, Cohn credits others with the vision. He sees his primary role as choosing the right people and sensing the right political decisions.

Did you have a vision of standards-based reform in your plans when you became superintendent?

No. I don't see myself as the architect. I chose people who brought me, kicking and screaming, to the standards effort. Coming from a parochial education background myself, I was more of a strictly basics person, but I realized that foundations were interested in this kind of reform and that we could use them as outside critical friends.

What really convinced you this was the way to go?

When I saw teachers who were most excited about the changes become better able to serve their students. What we had before, as in our standardized assessments, could measure progress but not get the best and brightest teachers excited about teaching.

You say you choose the right people. What do you look for when selecting people for major leadership positions?

I look first for intelligence. Would they be knocking people's socks off? At some point, you must have people who can make things happen. Also, I take it as a challenge to woo highly qualified people away from jobs they like. Some turn me down initially, but I have this residual good feeling about a commitment to urban schools -- comes partly from studying to be a priest -- and I am able to convince others to join us.

Why have you been able to stay around long enough to lead the district through many changes?

Some superintendents want to be the smartest person in the room. I don't. I want to bring all political persuasions together and get them to agree on basic issues, such as school uniforms. My job is to create initiatives that everyone can take credit for. I also help people see issues in larger contexts.

For example, I had to convince our reading leaders that going to a more structured reading program was a matter of pride. If Inglewood and Sacramento can make such great reading gains with the program --without the talent we have -- then they're embarrassing us. On the SAT-9, I brought in all our experts and said: "If we are really doing a good job on standards, then that little test should not throw us for a loop." Also, it is important that the school board and the superintendent be seen as change agents. Because we have an image of being demanding, we have blunted the kinds of criticism that often arise when major changes are made.

What do you believe have been the best accomplishments so far?

Everything to do with the development of standards, especially the engagement of teachers around building standards-based classrooms. Why do good teachers stay? It has to be because of good support; we are building a healthy environment in terms of support for teaching.

Would you consider the Eighth-Grade Initiative an accomplishment?

The initiative came from a strong school board. Among other things, it was highly symbolic. It told the high schools that the district was serious about student achievement, and it had a powerful message for middle school students and parents. It is based on very traditional grading. The standard of two Fs resonated well with the public. Yet, we know that in the hands of a talented school administrator, the grading issue can lead to larger efforts to make grading more fair and equitable. That has become one of our promises for the future.

What remains to be done?

We need to do better on the SAT-9. At the same time, we are suggesting to state officials that this large urban system can get better and that we are good at defining our own interventions. This is why we are reconstituting Washington Middle School and not waiting for the state to take action and give us a ticking clock. We need standards-based report cards, which will require massive communication efforts with parents. We need to clarify and clearly define the role of academic coaches.

We need to spend a lot of time describing the standards-based classroom and communicating that to parents, teachers, and the public. Finally, we need performance-based measurements that we hold up as genuine and celebrate and that say to the community: "Standards make a difference."

Q & A: Carl A. Cohn; superintendent, San Diego Unified School District

December 4, 2005

Outline your top priorities as you assume this position?

Answer: First and foremost is accelerating gains in student performance. That's the core mission of any school district. And that in my judgment needs to be your top goal. I want to provide, secondly, safe, secure and well-maintained schools. Third, want to strengthen partnerships with parents, community, business and higher education. Fourth, I want to boost employee morale. And fifth, secure adequate funds for our schools. So those are the five preliminary goals that I've set out coming into this system. And I'm on what I'm calling my 90-day listening and learning tour to sort out if there are additional areas of focus that I should be considering.

How would you propose to improve student performance?

I think San Diego has built a very positive foundation in terms of the focus on teaching and learning. But I hear a lot of concerns about performance at both the middle and high school levels. And so, taking a good, hard look at that seems really important. Where the reforms at the elementary level have pretty consistent student achievement gains to go along with the changes, the indicators are that hasn't been the case at both middle and high schools. So among other things in my experience in Long Beach, we really took on the middle school level with the help of a grant from the Clark Foundation that provided professional development for teachers at that level. Also a powerful focus on the values equation at the middle school level. What we know about parents is that they tend to really identify with elementary schools. And they feel that elementary schools consistently have values that they like. But there's a big period of time there when youngsters go off to middle school where parents, for whatever reason, start to feel divorced from school. So we should get at some of those issues.

Have you had time to look carefully at the Alan Bersin reforms, the Blueprint for Student Success, to assess the results of those reforms and to decide whether you're going to keep them?

I've assessed it in the sense that all of the large urban school districts that are getting better have some elements of the blueprint in their reform strategy. Powerful, early focus on literacy. High-quality professional development for teachers. Providing data that gives you a clear picture on which kids are falling behind, and then coming up with intervention



The San Diego Board of Education voted unanimously last July to hire Cohn as superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District. Cohn began his new assignment in October. He is a veteran of more than 35 years in education as a teacher, counselor, central office administrator and, from 1992 to 2002, superintendent of the Long Beach Unified School District, the third largest in California. Cohn, who holds degrees from St. John's College, Chapman University and the University of California, Los Angeles, was interviewed Nov. 22.

strategies. Extending the school day and the school year. So to the extent the Blueprint includes those big ideas of school reform, I definitely plan to include that. I think the issues around the blueprint have been largely around implementation strategies. So part of what I'm going to do is to try as much as possible to be inclusive and get teachers inside the process. And certainly that has worked well for me in the past. And the Public Policy Institute of California just published a study on the blueprint reforms, talking about the gains that have been at the elementary level. The issue then becomes, OK, to what extent can we move student achievement at the middle and high school level also?

So how do you do that? How do you take the back-to-basics core of the blueprint and apply it at the middle school and high school levels?

I think you get teachers involved in the professional development. I think you get teachers comfortable with using assessment data rather than just relying on 'I taught my class, if they didn't do well, if the grade distribution shows mainly Cs, Ds and Fs, that's not really my responsibility, I did my job.' Getting them engaged in looking at the data, what the data tells them and then giving them high-quality professional development that actually focuses on how you use the standards in a way that reaches a greater number of kids and then how you also in six to eight intervals of using assessments, how you gauge student progress so that you can then make even more adjustments. But at the secondary level, the key seems to be the engagement of teachers. And that's a relationship-type issue. Teachers generally get enthusiastic about government structure changes that empower them. But also getting them enthusiastic about changing their craft, what they actually do with students.

And how do you get teachers enthusiastic about that?

You do that in my judgment by sitting down with them, showing them the data, also showing them schools with comparable demographics that are beating the odds, for lack of a better term. Showing them how that middle school down the road with the same mean streets, the same dysfunctional families, showing them how the results there are better than their results. And that tends to have a different kind of effect on teachers than the old 'you're not doing it right and you better change your ways, otherwise something awful is going to happen to you.'

Isn't this going to be a particular challenge because a principal opponent of Bersin's reforms were the teachers or at least their union?

That isn't my experience so far. I'm optimistic.

But that's the experience of the last seven years.

Right, yes. But the people that I've met with, Terry Pesta, Robin Whitlow, the people that I met, their association reps. They don't look any different to me than the type of teachers I worked with in Long Beach. So I'll be really surprised if they end up with horns or different from what I saw.

Have you gotten assurances from the school board that the board will not attempt to micromanage this district and in effect do your job?

I have some contractual assurances. But the board is squirrely, there's no doubt. As opposed to an entity that you wouldn't really like, I think you'd select 'squirrely' to describe a degree of affection for some people who are tough to herd and corral. And that's one of the big tasks here. Whatever success I had in Long Beach really was about a very stable school board that

really knew its proper governance role. Four out of the five people who selected me stayed for all 10 years. In the past year I've probably worked with 12 urban school boards across the country through the Broad Institute for School Boards. I don't think the San Diego board is as difficult as some of those other urban boards. This summer I was exposed to the New Orleans board, the Washington, D.C. board, a particularly rambunctious board from Clayton County, Georgia where the schools lost their accreditation because of micromanaging by the school board. This San Diego board looks like ultimately a board that given the right governance training could come together. But the key first step is they've got to begin to trust each other.

Do you think they are ineffective now?

I don't think they're particularly effective now with all due respect to their unanimity around the selection of a superintendent.

How are they lacking in effectiveness?

I don't think they look at what are those big-ticket reform policies that we really ought to examine and then move forward on and move forward with a unanimous voice. The forces of the status quo in an urban school district are legion. And board unanimity becomes really important. And the problem with a 3-2 split (on the board) is that it encourages the forces of the status quo. They think, all we have to do is pick off one person in the next election and we can change this.

You should have seen the last school board here. This one is an improvement.

Yes, a lot of people have said that. But they've got to hone in on what are those areas where the board can really make a difference, what are those kinds of policies that will absolutely wake up this entire community. And in Long Beach that happened following the 1993 statewide voucher campaign. When the Long Beach board basically said, 'It's not going to be business as usual in the Long Beach schools.' And following that there were school uniforms, mandatory summer school for all third graders who weren't reading at grade level, multiple F eighth graders couldn't go on to regular high school.

Are you thinking of school uniforms for San Diego Unified?

Everybody asks that question and my response is I really view school board members as the representatives of the public. And if they as the temperature takers of the community feel that this is an important reform, I certainly know how to implement that. But I'm not the type of person who comes to a new community and feels I've got to implement those things that I implemented in Long Beach. Those are big ticket items that a school board rightfully needs to foster the discussion on.

We've been talking about education reform in this country since the startling report "A Nation At Risk" in 1983. What do you think are the principal things that we've learned as a result of wrestling with these issues for 20 years? What seems to work?

Even though the language of that report was very graphic, very stark, linking our educational failures with a national security disaster, I don't think the country took that very seriously. And so from '83 to the early '90s, I don't think a whole lot happened. I think state capitols and Washington in the last decade have gotten serious. I think there's a huge debate about

so-called research-based strategies in terms of what works. But I'm not sure we've done a good job as a country at disseminating that information, communicating that. We still have these ideological wars about various approaches. And so I tend to come down on the side of if you're waiting for Sacramento or Washington to make this clear, you're going to be waiting a long time. I tend to vest most of my hope on the rescue of kids at the local level. And I know that kind of goes against the grain in terms of where most of the country is. But I still believe that youngsters will perform at higher levels when people at the local level demand higher standards.

What is your opinion of President Bush's No Child Left Behind program?

Again, I think an excellent rhetorical flourish. A slogan borrowed from the Children's Defense Fund. But an accountability system that ultimately declares most schools are failing is not one that everyone's going to take seriously over time. What you'll have in 2008 is a whole bunch of schools in the leafy suburbs across the country being identified as failing. And once that happens I don't think the political will will be there to sustain No Child Left Behind. Now there are some reformers out there who are using it effectively. And I wrote an article for the Peabody Journal of Education about superintendent reactions to No Child Left Behind. Most urban superintendents tend to use it effectively as a part of their reform strategies. My leadership style is more one of trying to get people on the inside, trying to get them engaged. Whenever I've given a speech to the business community, whether it's in Sacramento, Long Beach, Los Angeles, recently here in San Diego, I ask people, 'At your workplace, if you work better when you're identified as a failure and threatened with job loss, raise your hand.' No one ever raises their hand and they tend to laugh nervously about that. I think that's the problem with No Child Left Behind. It's a one size fits all.

Isn't one thing that has emerged since 'A Nation At Risk' with consensus support is the notion that we need accountability in public education? Hasn't accountability been lacking in public schools when schools fail and kids don't learn?

I'm willing to concede that but I was in education between '83 and '90-whatever and I didn't see much emphasis on accountability.

But looking at attitudes today, isn't there a consensus that we've got to have accountability?

Sure.

And isn't that a good thing?

Yes. Clearly it's a good thing. My approach to accountability is to walk into a school and to ask teachers how can we help you, what do you need in terms of additional support? Especially from those of us in the central office who are not working with kids every day. So what do you need and then the accountability part of it that's so important is the reciprocal accountability. One of the problems in education is that teachers feel this accountability, it's all on us. Superintendent, all these other people occupying these offices, these folks in Sacramento, where's their accountability?

That's a very fair question, isn't it?

Yes. Reciprocal accountability is very much a part of the equation. And so I take the view that getting out there, figuring out what's needed in terms of additional support, additional resources, is really what's important. We're all prisoners of our own experience. And I think in the main the vast majority of classroom teachers are quite accountable and work hard every day. I think the percentage of people who are not doing what they ought to be doing is small.

What role do you see charter schools playing in public education in San Diego, specifically in contributing to the improvement of education here?

When charters were first started, there was this hope they would be your hothouses of innovation that the rest of the organization could learn from. And I'd really like to see that happen. I like the fact that Gompers is partnering with UCSD. Whenever you can get a research university to leave the safe confines of where they are, actually come out, get engaged in trying to turn around a neighborhood school, that's something really valuable that we as an organization need to learn from. So I'm hopeful. And then Keiller is partnering with the University of San Diego. So you've got these higher ed institutions that are saying we're not only going to play on our turf, the cream of the crop, special schools, but we're actually going to go out and partner on fixing neighborhood schools. I think that aspect of the charter movement is really important. And that we as a district should not be hands off. But I would like to see our research people out there finding out what's going on and if things of value are taking place I don't see why we can't incorporate that in the regular schools of the district. And that has just been one of the big mysteries here in San Diego is how did we arrive at this point where the only way a lot of people believe they can get what they want is by going charter. People ought to be able to get what they want from the regular school system.

Carl A. Cohn

**What D.C. Got
From the Wizard
of Long Beach**

What D.C. Got From the Wizard Of Long Beach

By Marc Fisher

Thursday, July 8, 2004; Page B01

Imagine that Carl Cohn had accepted the job of superintendent of the D.C. schools. Imagine that he had imposed the changes he believes made the difference in Long Beach, Calif., where he last plied his trade: School uniforms. An end to social promotion. A behavior code with high standards. Real academic expectations. A focus on the lowest-performing schools, along with the development of a marquee classical high school designed to lure families away from private and parochial schools.

Could he have done it? Would he have been laughed at by the system's permanent bureaucracy, which has grown expert at ignoring anyone who passes through the revolving-door superintendency? Could he have snapped the selfishness of principals and teachers who long ago retired in place? Could he have broken through the cynicism of educators who speak of children in their schools with derision and the lowest of expectations?

We'll never know, of course, because Cohn, like Rudy Crew before him, said "no thanks" to the District, where the schools are being managed, to be generous, by the third chief in eight months.

Now that two brief love affairs have ended in humiliating public rejection, the D.C. schools are in a familiar place -- nowhere.

But Cohn, a professor at the University of Southern California and consultant on managing city schools, says there's no cause for despair. "A lot of urban systems are in trouble," he says. "Most of these school bureaucracies have the same attitudes. You have to raise their spirits. Once they sense that the community supports these changes, they will line up to support you."

Three things make Washington a particularly tough case, Cohn says:

- There are too many cooks and not enough authority. No one knows who's really in charge: the school board, the D.C. Council, mayoral appointees, the superintendent?
- The system has been largely abandoned by the middle class and the well-to-do, virtually eliminating the public pressure essential to building up resources and expectations.
- The system long ago became more a source of easy public jobs than a vehicle for lifting children out of ignorance and poverty.

When Cohn told D.C. politicians that they should do as St. Louis did and bring in a management firm that specializes in turnarounds, "people said that won't work in

Washington because the system has so many patronage jobs and the city's workforce depends on having all those jobs."

Cohn was floored to hear such an affirmative defense of such a corrupt concept of a school system.

That's why he believes the first task for the city -- even before hiring a superintendent -- is to bring in an independent, respected outsider to run a town meeting at which city and school leaders join residents to thrash out what's holding back the schools.

"It has to be made clear to everyone that this is about the kids," Cohn says. "Then you bring in a take-no-prisoners company that addresses the fundamental issues of operation, of people not doing their jobs. You get rid of the land mines -- I mean, \$75 million a year for special education transportation alone? Something is deeply wrong: In Long Beach, with a larger student population, we spent \$16 million for our *entire* transportation budget."

Although Cohn left us standing at the altar, he made a lasting contribution before he split the scene: He got Mayor Tony Williams to give up on taking personal control of the schools.

Cohn liked Williams, but "as part of my due diligence, I asked people about the mayor, and they said if you're looking for a Daley of Chicago or a Menino of Boston, the mayors who successfully took over school systems, Tony Williams is not like that."

Cohn found the school board president, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, to be "mercurial, sometimes focused, sometimes off on something else."

It's easy for Cohn, now out of the picture, to assure us that the D.C. schools can be saved. The clear message from educators is that the best people want nothing to do with this job. But city leaders can change that almost overnight. They need only to make it clear that the new boss will have real authority and that the District is ready to run the schools for children -- period.

Carl A. Cohn

**Dialogue with
Tom Blair**

Carl Cohn

Dialogue with Tom Blair



SAN DIEGO'S NEW SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT has a tough act to follow. That may be a good thing. Tapped this summer to succeed Alan Bersin, Carl Cohn brings solid credentials. He also brings a reputation for innovation and reform, with a style more conciliatory than the controversial Bersin's. A career educator, Cohn once attended seminary with an eye to becoming a priest. Instead, he opted for teaching, rising through the ranks to counselor and then, in 1992, superintendent of Long Beach schools, where he helped forge dramatic improvements in student performance and behavior. After retiring from Long Beach in 2002, Cohn taught teachers and school administrators at USC's Rossier School of Education. He and his wife, Kathleen, have two college-age children, Tyler and Meryl.

TOM BLAIR: Welcome to San Diego. Have you settled into a new home yet?

CARL COHN: I'm renting over in Ocean Beach.

TB: O.B.?

CC: That's the way everybody reacts to Ocean Beach.

TB: Your wife still works at Cal State Long Beach?

CC: She's kind of up in the air on that. She's been invited down to San Diego State to talk about job possibilities. There may also be something at Cal State San Marcos. She's at a point where she can be pretty flexible, including taking early retirement.

TB: You've taken on a big job in a huge school district that's been through some very turbulent years. I know you once studied for the priesthood. Did you say any special prayers before accepting this job?

CC: I thought about it a lot, and reflected on it. What always draws you to a place is the possibility of rescuing kids. Having had some success in the place you were born and raised, there's always that lingering question about replicating that success in a place where you're not known. I just turned 60, and so I thought, *What if you've got something left? You'd better get out there and do it now.*

TB: Your predecessor had considerable support from the business community, and some parents, but many teachers were opposed to his reforms. Do you sense the district's teachers will work well with you?

CC: I certainly hope so. So far, when I've met with them, they seem very focused on working together. I did have that relationship with the teachers' association of Long Beach. We had a facilitator who had worked with school systems around the country. And we got together and talked about how you joint problemsolve over the long haul. You approach bargaining from the point of view that both sides have legitimate interests, and move forward. I'm planning to try my level best to bring that same kind of approach here—starting with visiting the schools with the president of the teachers' union, to listen to teacher concerns.

TB: You've had occasion already to meet with the district's teachers. How did it go?

CC: I was invited to the annual retreat in Palm Springs with their association reps. And I asked for patience. I said, "You can't solve all of this instantly." But I was trained as a counselor, so listening is a part of what I'm told I do best.

TB: One reason former Superintendent Bersin had early support from the business community, and parents, was the perception that students today don't know the basics. When they graduate from high school, many have trouble passing basic English and math exams. And the public blames the teachers. Why?

CC: Everybody out there has gone to school. I think their nostalgic view is that schools were perhaps more orderly, more focused on discipline and the basics. The reality is—and I went back 50 years in Long Beach to find out what the superintendent was saying in the early 1950s—dropout rates were extremely high. Among other things, he was lamenting the fact that high school kids couldn't read their textbooks. In those days, the difference was you could actually leave school, join the military or go to work at McDonnell-Douglas, and be a productive citizen. Today, if you drop out, you're facing, perhaps, a lifetime of unemployment. So I think when the public sees a lot of kids without basic academic skills, teachers end up being the likely suspects. But when you look at the challenges in terms of poverty, and youngsters whose primary language is not English, teachers, in the main, are doing well. Doesn't mean we're satisfied; doesn't mean we don't have a long way to go. But most teachers got into this for the right reason—they wanted to create bright futures for the kids. Most didn't get into this to simply raise test scores. So when they're constantly beat over the heads with standardized test scores, I think they have a reaction to that. They tend to look at youngsters as complete individuals, whose performance ought to be measured using a wide variety of instruments.

TB: Let's talk about tests. The daily newspaper was a strong supporter of Bersin's so-called Blueprint for Student Success. And stories often cited improvements in student test scores under Bersin. But haven't test scores around the state been improving? Has San Diego done any better than other districts?

CC: Excellent question. They've had some decent gains here. But other large urban districts in California during the same time, in terms of what we call "closing the gap," probably did a little better than San Diego. And three of those districts are San Francisco, Garden Grove and Long Beach. But one thing I don't want to do is get into all this—you know . . . All of us who were superintendents, we have things we'd be happy to do over. My job is to build on whatever foundation has been laid here and accelerate those gains to the next level. And I believe the best way to accelerate those gains is to enlist the support of classroom teachers.

TB: Well, you instituted your own reforms in Long Beach, focusing on literacy, making summer school mandatory for students who couldn't read by third grade, using coaches to work with classroom teachers on instruction. Did teachers generally support you?

CC: I think so. It wasn't "Let's all go to the school board and attack these proposals." The other thing that helped tremendously, though, is there was a unified school board in Long Beach that stayed unified during the 10-year period. So there wasn't a lot of hope that the school board was going to want to go in a different direction.

TB: Were you a unanimous hire by that school board?

CC: Yes. And four out of the five people who hired me stayed for the entire decade. So that makes a real difference. Part of the message in Long Beach was: These reforms are going to stand the test of time, and picking off an individual school board member is not going to give you the possibility of reversing. The other thing that's important to note is that with some of those initiatives, we took six months or so, formed a district committee that included teachers, and the committee was going to design the implementation process associated with the changes.

TB: The teachers' union was vociferous—some would say strident—in its opposition to Bersin reforms. Do you think it played a role in turning public sentiment against the Blueprint here?

CC: One of the things I teach at the university level is the politics of education. You have to look at this: There's Alan Bersin, and there's also Tony Alvarado. And just as an observer, from 110 miles up the coast in Long Beach, it seemed to me the really visceral [negative] reaction was more to Alvarado and his view of how schools ought to be run. The whole business of him coming in for various short amounts of time. One of the differences in Long Beach was that we, as officials, had to attend school board meetings—so if someone out there didn't like what we were doing, we had to sit there and take our licks. And I think there was something with Alvarado's arrangement—where he didn't have to take any licks—that only exacerbated the opposition. If you dig deep into the emerging school-reform literature, there's a distinction between "managed instruction" versus "managed pedagogy." And managed pedagogy, it seemed to me, was what Alvarado was all about. And that's like nails on a chalkboard for classroom teachers. They can handle managed instruction, core curriculum, the professional development associated with it, using data to assess

Carl A. Cohn

Student Dress Codes

ERIC Digest 117 - January 1998

Student Dress Codes

By Lynne A. Isaacson

In recent years, schools across the country have experienced violence, gang activity, and thefts of clothing and accessories. Many school boards, mindful of their responsibility to provide safe school environments for students, have implemented policies specifying dress codes or the wearing of uniforms.

As many as 25 percent of the nation's public elementary, middle, and junior high schools were expected to implement dress-related policies during the 1997-98 school year, according to the *California School News* (March 31, 1997). Ten states allow school districts to mandate school uniforms.

Educators and the public are divided over the value of implementing school-uniform policies in the public schools. This Digest examines arguments for and against school-uniform policies, identifies legal considerations, and offers guidelines for implementing policies on student dress.

What Are the Arguments in Favor of School Uniforms?

One of the chief benefits of school uniforms, say proponents, is that they make schools safer. Uniforms are said to reduce gang influence, minimize violence by reducing some sources of conflict, and help to identify trespassers. Parents benefit because they are no longer pressured to buy the latest fashions, and they spend less on their children's clothing.

Uniforms are also claimed to help erase cultural and economic differences among students, set a tone for serious study, facilitate school pride, and improve attendance (Cohn 1996, Loesch 1995, Paliokos and others 1996).

Proponents also say uniforms enhance students' self-concepts, classroom behavior, and academic performance (Caruso 1996).

What Are the Arguments in Opposition?

Opponents contend that school-uniform policies infringe upon students' First Amendment rights to freedom of expression; interfere with students' natural tendency to experiment with their identities; are tools of administrative power and social control; offer a

piecemeal approach to issues of racial and economic injustice; and may discriminate against students from minority backgrounds (Caruso 1996, Cohn and Siegal 1996).

Some believe uniforms will not erase social class lines, because policies do not apply to other items that can be used to convey status, such as jewelry, backpacks, and bikes. Uniforms may not be feasible in high schools, because older students are more independent. Others argue that it is wrong to make children's right to a public-school education contingent upon compliance with a uniform policy (Caruso, Cohn and Siegal).

What Are the Outcomes to Date?

Most preliminary findings come from the Long Beach (California) Unified School District, the first U.S. public school system to require uniforms for elementary and middle school students. Before implementing its policy in September 1994, the school district required approval from two-thirds of the parents (Caruso 1996).

Long Beach Superintendent Carl A. Cohn reported that during the first year suspensions decreased by 32 percent, school crime by 36 percent, fighting by 51 percent, and vandalism by 18 percent (Cohn). At Whittier Elementary, attendance rates have risen each year since the policy went into effect, reaching a high of 96 percent (Caruso).

Schools in Chicago, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, and Virginia have made similar claims (Caruso).

Parents have responded favorably to uniform policies. In Long Beach, only 500 parents petitioned to opt their children out of the mandate. In a national marketing survey conducted by Lands End, a Wisconsin-based clothing catalog company, respondents agreed that a uniform policy "could help reduce problems associated with dress," and most felt the price was "about the same or less than the cost of a regular school wardrobe" (*California School News*). California requires school districts to subsidize the cost of uniforms for low-income students.

A 1996 survey of 306 middle school students in the Charleston, South Carolina, County School District found that school uniforms affected student perceptions of school climate. Students in a middle school with a uniform policy had a significantly higher perception of their school's climate than did students in a school without a uniform policy (Murray 1997).

Student reactions range from delight at not having to decide what to wear to displeasure at looking like a "nerd." It is important, therefore, to include students as well as parents in the uniform-selection process.

What Legal Issues Are Involved?

To date, most legal challenges to dress-code policies have been based on either (1) claims that the school has infringed on the student's First Amendment right to free expression or

(2) claims under the Fourteenth Amendment that the school has violated the student's liberty to control his or her personal appearance (Paliokos and others 1996).

First Amendment Claims. The clash between students' rights of free expression and the responsibility of public-school authorities to provide a safe learning environment is the central issue in the debate over dress-code policy.

In developing a ban on gang-like attire, whether through implementing a dress-code or a school-uniform policy, administrators should ask: (1) Is there a direct link between the targeted attire and disruption of the school environment? and (2) Is the prohibition specific enough to target the threatening attire without infringing on students' rights? (Lane and others 1994).

"Any dress restriction that infringes on a student's First Amendment rights must be justified by a showing that the student's attire materially disrupts school operations, infringes on the rights of others at the school, or otherwise interferes with any basic educational mission of the school" (Grantham 1994).

To defend its action if challenged in court, a state must carefully define its interest when authorizing school districts to implement mandatory uniform policies. Policy-makers must be able to document that a problem exists (Paliokos and others).

Liberty Claims. Most challenges claiming a violation of the liberty interest have dealt with restrictions on hair length. Courts have been evenly split on whether a liberty interest exists. "Most courts that uphold the restrictions give the policy a presumption of constitutionality and place the burden on the defendant to show it is not rationally related to a legitimate school interest.... Those courts that strike down such regulations have found that schools impose unnecessary norms on students" (Paliokos and others).

What Are Some Guidelines for Implementing Policies?

Lane and others offer the following advice to policy-makers: Before implementing a dress-code or school-uniform policy, be able to justify the action by demonstrating the link between a kind of dress and disruptive behavior; consult with a school attorney; and make sure the policy is enforceable and does not discriminate against racial/ethnic minorities.

In regard to uniforms, Paliokos and others recommend that policy-makers address three key questions: Are the requirements legally defensible? Do they actually restore order? Are less restrictive dress codes a better alternative? For example, policy-makers can consider five alternatives ranging from least to most restrictive:

1. Do not institute a dress code.
2. Institute a dress code that outlines general goals, and let principals and local school officials formulate and implement policy at the grass-roots level.

3. Institute an itemized dress code that will be applied throughout the district.
4. Authorize a voluntary uniform policy.
5. Authorize a mandatory uniform policy with or without a clearly defined opt-out provision.

Then policy-makers should decide whether to let schools choose their own uniforms and whether to offer financial help to low-income families (Paliokos and others).

Whichever policy is chosen, successful implementation depends on developing positive perceptions among students and parents, making uniforms available and inexpensive, implementing dress-code/uniform policies in conjunction with other educational change strategies, allowing for some diversity in uniform components, involving parents and students in choice of uniforms and formulation of policy, recognizing cultural influences, and enforcing the rules evenly and fairly.

Superintendent Cohn credits his district's success to a stable school board, supportive parents and community, resources to defend the policy, capable site administrators, and community philanthropic resources.

Resources

"California Leads Nation in Public School Uniform Use." *California School News* (March 31, 1997): 4.

Caruso, Peter. "Individuality vs. Conformity: The Issue Behind School Uniforms." *NASSP Bulletin* 8, 581 (September 1996): 83-88. [EJ532 294](#).

Cohn, Carl A. "Mandatory School Uniforms." *The School Administrator* 53, 2 (February 1996): 22-25. [EJ519 738](#). Cohn, Carl A., and Loren Siegal. "Should Students Wear Uniforms?" *Learning* 25, 2 (September/October 1996): 38-39.

Carl A. Cohn

Press Release



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

NATIONAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Carl Cohn

Carl Cohn, former superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District, is the Distinguished Leader in Residence at San Diego State University's College of Education. Cohn has more than 37 years experience in education, serving as a teacher, counselor, central office administrator and superintendent. Cohn worked for 10 years as superintendent of the Long Beach Unified School District, California's third largest district. During that tenure, Cohn became the longest-serving superintendent of any large, urban district in the nation. In 2001, Cohn received the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education for his leadership in boosting student achievement. Following his retirement in 2002, he became clinical professor at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. In May 2003, he was appointed as an independent monitor by the federal court in Los Angeles to oversee the special education consent decree in the Los Angeles school system. Cohn has worked as a faculty advisor for the Broad Superintendents Academy, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising student achievement by recruiting, training and supporting executive leadership talent from across America to become the next generation of urban school district leaders. He also serves on the boards of American College Testing Inc., the San Diego Symphony, YMCA of San Diego County, Boy Scouts of America, Classics for Kids and on the executive committee of the Council of the Great City Schools and City of San Diego Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention. His academic degrees include a bachelor's degree in philosophy from St. John's College in Camarillo, Calif., a master's degree in counseling from Chapman University in Orange, Calif., and an Ed.D. in urban educational policy and planning from the University of California, Los Angeles.

The following appeared in the March 2nd, 2001 edition of The Beacon Journal

Carl A. Cohn

**Board Gets
Lesson in
Success**

Board gets lesson in success

California superintendent wows Akron school officials with tips for urban districts

BY REGINALD FIELDS
Beacon Journal staff writer

Students in uniforms. An alternative school for disruptive pupils. Incentive pay for the best teachers who agree to work in the lowest achieving buildings. A longer school year.

All these bold steps toward reforming education in Akron have been talked about and forgotten before the brainstorming starts.

But they're doing it in Long Beach, Calif., where rising test scores, record-high student attendance and a declining dropout rate at the urban school system have drawn hails by university and education researchers as one of the nation's best.

Long Beach Superintendent Carl Cohn was in Akron yesterday to talk about his success at turning around California's third-largest school system.

He first met with the school board in a meeting the board reluctantly opened to the public, even though state law requires them to do so. Cohn didn't seem to mind. He later was the guest speaker at an education forum at Central-Hower High School.

Education supporters hope Cohn's presence will encourage school officials to put action behind their ideas and to involve the community in solutions to better Akron's struggling system.

Cohn first met with the Akron School Board and emphatically said that his educational philosophy is to not worry about a student's socioeconomic status and focus more on teaching that child. Several Akron board members and educators believe family income is what ails Akron schools most.

"It's about holding students to high standards. I don't want to hear about their backgrounds. Just get after it," said Cohn, who recalled being taught to read in a 1950s classroom by a teacher without a college education or teaching certificate.

"If you only extend your year and do nothing with teacher quality," Cohn told the board, "you can be really exasperating your situation."

The board is currently in the middle of a national search for a new school superintendent. Current leader Brian Williams will retire in June. The board wanted to use Cohn as a practice candidate and ask him questions they might ask during an interview.

But because the meeting was open to the public, board President Linda Kersker changed the plans because she doesn't want the community or superintendent candidates to know what questions the board might ask.

But the 90-minute meeting proceeded anyway, with board members asking Cohn questions they likely will use in an interview.

Cohn left them spellbound with his answers on how to have courage in running a successful urban school system.

His district has 93,000 students and 88 school buildings. Akron has 31,000 students with 60 schools.

But the two sides learned they share many of the same problems that face urban districts -- low student achievement, high teacher turnover and sparse community support. The difference is the approach Cohn has taken in his nine years in Long Beach.

"We're not scared to try something," he told them.

And he has. Despite early criticism, Cohn made Long Beach middle schools single-sex buildings. And if an eighth-grader gets more than one F, he or she is held back a year before being sent to high school. That move has helped lower the district's dropout rate.

Cohn said he applies the tightest supervision to his district's lowest-performing schools. And if changes are needed, such as reconstituting a school or reassigning an administrator or teacher, Cohn said he will do it.

The Akron schools' philosophy has been that whatever it does for one school it has to do for all schools -- no matter the difference in student achievement at a building.

Meanwhile, Akron's search consultant, Dick Viering, yesterday said he has whittled the list of 25 superintendent candidates down to 11. He has recommended the board interview the remaining hopefuls.

They are: Timothy Calfee, Akron's coordinator of testing, research and evaluation; Agnes Case, director of business and finance for Utica, N.Y., schools; William Capehart, Boyd County, Ky., superintendent; Perry Clark of Indiana, regional vice president of Edison Schools; and Robert Harvey, assistant executive director of North Central Association on Accreditation and School Improvement.

Gerald Kohn, Vineland, N.J., schools superintendent; Dennis Kowalski, Strongsville schools superintendent; Dennis Leone, Chillicothe schools superintendent; Donna Loomis, Akron's executive director of secondary education; Thomas Seigel, former superintendent in Boulder Valley, Colo.; and Sylvester Small, Akron's assistant superintendent, also are included.

The school board will have access to information on all 25 candidates, but Viering was hired to lead the search, draw applications and bring them a short list of semifinalists.

President Kersker said the candidates the board decides to interview will be determined at its March 12 meeting. The interviews will begin the next day. The board hopes to make a decision by April 9.

Cohn, incidentally, is not a candidate for the Akron job

Carl A. Cohn

Line Game

LINE GAME—Used in Freedom Writers

Movie This is complete lesson plan.

OBJECTIVE

The Line Game is a great opportunity to become more familiar with your class and for your students to learn about each other in a non-threatening, and interactive way. This activity enables you to solicit information from your students that they may not feel comfortable sharing with a teacher. Knowledge about your students' lives will enable you to craft relevant lesson plans that effectively engage them in the learning process. Sharing information about each other will also build a sense of community within the classroom that involves everyone's participation. Sometimes it is difficult for students to open up in front of their peers, but the Line Game gives students an opportunity to speak volumes, without ever saying a word.

DESCRIPTION

Students will split into two lines, facing each other. You will ask them a set of questions ranging from general to specific, which range from pop culture to family to personal beliefs and experiences. For a sample list of questions, please refer to the last page of this lesson. If a student's response is "yes" to any of the questions, they must step on the line.

MSG'S TIP

To make this activity more fun, and throw the Freedom Writers off my trail, I would choose a few of our class clowns to start the Line Game off with a quirky rendition of the *Soul Train* line. Because the students will have an opportunity to ask their own questions at the end of the activity, it is important to lay down the ground rules early on. Remind your students that you are a mandated reporter, and their questions should not be about sexual or physical abuse, drug use, or other crimes. Also, be sure to remember to take a minute after class to write down what you learned about your students during the activity. This information will guide you during future lesson plans.

MATERIALS

- An empty area large enough to accommodate the whole class
- Something to divide the area into two equal sides (i.e. a bright-colored tape, such as painter's tape.)

PROCESS

Ground Rules: Before you begin the game, it is important to establish expectations. Students should not talk, high-five each other, or share details about their experiences between questions. Also, everyone must stand, everyone must participate, and everyone must walk on the line when it is relevant. In order for the students to expose their vulnerabilities, it is crucial that the parameters are enforced clearly and specifically at the beginning of the game.

Step 1: Have your students move all their chairs against the wall so they have a large enough space to move in. If you move outside of the classroom, be sure to move far away from other classes, so that your students know that no outsiders are listening.

Step 2: Place the tape or ribbon down the center of the area, creating two equal sides.

Step 3: Establish ground rules that the students must adhere to during the activity, including the following:

- Absolutely no talking, laughing, or joking.
- If their answer to the question is “yes,” then they should move forward, and step on the line.
- If their answer to the question is “no,” then no movement is necessary.

Step 4: Use a random method to separate the class into two groups. For example, have everyone say either “one” or “two” as you point to them, and then separate the “ones” and “twos” to form two parallel lines of students.

Step 5: Begin by asking questions that are simple, silly, and obviously pertain to the majority of the students. In order to get the students familiar with the exercise, the questions should be easy. Please refer to the

suggested questions at the end of this lesson. Keep the game at a brisk pace because a sense of urgency allows more questions to be covered.

A. These questions should be easy, generally pertaining to everyday activities (i.e. riding the bus), or pop culture.

Sample Question: Do you own the new Snoop Dogg (or other popular artist) CD?

B. Judging by the students’ level of comfort, these questions should become more specific. Possible secondary topics include school, family, and community.

Sample Question: Do you live with your mom and your dad?

C. The last set of questions, although sensitive in nature, may be the most enlightening for you and your students. To avoid precarious situations, begin this set of questions with “Do you know someone who....” When you feel that the students are participating fully and are truly engaged, you may start to ask more personal questions.

Sample Question: Do you know someone who is in a gang?

Step 6: Tell the students that they can also ask questions. Volunteers will most likely ask questions that pertain to them, which is an excellent way to learn something that you may have missed, or prompt additional questions from other students. Remind them to ask their questions by saying, “Do you know someone who...”

Below are sample questions that should be adapted to your students. In preparation for this activity, memorize the questions you want to ask, so you do not have to refer to your notes in front of your students. Doing so will help create a spontaneous environment, and will allow you to gradually

Increase the seriousness of the activity.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Set 1: School, family, and community

1. Who has ever had detention?

2. Who takes a bus to school? Two buses? Three buses?

LINE GAME 3

From *The Freedom Writers Diary Teacher's Guide* by The Freedom Writers Foundation, © 2006 Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers

Foundation. To be published by Broadway Books on February 20, 2007. | ISBN: 0-7679-2696-X |

EAN/ISBN-13: 978-07679-2696-6 |

Price: \$21.95/\$27.95 in Canada | Trade paperback original

From *The Freedom Writers Diary Teacher's Guide* by The Freedom Writers Foundation, © 2006 Erin Gruwell and The Freedom

Writers Foundation. To be published by Broadway Books on February 20, 2007. | ISBN: 0-7679-2696-X |

EAN/ISBN-13: 978-07679-2696-6 | Price: \$21.95/\$27.95 in Canada | Trade paperback original

EXCERPT FROM DR. COHN'S BOOK: Partnering to lead educational renewal: high-quality teachers, high-quality schools

[http://books.google.com/books?id=IUrPXAtTdlwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=carl+cohn&source=bl&ots=FOlj5R-](http://books.google.com/books?id=IUrPXAtTdlwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=carl+cohn&source=bl&ots=FOlj5R-RKq&sig=nHdOJyDTM79rBd5xeQV5sIEbENw&hl=en&ei=eO17TLDZMsWcnAewwKneAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9&ved=0CCMQ6AEwCDgK#v=onepage&q&f=false)

[Rkq&sig=nHdOJyDTM79rBd5xeQV5sIEbENw&hl=en&ei=eO17TLDZMsWcnAewwKneAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9&ved=0CCMQ6AEwCDgK#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=IUrPXAtTdlwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=carl+cohn&source=bl&ots=FOlj5R-RKq&sig=nHdOJyDTM79rBd5xeQV5sIEbENw&hl=en&ei=eO17TLDZMsWcnAewwKneAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9&ved=0CCMQ6AEwCDgK#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Carl A. Cohn

**Middle
Ground
Study**

RECENT LETTER FROM DR. COHN EXPLAINING THE MIDDLE GROUND STUDY

February 2010

Dear Colleague,

So much of the reform conversation in America has been focused in the last decade on what we need to do to strengthen high schools. But educators widely recognize that the quality of preparation in middle school often determines whether our young people will succeed in high school and beyond. This is a particularly important challenge in California—the nation's largest and most diverse state—which educates one out of eight middle grades students in the United States.

What district and school policies and practices are linked to higher student performance in the middle grades? To find out, EdSource, with researchers from Stanford University and the American Institutes for Research, spent 18 months conducting the most extensive study ever of middle grades. The study surveyed more than 4,000 California teachers, principals, and superintendents about a wide range of middle grades practices. To see what higher performing schools did, the responses were then analyzed against school-level student outcomes on standards-based state tests in English language arts and math, controlling for student background. The results of the study—presented in the attached report *Gaining Ground in the Middle*

Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better—illuminate strategies and practices that are raising performance for middle grades students from both middle- and low-income families. Above all, higher performing middle grade schools focus on improving student academic outcomes and preparing their students for a rigorous high school curriculum. Toward this end they set measurable objectives and hold everyone in the system—superintendent, principal, teachers, students, and parents—responsible for student learning. The findings reveal that educators at every level have a crucial role. Led by the superintendent, districts are essential to providing user-friendly student data and emphasizing improvement of all students. The principal is a hands-on leader who orchestrates every aspect of school improvement. Teachers work collectively to identify school needs for instructional improvement and students who need extra help. The effective middle grades practices reflected in this study are actionable and replicable. They can serve as a kind of research-based checklist against which educators can compare what they are doing to ensure academic success for middle grades students from all backgrounds. The report also provides valuable information to state leaders as they consider refining state academic standards and other policies, targeting investments, and improving how data are collected and provided.

We are confident that while the findings are from California schools, they will have national applicability. We invite educators and policymakers both in California and nationwide to review what this EdSource study found and

to draw ideas and inspiration from this work to help make all middle grades schools high performers.

.
Carl Cohn, Board of Directors, Microsoft, Inc. Clinical Professor of Urban
School Leadership
Former President, Claremont Graduate University
California State Board of Education Former Superintendent, San Diego
Unified & Long Beach Unified School Districts

Carl A. Cohn

**Broad Prize
Review Board**

The Broad Prize Review Board

A distinguished group of the country's top educational leaders serves as the Review Board for The Broad Prize for Urban Education. Review Board members examine performance indicators, demographic statistics and other information about the urban school districts that are eligible for The Broad Prize. Based on their examination, the Review Board narrows the list of 100 eligible school districts to the five finalists.

2010 Broad Prize Review Board Members Carl A. Cohn
Clinical Professor of Urban School Leadership, Claremont
Graduate University Former Superintendent, San Diego Unified
School District Former Superintendent, Long Beach Unified
School District, Calif.

Carl A. Cohn is distinguished leader-in-residence at the College of Education at San Diego State University. Most recently, he served as superintendent of schools in the San Diego Unified School District. Prior to that assignment, he worked as a clinical professor at the University of Southern California and as federal court monitor for the special education consent decree in the Los Angeles school system. From 1992-2002, he was superintendent of the Long Beach Unified School District.

Update On Dr. Carl Cohn

Dr. Carl Cohn, former Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District, recently resigned as chief of San Diego schools. Some of you may have heard this, as his last day was December 31, eighteen months earlier than his \$250,000 per year contract would have expired. Dr. Cohn was hired by San Diego in 2005, a move that brought him out of retirement after leaving Long Beach in 2002.

After offering his resignation to the board of the San Diego Unified School District, Dr. Cohn said, "I don't have the energy, heart and passion that I did when I first took the job." In his two years as Superintendent of San Diego schools, Dr. Cohn spent a considerable amount of time restoring peace to a district known for infighting and teacher unrest. It is widely accepted that a new, improved decorum now exists within the district, but whether Cohn had accomplished much else is a matter of debate.

Some fault Cohn for leaving as major initiatives to revitalize public education are still underway. In San Diego there are several elementary schools adding middle school grades as a strategy to slow declining enrollment, and some middle schools are working to implement a policy to hold back eighth grade students who fail two or more courses. There are also plans by district leaders to place a bond on the November 2008 ballot to provide funds for school renovations.

Despite all that's going on in the nation's second largest school district, and while some criticized Cohn's departure as a preemptive move during a time of great change for San Diego schools, his decision to remain through December was predicated on seeing five new schools open within that time. Contrary to the belief of some detractors, this is a testament to Dr. Cohn's leadership and desire to see the district improve and succeed.

After all, Dr. Cohn served Long Beach for ten years and is widely praised for his management style here in California's third largest school district. His leadership was noted by the public school district in Washington, D.C., a prominent organization that unsuccessfully attempted to recruit Dr. Cohn several years ago.

During his tenure in Long Beach Dr. Cohn instituted school uniforms, ended social promotion, implemented a new behavior code with high standards, and increased academic expectations that were successful in closing achievement gaps among students. In fact, in 2001 Cohn was awarded the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education for his successful efforts in improving student achievement.

So while some may fault Dr. Cohn for abandoning a school district in need, others praise him for improving that very district in just two years. Meanwhile, he's certainly still respected in Long Beach, a city that greatly benefited from his noble leadership. For those adversaries out there, take a look at his record and the truth shall prevail.

Carl A. Cohn

Quotes

Dr. Carl Cohn's quotes

"What people may be surprised about my leadership style is everything doesn't begin and end with me. I believe in empowering a team to do the work ... If people have a legitimate need, they don't need to come to me to fund it."

"I think this is an issue of healing and making sure everybody feels good about a shared vision for the future. I think that's very important. That's what I intend to do."

"When you are studying to be a priest, saving souls is supposed to be what you're all about. You can see how that gets translated to saving kids."

"I'm 59. If I'm ever going to do this again, do it now."

"There is a just a lot of buzz around charters here -- it's as if charters are the only option for change, ... Other ways could be explored."

"We have to roll up our sleeves"

"My first and most important goal is to accelerate gains in student performance. We have to roll up our sleeves. We have to redouble our efforts."

"If I bring everybody in, they'll get the message that they're ready to go back out and say, 'This is the hill we're going after,' ... I'm a good listener and I value the things employees and parents would want to say to me."

"What people may be surprised about my leadership style is everything doesn't begin and end with me. I believe in empowering a team to do the work, ... If people have a legitimate need, they don't need to come to me to fund it."

"I think this is an issue of healing and making sure everybody feels good about a shared vision for the future. I think that's very important. That's what I intend to do."

"My first and most important goal is to accelerate gains in student performance. We have to roll up our sleeves. We have to redouble our efforts."

"Art, music -- all those things that we all know contribute to the full development of a young person and can actually accelerate gains in academic areas -- we can't just put those aside."

"The pattern that you will find in the people I appoint is they have extraordinary people skills."