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15 Minutes

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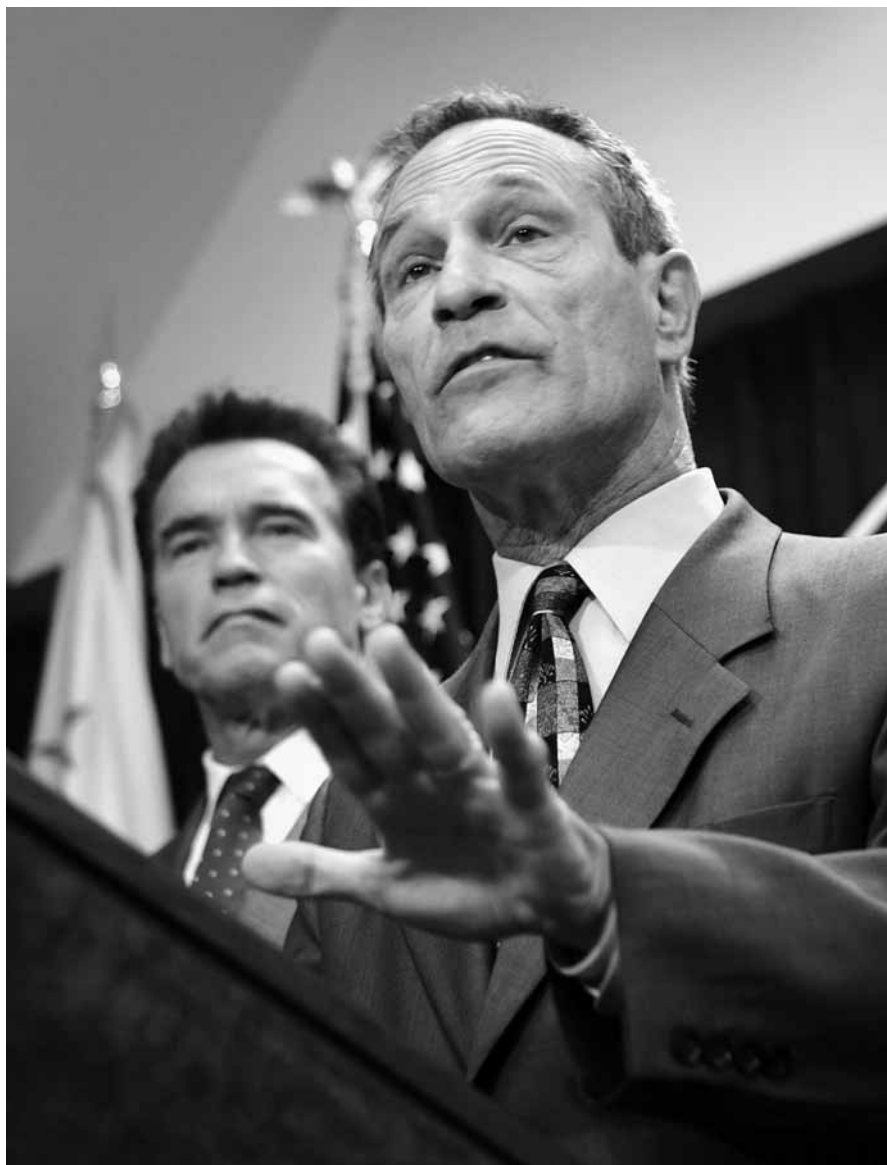


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Alan Bersin

California's secretary of education tackles the nation's largest school system



Alan Bersin accepts Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's nomination as California's secretary of education on April 29, 2005, in Los Angeles.

Alan Bersin not only embraces change, he also thinks deeply and broadly about how to achieve it in public education. As superintendent of public education for San Diego, he headed a dramatic, often controversial effort to turn around the nation's eighth largest school district.

During the first four years of Bersin's tenure, from 1998 to 2002, overall achievement scores increased 15 percent in reading and 20 percent in math. At the same time, his tenure was marked by battles with the teachers union and some school board members.

In July 2005, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Bersin as California's secretary of education. He now faces the challenge of trying to improve educational performance statewide.

In an interview with James A. Phills Jr., a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business and academic editor of SSIR, Bersin reflects on leadership, change, and the nature of public education.

What are the key drivers of educational performance?

If we want to improve student achievement broadly across schools and across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, the research is fairly clear that the quality of instruction is the driver that most counts, particularly with regard to kids from lower socioeconomic areas. I include in that not only the skill and knowledge of the teacher, but also the belief system of the teacher – believing in her students, in terms of high expectations and capacity to learn.

Then you ask: What is it that accounts for quality teaching? The main driver is the quality of school leadership. It begins, clearly, with an excellent school principal – a principal

who understands his or her job to be instructional leadership, not campus management, but rather providing for the selection of quality teachers and for the professional development of those teachers so that their skill and knowledge level, both individually and also as part of a team, develops, so that there is a constant growth in the capacity for better teaching and learning in the school.

What are the levers that a principal can pull to enhance the quality of instruction throughout a school?

Professional development [geared toward] improving the quality of instruction – by providing opportunities for your faculty to improve the level and the quality of teaching in your particular school. For instance, you start off by making conferences, materials, and professional literature available to your teachers. Then you create study groups and book groups. You provide opportunities for teachers to look at student work together, and make assessments about what do we have to do to improve the quality of the student work.

You create regular visitation. This has been an enormous change in public education over the last 10 to 15 years. When I was in school, our teacher would close the door and pull down that little shade in front of the classroom, and what went on in that classroom was a function of what that teacher determined. Principals, let alone coaches, assistant principals, or other teachers, never, or hardly ever, ventured into the classroom. Now, professional intervention, peer review, and coaching are becoming regular features of the professional landscape. So, we've done a lot to break down the isolation of teaching. And principals, good principals, do that every

day in the schools in which they work.

How do district educational leaders support principals and teachers in improving instructional quality?

In the beginning, the purpose, in Michael Fullan's words, is to articulate and emphasize a moral vision about what you are seeking to accomplish and how central improving the quality of teaching is to that goal.

Supporting the improvement of instruction raises issues of resource allocation – especially developing principals' leadership skills and knowledge, and investing massively in professional development and support for teachers. This is difficult in a system and a sector that does not easily reallocate resources – every existing allocation of resources has developed a political constituency that holds firmly to those resources and fights any effort to remove them.

But if public education is to become a system that gives children what they need for their education, rather than what adults want for their employment, then we will have to face up to the pain and the tumult that necessarily will attend to significant reallocation of resources.

What is the role for state leaders?

Defining a fair accountability system and then following up to ensure that it's implemented effectively. When you have school districts that are succeeding in terms of student achievement, you want to stay out of the way and do no harm. Let the accountability system provide the right sanctions – positive and negative – based on performance, measured in terms of growth in student learning and also the level of student learning.

The second major role is to provide for sensible interventions that

support schools that are not educating students well or serving their communities. Determining suitable interventions raises political as well as instructional issues. Enforcing accountability, however, is the way the state should support student achievement.

The Legislature has an enormously important role to play in establishing this accountability system but not in micromanaging educational policy. It's not clear to me that the best value added by a legislature or indeed the role intended by democratic theory for a legislature is to define how school bathrooms ought to be maintained. And yet there's the pressure to do that in our existing context.

Talk about the role of the federal government, specifically about the disagreement between California and Washington, D.C. [the Department of Education] about how to measure student achievement.

Since Horace Mann invented the common form school in western Massachusetts in the 1830s, public education in America has been largely a matter of local prerogative and authority. In the 1970s, there developed much more of a state role in public education. And now in the 21st century, for the first time, we're seeing an expanded and significant role assumed by the federal government.

The contrasting, even competing accountability systems currently in place by reason of separate federal and state legislative actions present an excellent case in point. We operate under a state accountability system that is based on growth – it defines success as moving students in schools along a continuum from far below basic skill to proficient and advanced. You look at the achievement of the school and the achievement of the

student last year compared to where they are this year as a means of determining whether or not the school is successful and high performing, even if low achieving in absolute terms.

We also operate under the federal model, which establishes status requirements for a specified percentage of students to achieve at the proficiency level in English language arts and mathematics. Unless the school reaches that percentage mark of achievement, it is not deemed a successful school, regardless of growth. In that context, we experience dissonance and confusion as different judgments are made based on the same facts.

If we don't harmonize the federal and state systems, those systems may fall of their own weight, because a system of accountability that cannot be understood by the community it serves will soon lose the acceptance of that community.

What underlies the two different perspectives?

We in education tend to look at matters in dichotomous terms: It's either standards-based education, or it's classroom independence for the teacher. It's either the growth model or it's the status model of assessment. In most cases, the right answer is a balance. The art is crafting an appropriate synthesis to locate that balance that permits us to take advantage of the strengths of each way of achieving and measuring quality results.

To what extent is the availability of sufficient economic resources a barrier to improving public education?

Resources present a difficult issue. Here's the dilemma we face in California: We're locked in an intellectual and political gridlock, literally, between those who say "no new

taxes," facing those who perpetually insist on the need for more funding. The quagmire produced by these two immovable positions is embodied on the one hand by Proposition 13 and those who would defend it to the death, and on the other by those within the education establishment who steadfastly refuse to discuss, let alone concede, any weakness concerning the productivity of current resource allocations.

One cannot resolve this kind of polemic by compromise because these are irreconcilable differences as framed. People are not really listening to one another and do not accept that the other position has any legitimacy. That's a prescription for the gridlock that we have now and ultimately for potential disaster.

How can we go about building a bridge between those two positions? We need to invest further in public education as we do in all other infrastructure in California. However, we can't expect taxpayers to pay further taxes until they can be assured that the resources currently provided for education – half of California's budget, more than \$55 billion – are being used in an acceptable, accountable, responsible, and productive fashion.

Until we commence that discussion, we will be caught in the polarized gridlock that characterizes contemporary California and national politics. In the education world, we must take to heart the criticism that additional tax dollars are not going to be made available when school districts, for example, are paying two to three times market value for landscape services. This is only one example and not meant to be directed against one particular group of employees or one specific service; there are literally dozens of others that could be cited.

Why should taxpayers be expected to put more money into a system in which school boards have voted lifetime medical benefits for retirees and their families, resulting in unfunded liabilities that may approach \$20 billion in California?

On the other hand, I have no problem making the argument from the educational perspective – concerning the challenges of designing, implementing, and maintaining a system that can provide equal educational opportunities such that no children are left behind, that is capable of meeting the teaching and learning needs of special education students, and that promises English language learners a level of written and oral language proficiency that will permit each of them to access content effectively and proceed on to the university or the workplace – that we cannot meet those expectations for all children on the budget that we have in California.

In your role as secretary of education for California, what keeps you awake at night?

We are in a race in which public support for public education will be won or lost. The community will lose confidence in the institution if it doesn't produce results that are acceptable to a broad range of our people.

I worry whether or not contemporary political leadership at all levels of our government is capable of overcoming the polarized differences that seem to characterize our civic life with respect to public education.

Unless our civic elites and business leaders understand what's at stake, and rise to the occasion to support change in the face of conflict, then we will continue to experience the lack of continuity that has characterized most serious reform efforts. □