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Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Letter

Urban School Systems: Getting Talent to All the Right Places.

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My Roots as a Non-Traditional Educator

Forty years ago last fall, I abandoned my studies for the Roman Catholic priesthood and walked into Dominguez High School in Compton, California, as a beginning teacher convinced that I could make a difference in the lives of struggling high school students. As everyone knows, 1968 was a tumultuous year in a tumultuous decade, and I was very much a member of my generation determined to pursue the high ideals articulated by both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy.

In those days, I wasn't sponsored by *Teach for America* or the *New Teacher Project* because those idealistic ventures were decades away. I was an "emergency permit" teacher, who hadn't taken a single education school course. But I had a bachelor's degree in Philosophy, and the Human Resources folks in the district office were convinced that I could handle tenth graders in a required Western Civilization course that, in the spirit of the times, had been renamed "World Cultures".

I wish I could say that I had gone on to become a great teacher like Jaime Escalante (*Stand and Deliver*) or Erin Gruwell (*Freedom Writers*),



but that wouldn't be anywhere near accurate and it would diminish the extraordinary work of those two iconic teachers. In the 1970s at Long Beach Polytechnic High School, I did become a decent high school counselor with a knack for pushing kids beyond the limits that they had set for themselves and an uncanny ability to ease racial tension in volatile campus situations.



School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 75 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

Fast forward to the superintendent selection process in 1992 in Long Beach, California, the state's third largest district, where a multi-racial school board unanimously selected me, a candidate who hadn't been a principal and hadn't distinguished himself as an instructional leader, to turn around a struggling school system. At that time, the Harvard Urban Superintendents Program was just beginning and the Broad Superintendents Academy was almost a decade away, but in Long Beach you had an urban school board that was focused on getting new talent to lead an urban school system.

Later on in the decade of the 90s, the Seattle school board, again without prodding from any external entity, would break historic ground by selecting retired Army general John Stanford as superintendent of schools. In my judgment, he was a remarkable figure for at least two reasons: 1) he had amazing rapport with classroom teachers and, 2) he was smart enough to select Arlene Ackerman as his deputy superintendent. Those who want to advance the careers of non-traditional leaders in urban school systems can learn a great deal from his example.

The Broad Foundation Takes the Lead

As a practitioner who recovers from my stints as an urban superintendent in clinical professor positions in higher education, I've had a unique opportunity to reflect on my work with the foundations that are committed to getting new talent to urban schools and school systems.

First of all, the Broad Foundation, for the past decade or so, has put its considerable resources behind two programs that are designed to accelerate the movement of non-traditional leaders into the mainstream ranks of urban school leadership.

The Broad Superintendents Academy is a ten-month executive training program designed to provide urban school boards and mayors with a fresh new pool of talent from which to select new leaders who bring with them a sense of urgency about the rescue of

youngsters who historically haven't been well-served by such systems. The Broad Residency in Urban Education, on the other hand, is a two-year training and placement program designed to populate urban school districts and charter management organizations with talented, early career professionals who have background and experience in fixing the many dysfunctional, non-instructional parts of urban school systems such as finance, human resources, IT, facilities and construction and other business operations.

Both programs are highly selective and seem to attract individuals with stellar leadership credentials who have made their mark in business, industry, the military or education. As an urban superintendent who was always looking to marry inside talent to outside expertise, I found them excellent resources for improving the school systems that I headed in both Long Beach and San Diego. As an advisor and presenter for both programs, I relished the opportunity to share with the fellows and residents those aspects of running a large urban school system that they wouldn't be expected to know. As a mentor and coach for two of their newly-appointed superintendents, I appreciated the Foundation's interest in making sure that their investment was supported with every resource available—something that every school board appointing a new superintendent should seriously consider.

Last fall, I presented at an alumni meeting of the Broad Residents program that was designed to discuss how the Broad residents, who are younger MBA-types without initial aspirations toward the top job, might start thinking about their own pathways to the superintendent's job. This development seems to acknowledge the Foundation's understanding that, even though they've made a significant contribution to increasing the pool of available talent for the leadership of urban school systems, there will continue to be many vacancies without sufficient talent to fill them. And what better way to do that than to further develop those who are already familiar with the Broad brand.

By developing a third 'flagship initiative' called the Broad Institute for

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From our vision statement

School Boards, the Foundation smartly recognizes that the only way to build longevity and stability into some urban school systems is by making sure that school boards know and understand their appropriate role as change agents of reform through the policy-making process. Thus, they provide training and support for board/superintendent governance teams that foster genuine team building with a view toward getting rid of the trappings of dysfunction often associated with some urban school boards.

Strategic Management of Human Capital

Several years ago, the Harvard Education and Business schools invited a dozen of us urban superintendents to the campus for a weekend discussion of what challenges we faced that the Harvard Business School might be able to help us with. Instead of identifying a number of critical areas, we all agreed that our human resource operations were dysfunctional. We shared that our HR operations were compliance-driven legalistic shops, completely divorced from any semblance of recruiting, developing, maintaining and promoting talent. In addition, we felt that these offices were completely removed from the significant instructional improvement strategies that our districts were now developing and implementing.

For the past year, Allan Odden and Jim Kelly, with assistance from Gates and Carnegie, have convened a national task force on strategic management of human capital. As former Governor Jim Hunt of North Carolina, one of the task force members, likes to say:

“Strategic management of human capital” is not a phrase that you use in the country general store down in North Carolina. What we’re really saying is that we’re going to put the best teachers in front of the kids who need them the most. That’s the kind of “kitchen-table talk” that everybody can understand’.

This work is the practical embodiment of what that Harvard weekend was all about—changing the face of HR in large urban school systems so that they

become offices that are strategically aligned with curriculum and instruction, data and assessment, and professional development. In short, an office that is not operating in a silo, but one that is central to the district’s core mission and vision for improvement.

Among the considerable resources provided by this new national network are case studies of five urban districts that have pioneered efforts to transform their human resources departments. Boston, Chicago, Fairfax County, Long Beach and New York City are developing new practices that are designed to acquire top talent and keep it. In addition, these districts are working with their unions to frame new conversations about how to link this new approach to the design of instructional practices that lead to improved student achievement.

“... encouraging urban districts to collaborate with their labor partners on the design of new reward structures for outstanding teachers may well advance the long-term interests of low-income students of color”.

No one believes that changing the way HR offices operate will be easy given the many compliance-driven and bureaucratic functions that have been deposited there over the years, but there is in this new network a sense of hope that tackling these long-avoided tough problems may yield significant competitive advantages for those districts willing to change.

The other important feature of this new movement for change is the establishment of both district and state networks designed to bring a sense of advocacy to this reform effort. More than twenty urban districts from across the country recently attended a conference in Chicago to begin sharing ideas and resources on how to develop these human capital management reforms. A network of states committed to this agenda is also being developed for rollout later this year.

Gates Abandons the Shallow End of the Pool

In another effort to get top talent to urban school systems, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has launched a new effort designed to ensure that 80 percent of students graduate from high school prepared for college. This new initiative, labeled “deep dive” by the Foundation staff, would ultimately put the best teachers in front of the neediest students—no small accomplishment in any district. In addition, it would promote the retention and compensation of teachers based on their performance in the area of measurable student outcomes.

Hearing about this new approach, one of my long-time colleagues in reform said: ‘Gates is once again chasing something ephemeral’. I’m not so sure. In fact, I think Gates may well have gotten it right this time. Dramatically improving what actually happens between high school teachers and their students is what separates great teachers from ordinary ones, and encouraging urban districts to collaborate with their labor partners on the design of new reward structures for outstanding teachers may well advance the long-term interests of low-income students of color.

The Gates “deep dive” process involves an initial visit from a Foundation team that includes two staffers and an urban superintendent. Following an interview protocol, the team looks at whether or not the district has the capacity to deliver on the goal of dramatically increasing college readiness rates by putting the best teachers in front of the students who need them the most. Looking at data and interviewing all the stakeholders, including school board and union leaders forms the bulk of the two-day visit.

The Foundation staff will then spend time trying to ferret out which small number of districts will be invited to participate in a second round of due diligence, which will include consultant support and an RFP process. The timeline calls for decisions later this year on which districts will receive significant financial support to move

this bold undertaking forward over the next three to five years.

The Feds Weigh In with Stimulus Money

Signaling that the foundations have gotten it right in promoting initiatives designed to get top talent to urban school districts, the Obama administration's Teacher Incentive Fund Program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) provides an additional \$200 million in grants for school districts that want to do any of the following:

- Improve student achievement by increasing teacher and principal effectiveness
- Reform teacher and principal compensation systems so that teachers and principals are rewarded for increases in student achievement
- Increase the number of effective teachers teaching poor, minority and disadvantaged students in hard to staff subjects
- Create sustainable performance-based compensation systems

San Francisco, Austin, Denver, Houston, Toledo and New York have all taken steps in the past few years to design alternative teacher compensation schemes in collaboration with their labor partners. While most of these new approaches abandon the traditional single salary schedule, none of them appear to take a serious stab at linking student performance results to teacher compensation. Perhaps this new government initiative will actually "stimulate" that development in a number of urban districts.

Some Additional Policy Options to Be Considered

As a scholar/practitioner who has been involved for more than forty years in efforts to improve urban schools and districts, I'm struck by the confluence of factors that seem to be coming together to support this major new effort to rescue the neediest

students in urban America. Is it possible that the idealism of the 1960s is finally going to be connected in a practical way to the resources provided by the federal and state government, along with the largesse of the foundations and non-profit world?

In the spirit of advancing this agenda and adding to it, I offer some alternative policy options that should be considered if we're serious about the rescue our neediest students in urban America.

1. **Fund some demonstration projects in America's urban districts that are willing to use the approach of Scandinavian and Asian countries like Finland and Singapore in pursuing teacher excellence.** In these top scoring countries, the best teachers are selected through rigorous exams, prepared through fully-funded graduate fellowships at the best universities, and then trained in the best lab schools that are designed to expose beginning teachers to the best master teachers available.
2. **Provide more federal research money to study the best instructional practices of America's higher performing urban districts.** Through the Broad Prize, the recent Brookings Institute study, and the Trial Urban District Assessment of NAEP, we actually know much more about which urban districts are breaking the mold in terms of results and closing the achievement gap than we did ten years ago. Studying and disseminating the best practices of these districts at the national level is long overdue.
3. **Study the administrative support structure at hard-to-staff urban schools.** As a superintendent in two large urban districts, whenever I have approached National Board and other award-winning teachers about voluntarily leaving the safe confines of their current assignment for one where their services were really needed with the most challenged students, they were always concerned, first and foremost, about what kind of administrative support they would receive at the new school.

Additional compensation was never the highest consideration for them. Studying non-monetary ways to support teachers in urban schools might well yield better results in this area.

4. **Pilot statewide collective bargaining in some large states.** I've always found it strange that here in California we have statewide collective bargaining in public higher education but not in K-12. As superintendent of California's second and third largest urban systems, I can attest firsthand to how much time, money and resources were spent negotiating local district contracts—energy that could have been directed toward instructional improvement and acquiring top talent for urban schools.
5. **Provide new federal research funds to study governance in large urban school systems.** With Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently suggesting that large urban school districts should be run by mayors, a new policy debate of critical importance is in the offing. Linking sustained student achievement results to mayoral control is, at best, a dicey proposition. A new independent study, funded by the federal government, might provide some important answers to this emerging policy issue.

In this letter, I've discussed my own roots as a non-traditional educator, the work of two foundations that are trying to get new talent to urban school systems, a promising new national task force that is trying to convert stodgy HR bureaucracies in urban districts into talent management agencies, and the federal government's attempt to provide stimulus money to further support these efforts. In addition, I've offered some alternative policy recommendations that might prove to be equally significant and important in providing a bright future for the urban school children that we're all privileged to serve.

Notes & Links

Dr. Cohn was an independent consultant to both the Broad and Gates foundations, as well as vice-chair of the Strategic Management of Human Capital task force. The following websites are useful links to some of the work Dr. Cohn has presented in this Ed Letter:

Broad Superintendents Academy. The Broad Superintendents Academy identifies and prepares prominent leaders—executives who have experience successfully leading large organizations and a passion for public service ... *(read more)*

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The foundation's education work in the US has two major initiatives: ensuring all students graduate from high school ready for college and improving postsecondary education so that more students earn a degree or certificate with genuine economic value. ... *(read more)*

Strategic Management of Human Capital. SMHE uses talent management to develop instructional practices to improve student performance. *(read more)*

Teacher Incentive Fund Program. This Fund supports programs that develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems, based on increases in student achievement, in high-need schools. *(read more)*

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is an unprecedented effort to jumpstart our economy, save and create millions of jobs, and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so our country can thrive in the 21st century. ... *(read more)*



Dr. Carl Cohn joined the CGU faculty in fall 2008 with over thirty years of experience in the field of education. Throughout his distinguished career, he has worked in a variety of educational capacities including 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.

*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.***



School of Educational Studies

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The Urban Leadership PhD Program at CGU offers a cohort of highly motivated and dynamic educational leaders the opportunity to engage in a challenging and rigorous program, rooted in academic excellence that relates to the work they are doing in urban communities. Our program encourages students to connect their academic studies to real-life workplace experience. Students also benefit from the distinctive opportunity to pursue an individual plan of study after one year of cohort studies, and are encouraged to take courses in any of the nine schools at CGU including the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences (SBOS), and the Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management. The Tier 2 California Professional Administrative Services Clear Credential (PASCC) may also be earned in conjunction with the PhD.

Our program is based on four guiding principles:

Effecting local and systematic change in education requires a critical mass of effective urban education leaders.

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Areas of Study

Issues in Contemporary Urban Leadership

The Politics, Policy and Governance in Urban Communities at the Local, State and Federal Levels as well as From a Global Perspective

Creating Learning Organizations in Urban Communities

Coaching, Mentoring, and Professional Development

Seminar in Urban Education: Literature and Practice

History and Theory of Urban Education

