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EXTREME MAKEOVER:

Two Failing San Diego Schools Get New Start as Charters

By Joe Williams and Thomas Toch

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Education Sector's Ideas at Work series examines innovative solutions to the challenges facing educators and education policymakers. This is the second report in the series. The first looked at innovative ways for states to fund the expansion of high-quality preschool.

The San Diego Unified School District in 2004 became one of the first school systems in the country to confront one of the toughest challenges posed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act: what to do with persistently failing schools.

Nine of the district's 216 elementary and secondary schools had produced poor academic results for six consecutive years under NCLB. The law demands the "restructuring" of such schools—turning over their operations to the state of California, bringing in school-management companies, replacing their principals, or introducing other changes in their governance. Most of the nine schools made modest moves, including one school that reorganized itself into smaller "academies," and another that changed its name but not much else.

But three of the failing schools, wanting to rebuild from the ground up, chose another strategy available under NCLB—reconstituting themselves as charter schools, publicly funded schools that run independently of school system regulations and union rules. King Elementary School reemerged as King-Chavez Academies under the management of one of San Diego's existing charter schools, the nearby King-Chavez Academy of Excellence. The other two, Gompers Middle School and Keiller Middle School, which serve mostly poor Hispanic students in blighted communities in southern San Diego, converted to charter schools themselves.

Doing so has put them on the cutting edge of school reform. While the charter school movement has grown since 1992 to more than 4,000 schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, most charter schools have been new schools created independently of public school systems. Only Gompers, Keiller, and a handful of other charters nationally have been created from existing public schools in response to NCLB's reform demands after years of failure, hoping to use the autonomy of charter schooling to turn themselves around.

The story of the conversion of Gompers and Keiller to Gompers Charter Middle School and the Keiller Leadership Academy is at once encouraging and sobering. Parents and teachers in the new schools have rallied to the cause of reform, building a strong bottom-up constituency for change. And only a year and a half since

the schools' reemergence as charters, there are already signs of improvement at the troubled schools. The schools have used their new-found independence to transform their dysfunctional cultures; they are safer places now and learning has become a higher priority. And student achievement at the perennially lagging schools has begun to rise.

But Gompers and Keiller have had a great deal of help in their conversion to charter schools—from a school superintendent strongly supportive of charter schooling to an infusion of external expertise and funding—raising a question about whether the schools would be where they are today had they not received such support.

With thousands of failing public schools nationwide facing NCLB's demands for reform, and with federal lawmakers beginning to explore ways to improve NCLB as the Congress moves toward reauthorizing the law, the transformation of Gompers and Keiller teaches important lessons about the reform of persistently failing public schools, and about NCLB's seldom-used charter school restructuring strategy.

Charter Advocate

Alan Bersin was a proponent of charter schools when he became superintendent of the San Diego school system in 1998 after five years as the U.S. District Attorney in Southern California and a career as a Los Angeles lawyer. Charter schools, he believed, offered the possibility of implementing staffing and other key reforms quickly, as well as the prospect of creating school communities committed to change. He established an Office of School Choice to promote the reform and courted charter school operators. By the time NCLB sanctions were leveled against the nine failing schools, there were already 21 charter schools operating under Bersin's auspices (including one, Memorial Junior High School, on the failing-schools list).

So perhaps it wasn't surprising that one of Bersin's first moves when he learned the names of the lagging schools from California officials in early 2004 was to call the California Charter School Association (CCSA), a Los Angeles-based advocacy and technical-assistance organization that supports California's 618 charter schools.¹

CCSA began a quiet but active campaign to recruit organizations and individuals, including the Urban League, a Latino community organization, and local ministers, to run the restructuring schools as charters. It also reached out to charter management organizations such as Aspire Public Schools, which manages 17 schools in seven California cities.

Bersin, a Harvard and Yale Law School graduate and a Rhodes Scholar, issued a public request for proposals (RFPs) to community groups, charter management organizations, and any other bidders to restructure San Diego's nine failing schools. CCSA drafted the document with Bersin's staff and the San Diego school board approved it in late September of 2004.

CCSA and San Diego Office of School Choice Director Brian Bennett worked hard to recruit bidders. But, with the exception of King-Chavez, there were no takers. The organizations were discouraged by the tight timelines in the RFP (charter applications had to be submitted by Jan. 3), reluctance to partner with long-failing schools, a lack of commitment to reform in some of the schools, and, in Aspire's case, the lack of an organizational infrastructure in San Diego. The companies were also concerned about political uncertainty in the San Diego school district; school board elections were looming in November and several candidates were running on anti-Bersin platforms.

At the same time that Bersin was looking for outside help with restructuring his troubled schools, he and his staff established "workgroups" of teachers, administrators, parents, union representatives, and community leaders at each of the schools out of a strong belief that reforms would take at the schools only if representatives of each school community were invested in change. Bersin also believed that board members and teacher-union leaders, important powerbrokers in public school systems, would not support such dramatic change unless they were presented with clear evidence of such bottom-up support from parents and others.

The groups met regularly throughout the fall of 2004, gathering around tables pushed together in the schools' cafeterias and libraries. They started what would be hours and hours of conversations to answer such questions as: What is school restructuring? What are our options? Tom Mitchell, the San Diego school system's director of parent and community involvement, who had organized the groups, facilitated their meetings, guiding the groups through their restructuring options and ensuring that there were interpreters present for Spanish-speaking parents.

CCSA's San Diego regional general manager Julie Umansky, Bennett, and others attended dozens of the meetings, helping the groups understand the challenges of converting to charter schools. CCSA paid the airfare for members of at least one working group to visit Aspire schools. Like Bersin, the outside organizations wanted school-level buy-in for reform. King-Chavez executive Dennis McKeown told more than 100 parents and teachers at a public forum at King Elementary that his organization was interested in managing the school only if the school's workgroup supported the move. "It's your decision," he said at the meeting.

But many of the workgroups rejected the charter conversion strategy, believing that such a dramatic step wasn't necessary, that teachers would lose job security, or that there wasn't enough time under the Jan. 3 deadline to build consensus for the reform within their school communities.

It was a different story at Keiller and Gompers.

Both schools were dysfunctional. The 1,000-student Gompers campus had been a popular magnet school in the 1980s. But it returned to being a neighborhood school in the early 1990s and eventually succumbed to the pressures of the gang culture that afflicted its Chollas View neighborhood. By 2004, there were 1,000 suspensions a year at the school, syringes littered the playground, and teachers were locking themselves in their rooms during free periods. The school couldn't manage to give students their class schedules until long after school started, and, in the summer of 2005, Gompers staff discovered a closet filled with hundreds of report cards that were supposed to have been sent to students the previous year.

Things were just as bleak at Keiller: 80 percent of its students were performing below grade level academically

and the middle school was considered one of the most dangerous in California.

Bersin had installed Vince Riveroll, a hard-working, popular administrator, as principal at Gompers in the summer of 2004, knowing that he was predisposed to move boldly in the name of reform. As his Gompers workgroup met through the fall, Riveroll was already hard at work cleaning the school's playground, remodeling its library, and taking other steps to change the school's climate. At about the same time, Bersin named a new, reform-minded principal, Patty Ladd, to lead Keiller, where Riveroll had spent the previous year as Ladd's mentor. So both Gompers and Keiller had principals loyal to Bersin.

They began their workgroup sessions on school restructuring by posing two basic questions: What should an ideal school look like? And why doesn't our school look like that? The answers to those questions led to more questions and an informal fact-finding process.

As the groups sought to answer the questions, they kept coming back to different variations of the same problem: Too many teachers were putting in their time, accumulating seniority, and then using the seniority to bolt as soon as jobs in more attractive schools opened up. It was a pattern that had devastated the schools' morale and left them unable to rally behind reform. What Gompers and Keiller needed, the workgroups concluded, were teachers who were highly invested in the schools' success, teachers who were willing to share in the building of school cultures that valued learning. "We were looking to have people who would take ownership of everything that happens in our school," says Ladd.

But Gompers and Keiller lacked the authority to recruit such teachers because San Diego's teachers contract—like those in most U.S. school systems—allows teachers rather than schools to decide where teachers work, and offers them no incentives to remain in challenging schools to help turn them around.

Teachers with the greatest number of years in the school system and the most college credits get first choice of where they want to work, and then less senior teachers choose their schools when there are openings, and so on. For the most part, principals have to take the teachers who want to work in their schools, whether they are

good or bad, and regardless of whether they share the principals' educational philosophy.

Despite Bersin's commitment to charter schools, teachers, parents and administrators at both Gompers and Keiller say they were not immediately drawn to the charter conversion option. They say they were not eager to break away from the city's school system. "What we were really looking for was a waiver [from the San Diego teachers contract] so that we could hire our own teachers and create a team that was going to be here for a while to see [reform] through," says Riveroll.

But such waivers weren't possible, given the sour relationship between Bersin and the local teachers union, the San Diego Education Association (SDEA). The relationship had begun deteriorating early in Bersin's tenure when Bersin sought changes in the roles of school staff and other reforms that the union had opposed. The district requested waivers to the city's teachers contract for the schools failing under NCLB in a November 2004 letter. But it hadn't followed the required legal protocol of getting two-thirds of the union members at the schools to approve the request through secret ballots. As a result, the union didn't respond to Bersin's request.

Today, Bersin says that the union's president and executive director walked out of a September 2004 meeting after Bersin proposed changes in the teacher work rules in the failing schools as a way of improving the cultures in the schools. Current SDEA President Camille Zombro says the SDEA was willing to discuss waivers, but that the district's demand for the work-rule exceptions without first getting the contractually required approval from teachers made it impossible for the union to consider the waivers. Zombro, who like her union, is a harsh critic of NCLB, accuses Bersin of "sabotaging" his waiver request in order to sidestep the union.

In the absence of waivers, the Gompers and Keiller workgroups turned to the charter school option, as Bennett and Bersin had encouraged them to do. Bennett responded to concerns that Gompers and Keiller staff would lose their San Diego school system benefits by guaranteeing teachers the right to return to the district's schools and by pledging that teachers' years in charter schools would count toward their San Diego seniority and retirement funds.

Julie Umansky and her colleagues at the California Charter School Association helped the groups draft their charter applications, paying for their translation so that Spanish-speaking parents at Gompers and Keiller could understand them. They schooled Ladd and Riveroll in everything from charter school boards to teacher recruitment. And they brokered a relationship between the principals and ExED, a nonprofit company providing charter schools with “back-office” services such as accounting and payroll.

Umansky, who now heads the CCSA Legal Defense Fund, also helped Riveroll win university allies, using her relationship with Cecil Lytle, a provost at the University of California, San Diego, to foster a partnership between Gompers and UCSD, which lent its reputation to Gompers’ charter application and helped the school develop its reform agenda. Lytle, who had founded the highly regarded Preuss charter school on UCSD’s campus, also had a close working relationship with Bersin and key members of his administration, who also encouraged the idea of a partnership between the university and Gompers.

Two UCSD officials, Lytle and Hugh “Bud” Mehan, director of UCSD’s Center for Research on Educational Equity, Access, and Teaching Excellence, joined Gompers’ board of directors. Ladd and Bennett forged a similar partnership between Keiller and the University of San Diego. Lonnie Rowell, director of USD’s Center for Student Support Systems, created a new student counseling program at Keiller, the university pledged student-tutors, and Paula Cordeiro, USD’s dean of the School of Leadership and Education Sciences, became president of Keiller’s board of directors.

The San Diego Education Association and the city’s school board tried to talk the Gompers and Keiller workgroups into dropping the charter school plans, pledging the district’s resources to help the schools in their reform efforts if they remained with the San Diego system, and warning teachers that they would have less job security in charter schools. But by Thanksgiving 2004, the groups had settled on a reform strategy.

Gathering Support

California’s charter school law required the groups to gather signatures in support of the Gompers and Keiller conversions from a majority of the parents in each school,

no small task in the troubled, low-income neighborhoods that the schools served, and next to impossible without a sympathetic school administration supplying parents’ names and latest addresses.

Teams from the two schools went door-to-door over the rainy holiday break in December 2004. Others worked local grocery stores. Such was the passion of parent volunteers that one collected aluminum cans to be able to afford the gas required to canvass neighborhoods by car. CCSA hired a community organizer from Los Angeles to walk the streets with the volunteers, helping to explain what charters schools were and why parents should sign the volunteers’ petitions. “We didn’t have a magic wand,” says Michelle Evans, a parent activist at Gompers. “We just knew that something needed to change and this might be a way to do it.” In the end, Evans and her colleagues collected signatures from parents representing nearly 700 of the school’s 1,000 students.

The RFPs required that school reform plans be submitted with parent signatures by Jan. 3, 2005. The November school board election, fueled by the teachers union’s antipathy toward Bersin, had shifted the board from a 3–2 majority that supported Bersin to a 3–2 anti-Bersin majority. When they submitted their signatures, the Gompers and Keiller workgroups found themselves facing a different board than the one that had approved the RFPs the previous September. At a Jan. 7 meeting crowded with 300 charter supporters from Gompers, Keiller, and King, the new majority ruled that the parent signatures weren’t good enough; the schools also had to collect signatures in support of the charter conversions from a majority of their teachers.

The workgroups had proceeded under the assumption that the charters were start-up schools in the eyes of the California charter school law, requiring only parental petitions. But the new majority on the school board sought and received a legal opinion from a different lawyer than the one Bersin had used to interpret the schools’ status. The new ruling declared Keiller, King, and Gompers to be “conversion” charter schools that under state law required the approval of a majority of each school’s teachers. The hundreds of parents in the audience jeered the board, sensing it was attempting to derail the charter conversions. McKeown, the chief executive officer and lead principal of King-Chavez Academies, vowed to sue the board over the move.

A core of teachers in the schools backed the charter strategy, but for many teachers signing the petitions was tough; it required them to abandon their union memberships. Parents on the workgroups pleaded the case for charter conversion in one-on-one meetings with wavering teachers. Teachers who supported the charter school plans also lobbied their colleagues to sign on. In the end, 57 percent of the teachers at Gompers and 60 percent at Keiller agreed to support the radical restructuring plans—including several who had no intention of working in the charter schools. “We weren’t getting done what we needed to get done at Gompers when we were in the public school system,” says Jeremy Hurlbert, a Gompers teacher who stayed through the conversion. “The charter was our answer.”

But the school board’s approval still wasn’t guaranteed. Shelia Jackson, the newly elected school board representative of the San Diego sub-district that included Gompers and Keiller, expressed skepticism about the charter conversions and suggested that the San Diego school district had a responsibility to improve its struggling schools rather than setting them off on their own. She proposed an alternative plan in late February that would give the two schools autonomy in curriculum, hiring, and in extending the school day and year.

The SDEA threw its support behind Jackson’s plan. “An autonomy plan will allow schools the chance to develop creative curriculum, practices, and strategies, while remaining within the district,” then-SDEA President Terry Pesta and Executive Director Robin Whitlow wrote in a letter to Jackson. “This configuration also maintains the revenue flow to the District, which enhances the resources to support student achievement.”² Teachers in the three schools also would continue as members of the SDEA.

But the workgroups weren’t buying Jackson’s proposal. “We said, ‘If you have all these ideas, why haven’t you done them?’” recalls Clarissa Lopez, a Gompers parent. Nor were the King, Keiller, and Gompers groups buying a proposal by the school board to delay a vote on the conversions a second time, to April.

Three hundred supporters of the charter conversions again packed the auditorium at the school board’s Normal Street headquarters at an emotional school board meeting on March 1, 2005. Even students took to microphones in support of change. “Good things don’t happen to

Gompers,” declared eighth-grader Miryam Soodati. “Is it wrong for us to want good things?”

To the surprise of many, the board voted unanimously that night to grant King, Gompers, and Keiller charter status for five years, effective July 1, 2005. The room erupted in applause at the vote. “We were stunned,” says Ladd. CCSA President Caprice Young had worked with Bersin before the meeting to find lawyers to appeal what they were sure would be the board’s rejection of the charter applications.

Board members said at the time that they couldn’t bring themselves to vote against the conversions once the school communities had satisfied the board’s demands. In Umansky’s view, the board’s new members were reluctant to stand up to a room filled with hundreds of parents and students who had effectively called the board’s bluff and won the signatures of majorities of both parents and teachers, lending credence to Bersin’s notion that dramatic change required strong grass-roots backing.

But the board didn’t hesitate to undertake a rear-guard action against Bersin and his charter school plan: In early February, at Jackson’s request, they ordered Bersin in a closed-door meeting to remove Riveroll from the principalship at Gompers and put him in a central office job mentoring other principals. Three months later, the nascent Gompers charter school board announced that the popular Riveroll would again be the school’s principal when it converted to charter status in July.

Culture Change

By late spring, Riveroll and Ladd were already searching for what their workgroups had identified as the key ingredient of reform at the troubled schools—talented teachers committed to creating culture change.

Riveroll had to fill 39 of 45 teaching positions at Gompers after the majority of the staff quit or were fired once Riveroll gained authority over staffing when Gompers converted to charter status. The half-dozen teachers who stayed spent much of their 2005 summer vacations helping Riveroll interview candidates. At Keiller, Ladd and her team had to fill 13 of the school’s 28 teaching positions. Both schools ran advertisements, attended job fairs, and had CCSA post openings on its Web site looking for people willing to embrace the opportunity,

and the challenge, that the San Diego school board had handed Gompers and Keiller.

Their work was made more difficult in early July, when McKeown, the chief executive of King-Chavez Academies, was arrested for molesting a young male relative in McKeown's home between 2001 and 2003. The newly minted charter schools got a black eye when the arrest made the San Diego papers, and again in the fall when McKeown was convicted and sentenced to a decade in prison. But a former consultant to Bennett's office of school choice, Timothy Wolf, stepped into the leadership vacuum at King and the new King Academies opened on schedule in late August.

Gompers and Keiller opened shortly after Labor Day. But before they did, Riveroll and Ladd put their teachers through two weeks of rigorous training rather than the traditional two days of meetings before the opening of school. Gompers ran a week of "academic camp" and a week of "culture camp" to teach staff successful teaching techniques and to build a shared commitment to high standards and an orderly campus.

It was only the first step in the principals' attempts to signal that things would be different at the two long-dysfunctional public schools.

When students arrived on the first day of school, they strode down a red carpet and were greeted by teachers dressed in suits and ties—and by television cameras on hand to capture Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's visit. Volunteers had spruced up the campuses and taken down unsightly perimeter fences that had made the schools seem like prisons. The schools' former students were given an option of reenrolling or attending traditional public schools. Most chose to stay and arrived on the first day wearing newly required school uniforms. They found the school day had been extended an hour and that there would be Saturday catch-up classes and a longer school year—some 17 days longer than the school year at most San Diego public schools.

To signal to her students that their presence in school was important, Ladd began greeting them with a handshake every morning, and to give teachers incentives to do their best work, both schools established end-of-year performance bonus systems for meeting attendance or instructional benchmarks.

Fast Start

The reforms at Keiller and Gompers produced significant improvements over the course of the schools' first year. At Keiller, where a serious teacher attendance problem had necessitated 250 days worth of substitute teachers in 2004–05, some 40 percent of the school's teachers were eligible for \$1,500 bonuses for perfect attendance and the school needed only 15 days worth of substitutes.

Seemingly small things like insisting that students tuck in their shirts and walk in straight lines were important in establishing a new atmosphere in the two schools. "It changed the attitude," says Gompers teacher Matt Miyashira. "The students want to be in line. They want the discipline—even if they don't know they want it. But it has to be every single teacher working hard at the same goal." Even the custodians at Gompers enforce the school's shirts-tucked-in rule. Many at the school say the strong sense of shared purpose emerged in part from the long hours that teachers, administrators, and parents spent together discussing the schools' future during the previous year's many workgroup sessions.

The schools' focus on restoring order lowered student suspensions and expulsions at Gompers from approximately 1,000 in 2004–05 to 305 in 2005–06, and the school's students were able to begin the 2006–07 school year with completed class schedules after UCSD tutors had helped students select courses the previous spring, thus avoiding the chaos that marked the beginning of classes in years past.

Neither Gompers nor Keiller have introduced major reforms in their curricula or teaching strategies in the early going, focusing instead on school culture and on who is doing the teaching.

Even so, test scores rose at both schools in their first year. Keiller's score on California's Academic Performance Index, a composite standardized-testing rating that is reported on a scale of 200 to 1,000, climbed 50 points, from 638 to 687 between 2004–05 and 2005–06, compared to an average gain of 7 points in San Diego's 216 traditional public schools and an 11-point gain statewide. Gompers' score rose 24 points, from 540 to 564. As one large elementary school, King-Chavez had an API score of 559. The API scores at the three small charter schools formed in its footprint rose dramatically: to 631 at King-Chavez Arts; 683 at King-Chavez Athletics; and 675 at King-Chavez Primary.

California did not report API scores for several of San Diego's other restructuring schools. The performance of the schools that it did report scores for was mixed. The API index of one school rose from 644 to 674; the indexes of two other schools declined, from 577 to 565 in one instance, and from 584 to 583, 554, and 556, where a school was divided into three smaller schools.

Such results and the schools' improving climate have led nearby traditional San Diego public schools troubled by the prospect of losing students to the new charter schools to promote themselves to Gompers and Keiller families through various types of advertising. Says Riveroll: "We understand that we're the competition now, and that's not a bad thing."

But student performance at both Gompers and Keiller is still below San Diego's average 2005–06 API score of 735, and well below California's target API score of 800. It is much easier to raise very low scores than to sustain improvements once scores begin to rise, and educators at both Gompers and Keiller acknowledge that raising test scores to state standards will require much more attention to teaching and learning at the two schools.

Both Riveroll and Ladd attribute much of their schools' early progress to the schools' original reason for becoming charters—having the ability to select staffs that were fully invested in Gompers and Keiller's success. The new staffs embraced the hard work required to bring about change, they say, and having a team of teachers, support staff, and administrators who are in agreement about the importance of a more orderly school culture made it easier for individual team members to enforce new school rules. Many teachers worked significantly longer days under the new governance structure, and many of them tutor students after school.

Making Gompers and Keiller more cohesive communities hasn't been a painless process. One Gompers teacher complained, for example, that the school's new rules weren't enforced consistently, undermining the sense of teamwork at the school. But Riveroll says that his teachers have urged him to get tough with colleagues they felt weren't pulling their weight—something that didn't happen in the past. Conversely, Ladd says that when she was forced to not renew a struggling teacher's contract, it led to some surprised looks from other staffers who weren't used to the idea that performance and fit could be factors in personnel decisions.

The Price of Reform

Gompers and Keiller have made impressive early progress in part because they enjoyed the strong backing of San Diego's school superintendent and the active support of the California Charter School Association. The schools have also benefited from hundreds of thousands of dollars of government and foundation funding.

Both schools collected \$360,000 in funding from a U.S. Department of Education charter school program and CCSA helped both schools win \$300,000 grants from the Bentonville, Ark.-based Walton Family Foundation, through a program that CCSA administers for the foundation (Walton gave King Academies \$540,000). CCSA also helped the schools secure \$100,000 grants from the Girard Foundation, a San Diego philanthropy.

The schools spent the money on start-up work that ranged from curriculum planning to team-building and budget-writing. The funding helped the schools develop and pay for a number of new initiatives, including the teacher performance bonuses and salary supplements (both schools pay teachers slightly more than they would make in the traditional system). And it has helped to cover some of the schools' general operating expenses for work that traditional public schools don't have to provide for themselves, such as accounting.

To a significant degree, the money has helped the schools compensate for very low state funding of charter schools. Under the terms of California's charter school law, charter schools in San Diego receive \$5,200 per pupil, significantly less than the \$8,000 per pupil that the local district spends per student. Gompers, with its federal and foundation funding, spent approximately \$7,000 per student in 2005–06. Given the significant costs of turning around failing schools, it is unlikely that the philanthropic community could support charter school conversions such as those at Gompers and Keiller on a national scale in the absence of sharply higher state charter school funding.

Alan Bersin had left the San Diego superintendency by the time Gompers and Keiller opened their doors in September 2005. The new school board had bought out his contract the previous January, only weeks after their election. Bersin stayed through the end of June and became California's Secretary of Education on July 1 as a member of Gov. Schwarzenegger's cabinet. Four months

after Bersin departed, Bennett left his post as San Diego's director of school choice.

The strong support Gompers and Keiller enjoyed from the district administration departed along with Bersin and Bennett. The school faced facilities and services fees from the district that were significantly higher than those they had originally negotiated. In one instance, district officials threatened to padlock Keiller's classrooms unless the charter school paid additional space fees.

San Diego's new superintendent, Carl Cohn, who replaced Bersin in October 2005, insists that San Diego and other urban school systems are fully capable of turning around failing schools without turning them into charter schools. In October 2006, Cohn and teachers union president Camille Zombro announced a tentative agreement on a new contract that gives principals in the city's lowest-performing traditional public schools a degree of the flexibility in selecting teachers enjoyed by charter school principals—and more flexibility than Bersin had sought for traditional public schools in the September 2004 meeting that teacher union leaders had walked out of before the conversion of Gompers, Keiller, and King to charter schools.

But nationally, few school boards, superintendents and teachers unions—the players who hold the local levers of power in public education—have shown enthusiasm for the bold reforms that Gompers and Keiller have adopted with their new-found autonomy: the selection of staff based on fit and merit rather than seniority, financial incentives for teachers, longer school days, uniforms, tightened discipline codes, and administrative efficiency. Nor have they, or their state and federal counterparts, been willing to marshal the considerable resources required to turn around failing schools like Gompers and Keiller.

The No Child Left Behind Act is likely to cast a bright light on thousands of such schools in the months and years ahead. The conversion of Gompers and Keiller to charter schools in San Diego suggests that with the right combination of top-down and bottom-up pressure for reform, and with sufficient support for reform efforts from inside and outside of school districts, even the most troubled public schools are able to turn the corner toward educational success. The question is whether education policymakers will act on the lessons that schools like Gompers and Keiller teach us.

DISCLOSURE: Co-author Joe Williams writes The Chalkboard, a blog, for the New York Charter Schools Association. Alan Bersin is a member of Education Sector's board of directors.

ENDNOTES

¹ NCLB became law in 2002 but it counted schools' prior performance in meeting state standards.

² Feb. 23, 2005 letter from Terry Pesta and Robin Whitlow to Shelia Jackson.