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Long Beach Unified School District (A): Change That Leads to Improvement (1992–2002)

In September 2002, 43-year-old Christopher Steinhauser became the 12th superintendent of the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). Steinhauser succeeded Carl Cohn, a popular leader who led the district from 1992 to 2002. During Cohn's long tenure as superintendent, LBUSD implemented many new initiatives including the adoption of a mandatory K-8 school uniform policy, standards-based instructional reform, and the development of a partnership with local institutions of higher education. LBUSD also ended social promotion for the district's third, fifth, and eighth graders and required all students to be able to read by the end of third grade. Steinhauser knew it would be a challenge to follow in Cohn's footsteps, but he was dedicated to educating the children of Long Beach. A former LBUSD student himself, Steinhauser had also served the district as a teacher's aide, teacher, principal, area superintendent, central office director, and deputy superintendent prior to his promotion. As Steinhauser contemplated his predecessor's record and how to build on it, he asked himself: "What has been critical to our success thus far?"

Long Beach in the Early 1990s

Economic Tailspin

Located in Southern California adjacent to Los Angeles, this heavily industrialized port city was the fifth-largest city in the state with nearly half a million residents. Due to immigration from Asia and Latin America, Long Beach was on its way toward becoming the most ethnically diverse city in the nation.¹ Ongoing population growth strained the local economy, which was reeling from the closure of a U.S. Navy base and the downsizing of operations at McDonnell Douglas, the city's largest employer.

¹ Relative to the 65 most populous U.S. cities, cited by the City of Long Beach, <http://www.ci.long-beach.ca.us/news/displaynews.asp?NewsID=313>.

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Moreover, rising levels of gang activity threatened public safety. Residents were devastated on April 29, 1992, when riots raged across the city following the acquittal of four white police officers accused of assaulting African-American Rodney King. The damage caused by burning, looting, and violence was a terrible blow to this historically tight-knit community, once nicknamed “Iowa by the sea.” One Long Beach native recalled:

Long Beach felt like a war zone in the early 1990s. The state’s economy was sinking. All major revenue-earning businesses downsized. We couldn’t catch our footing. The civil unrest left entire blocks of residences and business burned to the ground. We were no longer a navy town, nor a shipyard, nor an aerospace town. As middle-class jobs disappeared, there was white flight, and some wondered if we would become a ghost town.

The Cohn Era Begins

In the midst of this community turmoil, Carl Cohn was appointed superintendent, the first African-American to hold that position. A Long Beach native, former Compton high school history teacher, and LBUSD high school counselor, Cohn earned his doctorate in urban educational policy and planning at UCLA and worked as an LBUSD administrator in a variety of assignments from 1977–1984 and 1988–1990. While away from Long Beach in the mid-1980s, Cohn taught courses in the politics of education at the University of Pittsburgh and California State University, Los Angeles. Cohn served as an LBUSD area superintendent for the two years prior to his promotion to superintendent in September 1992. His background was considered somewhat nontraditional for a Long Beach superintendent, since he had never been a principal.

Cohn took over California’s third-largest school system, the 32nd-largest school district in the U.S. In response to the influx of immigrants, enrollment at LBUSD had grown steadily, from 57,467 in SY82² to 96,488 in SY02 (**Exhibit 1** shows enrollment changes). The city’s changing demographics were reflected in LBUSD’s students, who spoke over 46 different languages at home. By the end of Cohn’s tenure, more than one-third of LBUSD students were learning English, and more than two-thirds were poor. Population growth was uneven across the city, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and busing programs. LBUSD brought children from the central and western sections of the city into the more affluent east-side neighborhoods.³

In addition to the challenges of growth and diversity, LBUSD’s financial picture was unpromising at the outset of Cohn’s tenure. LBUSD was fiscally independent (not under city or county jurisdiction). Budget shortfalls caused by recessions at the state and national levels impacted the district’s funding. The district cut its proposed budget by more than \$5 million in SY92, \$8 million in SY93, and \$9 million in SY94. Total LBUSD revenues grew from \$423 million in SY93 to \$972 million in SY02 (**Exhibit 2** profiles financial information from SY93–SY02).

A Call to Action

In early 1993, the mayor convened an influential and diverse set of leaders from the press, business, and education fields to address three critical areas facing Long Beach: economic

² PELP cases use the convention “SY” to designate, in this instance, school year 1981–1982.

³ During the mid-1990s, Lakewood and Signal Hill, two distinct neighborhoods within LBUSD, petitioned to separate from the district. Cohn recalled, “These separatist movements were a major distraction. After nearly five years and countless county committee hearings, the state unanimously refused these requests.”

development, education, and public safety. The Mayor’s Task Force worked to define some shared goals for improving the community.

As they prepared to implement their ideas, members of the Mayor’s Task Force reflected on the inefficacy of many past community public education initiatives and decided to create a unique vehicle to sustain their focus. In October 1993, they brought the three new leaders of Long Beach’s educational institutions together to forge the Long Beach Educational Partnership.⁴ In the first of many conversations, Cohn and his counterparts from Long Beach City College (LBCC) and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), discussed the city’s education system. Cohn reflected on the importance of the community’s voice:

Meeting together with other leaders reinforced my sense that the issue of education had the community’s attention and support. We worked hard to prevent a statewide voucher initiative in 1993, and when voters defeated the proposal, we felt that we had been given a second chance. It was important for us to prove our worthiness when voters asked us to “improve the existing system, not create a new one.” They didn’t want business as usual anymore in our public schools, and I felt we had been given a clear mandate for change.

Governance

Board Membership and History

A five-member Board of Education (henceforth referred to as the “Board”) governed LBUSD and set district policy. Each Board member represented one of five regions of Long Beach. Although the poorest residents were concentrated in two regions in the southwest section of the city, all five members’ regions included culturally and economically diverse neighborhoods, reflecting the city’s integrated nature. Boundaries for these five regions were established in 1988, when, in an attempt to address the changing demographic profile of Long Beach, citizens voted to change Board election policies. Prior to the vote, Board members were elected by the city at-large. The redistricting led to the election of four new members, including the first Latino and African-American.

Following this membership turnover, the Board became more explicit in its efforts to, as one member explained, “work together to act in the best interest of all kids across the city.” LBUSD had a history of stable Board membership, and residents, school district officials, and Board members alike spoke about the high quality and dedication of past and current members. According to local sources, officers rarely used Board membership as a stepping-stone to other public offices.

Giugni’s Legacy

As Cohn and the Board surveyed the work ahead, they evaluated the legacy LBUSD inherited from Cohn’s predecessor, Tom Giugni. Long Beach superintendents averaged eight years of service on the job, which more than doubled the three-year national average. Giugni, who led LBUSD from 1986 to 1992, was the first “outsider” hired as LBUSD superintendent in more than 50 years.

One Board member characterized Giugni’s working relationships with individual Board members as a “divide and conquer strategy.” Giugni labored to improve relations between LBUSD and the

⁴ *Partnering to Lead Educational Renewal: High-Quality Teachers, High-Quality Schools*, edited by J. W. Houck, K.C. Cohn, and C.A. Cohn (New York: TC Press, 2004), documents a full history of the Long Beach Educational Partnership.

local teachers' union, the Teacher's Association of Long Beach (TALB). "Giugni and TALB's executive director," recalled the district's former director of employee relations, "slowly worked to switch LBUSD-TALB negotiations from bargaining over words to bargaining about concepts. TALB began discussing issues that came to our attention as problems to be solved rather than threats to their system."

In an effort to decentralize the entrenched central-office power structure, Giugni replaced the traditional elementary and high school assistant superintendents with five "area superintendents," each responsible for one section of the city. Giugni was careful to ensure that the new areas did not match Board members' regions, and he promoted Cohn to take charge of one area. Veteran administrators recalled that this change began to "topple the hierarchy and break down fiefdoms." In addition, schools received more responsibility for curriculum decisions, as Giugni eliminated the central curriculum department. Giugni retired in 1992. In reflecting on Giugni's tenure, Steinhauser said, "Superintendent Giugni had an 'everybody do your own thing' philosophy, and schools were disconnected from the central office. By creating the area structure, he encouraged a healthy competition, but expectations across the district were inconsistent."

A New Approach to Governance

During his tenure as an area superintendent, Cohn had been frustrated by the time and energy senior staff devoted to preparing for semi-monthly Board meetings, which he felt distracted central office's focus on support for schools. So, he and the Board agreed to experiment with a new way of working. Both Cohn and the Board members believed that "strength would breed strength." They wanted neither a weak superintendent nor a weak Board and worked to establish a structure that would suit both parties.

They decided that the Board would hold quarterly retreats, rather than meeting with LBUSD senior staff in long, semimonthly meetings. By law, the Board conducted a superintendent's review in a closed session. Cohn asked that the Board initiate a "90-day superintendent review" as part of these full-day workshops, because he felt it was imperative to "get problems out on the table." Cohn felt this gave him a chance to talk with the Board "when everyone could really let their hair down and get into the issues."

As stipulated in California's Brown Act, the Board continued its practice of semimonthly open sessions, but these regular meetings were considerably shortened. Usually, public business was conducted in less than an hour. Five standing committees—providing oversight for LBUSD business, instruction, personnel, finance, and purchasing and contracts—also remained intact, and each Board member sat on two committees. As long as two Board members were present, committees could meet with LBUSD staff privately prior to each semimonthly meeting to prepare items for the agenda. Board member Karin Polacheck reflected on the experience:

With Carl's predecessor, everything was very prescriptive. Giugni met with his staff to prepare three days in advance. Their reports were very polished, but there was little dialogue or listening. Carl felt that talking together without an agenda was critical. He really believed that we were community representatives, and he wanted a chance to hear our concerns. Our first quarterly retreat started with an evaluation of Carl. Together, we defined the six to eight things we wanted him to work on, and then said, "Okay, we'll talk about that in three months." This established our rapport and gave us a sense that we were working together as a team. We knew Carl cared about kids, and our conversations built an incredible sense of trust. I believe our retreat structure was our strength.

Board Initiatives

During their retreats, Cohn and the Board discussed the many challenges facing LBUSD and developed a shared vision for how the district could address some of the short and long-term community concerns regarding public safety, equal opportunity, and quality education. They agreed that the district should focus on “*raising standards in dress, behavior, and achievement.*” This three-part goal was established in one of the early Board retreats and led to a sequence of what LBUSD called “Board initiatives.” Board initiatives were long-term projects requiring the consistent focus and attention of the district’s many stakeholders.

Over time, Cohn, the Board, and the LBUSD senior staff came to see the district staff as agents of implementation for Board policies. As superintendent, Cohn was designated the spokesperson for district policies. Cohn explained his philosophy of governance:

Extraordinary teaming emerged from those retreats, because people really spent time together hashing out the issues. The fur flew when we disagreed, but then understandings would emerge and we could move forward and make decisions together. Even if we had to wait an extra year to get consensus, I insisted upon unanimity around big issues. Split votes might have offered hope or a reason to avoid our initiatives to anyone who opposed our mandate for change, and we couldn’t afford distractions or detractors. I was lucky that our Board members’ political instincts were invariably excellent. They knew what mattered to this community, and I listened carefully to those views.

Getting to Work: Implementing Reforms

School Uniforms: Adopting the Nation’s First Mandatory Policy

In January 1994, the Board adopted its first initiative mandating school uniforms for elementary and middle school students. While many districts around the country had experimented with voluntary uniform policies in attempts to curb gang-related violence, LBUSD was the first district in the nation to mandate uniforms.

The mandatory policy was implemented after LBUSD conducted some site-based experiments. Cohn had first explored the use of school uniforms when he led the district’s anti-gang task force in the late 1980s. Cohn described a scene where a few dozen children, caught in the middle of a gang shootout, were forced to the floor of a school bus. “We needed to give safe passage for students through some very tricky terrain,” he said. “We realized the way to make students identity apparent was with uniforms. We didn’t think about all the other issues. It was safety, pure and simple.”⁵ In response to Cohn’s prodding, LBSUD soon gave principals the option of adopting uniform requirements at their schools. The district discovered, “that for those schools that adopted uniforms, they soon found that their students were earning better grades, were better behaved and were less frequently absent.”⁶

In light of these results, the district convened meetings with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders across the community to gauge interest in the idea of a system-wide mandatory uniform policy for K-8 students. LBUSD staff determined that the community favored the idea and felt this

⁵ J. Sterngold, “Taking a New Look at Uniforms and Their Impact on Schools,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2000.

⁶ “School Uniforms Growing in Favor in California,” National Desk, *The New York Times*, September 3, 1994.

support was sufficient to withstand possible legal challenges regarding students' civil liberties. Following a vigorous debate at the next quarterly retreat, the Board unanimously approved the policy. This system of piloting and consultation became the standard approach for subsequent Board initiatives.

In the first year of mandatory uniform implementation (SY95), suspensions across the district dropped 32%, and one reporter wrote, "every category of infraction—from assaults to drug use to sex offenses—has fallen as well, sometimes precipitously. Teachers and administrators said they believe most students also perform better academically, though other initiatives begun at the same time make it difficult to single out the role of the uniforms."⁷ Unsuccessful suits filed against LBUSD by the American Civil Liberties Union and others argued that the policy violated state law "by essentially intimidating parents through a cumbersome exemption process and by not providing sufficient uniforms or financial aid to those who can't afford the outfits,"⁸ which prompted the state legislature to adopt provisions protecting uniform policies. LBUSD worked to advertise and streamline the exemption process and also to find creative solutions to the financial aid problem. By 1998, the district reported 99% compliance, with only 600–700 students officially requesting exemption.⁹ Following the Long Beach example, schools in more than 35 states had mandatory uniform policies by 2000.¹⁰

Developing Standards for Academic Excellence

Many factors during the early 1990s led to changes in the area of instruction at LBUSD. Nationally, the movement toward standards-based instruction, which was popular by the decade's end, started slowly with individual school and teacher experiments. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics developed and released the first set of national standards in 1989. These "guidelines for excellence" sparked a new chapter in the nation's enduring debate about what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling.

While political support for standards in California was uncertain following the governor's veto of the state's new learning assessment system in 1994, Cohn and other key administrators felt "academic standards were an inevitable and important lever for school improvement."¹¹ Locally, they encouraged the fledgling Long Beach Educational Partnership to foster dialogue among teachers, administrators, business leaders, university experts, and parents about the means for improving the city's educational offerings. Participants expected early partnership meetings to focus on the unacceptable number of LBUSD high school graduates who entered local colleges without adequate skills in literacy or math. However, as the groups talked together they discovered that two-thirds of LBUSD third graders were reading below grade level. These conversations led LBUSD to decide that rigorous grade-level standards were needed to ensure that all students would be prepared to learn at higher levels.

⁷ A. Pertman, "California Finds Uniform Success," *The Boston Globe*, January 13, 1996.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ K.C. Cohn and C.A. Cohn, "School Improvement Initiatives in Long Beach, California: The Quest for Higher Student Achievement, Behavior and Dress Standards," *Education*, Winter 1998, Vol. 119, Issue 2, p. 181.

¹⁰ Sterngold, "Taking a New Look at Uniforms and Their Impact on Schools," *The New York Times*, June 28, 2000.

¹¹ Quoted from Anne Mackinnon's *Standards-Based Middle Grades Reform in Six Urban Districts, 1995–2001: A Report on the Program for Student Achievement of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation*, 2003, <http://www.emcf.org>, p. 22. This report gives a full overview of the reform in LBUSD middle schools.

Calls for change were also being voiced internally. When Cohn became superintendent, curricular decisions were quite decentralized, as Giugni had disbanded the district's curriculum department. Christine Dominguez, who would eventually take responsibility for the Office of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development, commented:

Carl believed that the purpose of the central office was to support schools in serving children. He made it clear that we were expected to spend time in schools and told us to find out what was needed by going out and just listening. This was a major shift.

We decided to hold focus groups to find out what, if anything, people would want if we recreated a curriculum function in the central office. Teachers and principals said they wanted more consistent expectations and support. Parents complained that the lack of uniformity among classrooms and schools was confusing. So, our focus on standards evolved from trying to meet those needs.

LBUSD formed core academic committees in language arts, math, science, and history/social science. In SY95, these four groups began drafting content standards, the first of three core components of a standards-based system. These three components included:

- **Content standards** specifying what students should know in each subject area
- **Performance standards** clarifying the content standards with specifics about how students would demonstrate mastery, how students' performances would be judged and graded, and, implicitly, how teachers needed to teach
- **Performance assessments** measuring students' attainment of the performance standards, thus making all students, teachers, and schools accountable for reaching a common, verifiable level of achievement¹²

The committees spent months drafting content standards, and a large number of "critical friends" including foundation partners, parents, and local faculty from LBCC and CSULB were involved in the final review process. By June 1995, the first set of English/language arts content standards, designed as benchmarks for grades 2, 5, 8, and 12, were developed and approved by the Board. Implementation began in SY96. Content standards were soon completed in other areas and were in place for all grade levels by SY98. Under the leadership of the curriculum department, with support from the research department, initial performance standards and assessments were developed and piloted in SY98. When California began issuing state academic standards in 1998, LBUSD redrafted their standards to achieve full integration with the state's.

Reforming Instruction

While the standards work was getting underway, many district stakeholders were concerned that additional actions were needed to focus attention on improving students' performance, especially in the early grades. Board members agreed failing students could no longer be promoted, and they adopted a series of three initiatives over the next five years: elementary literacy (adopted in 1995), middle school reform (1996), and high school reform (1999). Partial funding for these projects came from a \$63.7 million settlement awarded to LBUSD by the state in 1995 following resolution of a 13-

¹² Adapted from Mackinnon, *Standards-Based Middle Grades Reform in Six Urban Districts, 1995–2001*.

year lawsuit, in which LBUSD sought reimbursement for costs incurred in implementing voluntary desegregation efforts during the 1980s.¹³

K-3 literacy initiative In response to data that illustrated serious reading problems for the district's youngest students, the Board adopted its second initiative in 1995, which stated, "*every child would read before exiting the third grade.*" Children who could not read were sent to summer school. Referred to as the "Third Grade Reading Initiative," this project was masterminded by Dominguez and Steinhauser, who was then director of special projects. They focused their efforts on developing standards and related assessments for each grade level, redirecting resources, and revamping professional development at all 56 elementary schools.¹⁴ Resources were targeted at the schools that faced the biggest challenges, a philosophy that permeated LBUSD's approach to resource allocation. Benchmark books, aligned with district standards, were chosen to measure progress (**Exhibit 3** details student performance on benchmark books).¹⁵

As instructional reform in the early grades unfolded, LBUSD encountered an unexpected hurdle when California abruptly passed class-size reduction legislation in 1996. By mandating a maximum of 20 students per classroom teacher in grades one through three, this law created an urgent need for qualified elementary teachers, who were already in short supply. Thus, in partnership with CSULB faculty, LBUSD created the Early Literacy Institute, which offered professional literacy training for all K-3 teachers district-wide. This mandatory 36-hour course integrated existing LBUSD pedagogy with strategies for standards-based literacy instruction. Sessions addressed language acquisition, applied phonics, and student assessment within the context of the Essential Elements of Effective Instruction, a pedagogical method for linking instructional objectives with student behaviors and outcomes developed by Madeline Hunter. The Institute received rave reviews from veteran and new teachers alike. Coaches were also provided for low-performing schools. Dominguez said:

The reform process was hard and sometimes very emotional. We weren't used to constructive criticism, and suddenly outside evaluators were giving us critical feedback. Many people didn't know how to accept it, which led to a lot of hurt feelings. We had to learn how to act upon new ideas, instead of getting defensive. Recounting it now, it sounds like we knew what we were doing. But, it was messy. When we started, we didn't really know how all the pieces would fit together in the end. People kept asking us to describe what the district would look like when the reforms were complete, but we couldn't explain the whole picture because we were creating a system as we went along. When it got really rough, we could put on our parent hats, since many of us—including Carl, Chris, and myself—had kids in the system. Going home each night was a powerful reality check.

Between 1999 and 2002, the number of fifth graders reading at grade level increased from 6.7% to 53.5%. In SY02, 40% of third-grade students who attended summer school raised their reading achievement to grade level or above.

Middle school reform To address lagging academic performance in LBUSD middle schools, the Board adopted the "Eighth Grade Initiative" in 1996, which barred eighth graders who failed

¹³ See Peter Schmidt, "California Agrees to Pay District For Desegregation Expenses," *Education Week*, May 10, 1995.

¹⁴ A detailed explanation of this initiative is provided in "Working Together to Improve Reading in the Early Grades," by K. DeVries, J. Seal, T. Bellmar, T. Suzuki, C. Dominguez, and C. Steinhauser, Chapter 2 in *Partnering to Lead Educational Renewal: High-Quality Teachers, High-Quality Schools*.

¹⁵ The district sought a waiver from the state to supplement mandated textbooks with "little books" for guided reading.

more than one class from enrolling in high school.¹⁶ To improve student performance, efforts focused on implementing standards-based reforms and expanding professional development for teachers and principals. The middle school work built on more than a decade of change in the way LBUSD educated young adolescents. During the late 1980s, LBUSD followed the nationwide trend and converted its seventh- to eighth-grade junior high schools into sixth- to eighth-grade middle schools. Martha Keizer, a retired administrator who managed some of the transition process from junior high to middle schools, recalled:

Necessary shifts in teacher and administrative attitudes appeared in every form from the ridiculous to the sublime. They had to figure out how to implement core classes, advisories, elective wheels, and many other brand new concepts. It was hard work, and some people made it more difficult than others. So, I insisted that LBUSD pay to chisel new names on each building. It sounds silly, but I believe that attending to small but important details can sometimes make the harder, more challenging things seem more manageable. Once “Middle School” was written in stone, people knew there was no going back.

Once middle schools were established, LBUSD concentrated on implementing standards-based reforms. At the urging of Clark Foundation program officer Hayes Mizell, an office of middle school reform was established in the early 1990s. Mizell commented:

I wanted to be sure that this reform wouldn’t fall into the lap of just one person, but that key people at different levels would sit down and talk together on a regular basis. Carl was clear that he wanted his team to build a system with the force and focus needed to drive change all the way to the classroom. We kept reinforcing this expectation of accountability in formal and informal ways. Some people found our approach to be a bit challenging, since on the one hand, we were offering financial and other support, and on the other, we were not shy of being critical or asking tough questions.

Cohn brought in a young teacher named Kristi Kahl to manage the middle school effort, following two long-established traditions at LBUSD: early promotion and rotation of leaders across the district. Unlike many other districts, in which principals and administrators followed isolated career paths, leaders in Long Beach were expected to rotate among assignments and switched not only among schools but between the central office and schools, as well as across departments. Principals rarely worked at one school for more than five years, and central administrators moved among departments. Those responsible for annual assignments took a system-wide view in placing people, especially principals, trying to find the “best fit” between an individual’s skills, the local school community, and district needs.

Area superintendent Dorothy Harper worked in close collaboration with Dominguez and the curriculum department and Lynn Winters, who headed up the research department, to upgrade the district’s professional development. Efforts focused on linking district offerings and expenditures to standards-based pedagogy. Slowly, many LBUSD one-day training modules were replaced with subject-matter workshops spanning the school year and supported at school sites by teacher coaches. George Perry, a consultant, who helped with this endeavor, observed:

I used to think teachers would welcome the opportunity to take responsibility for their own professional development, but I’ve learned that teachers care about their students and what

¹⁶ LBUSD assigned low-performing eighth graders to the Long Beach Preparatory Academy. Long Beach Prep, which opened its doors in SY97, was considered a temporary measure by many district officials. While the number of failing eighth graders fell by more than half in its first two years of implementation, Long Beach Prep graduates experienced difficulty in rejoining their high school classmates. LBUSD closed the academy in June 2001.

happens in their classrooms—period. Everything else falls to a distant second. Dorothy, Chris, and Lynn took responsibility to lead a systemic change and tried to figure out how that work could be implemented in individual schools and classrooms through developing clear expectations and systems of support. Their collaboration was wonderful, though that type of interaction didn't exist at other levels.

When a 1998 study showed that many principals were inadequately informed or involved in the reform, the district arranged seminars and literacy training for principals that mirrored the teachers' workshops.¹⁷ The leadership team worked with others to integrate activities across their departments based on information that described student needs. Building the district's capacity for "data-driven decision making" was a key component in designing interventions and support systems that achieved results. The district leadership team collaborated with principals to establish an understanding of their new role as instructional leaders. Together, they implemented many new practices including curriculum mapping, student portfolios, coaching, mentoring, school and classroom walkthroughs, and open evaluation of student work. Principal evaluations were also redesigned. The challenge of establishing new middle school cultures led to turnover among LBUSD principals. Harper recalled: "I think the biggest barrier to change was that we had such pride in the way we were. This made it difficult to determine what was no longer needed. Some people were frightened when Carl came up with these new ideas, ideas that challenged what had worked well for Long Beach in the past. It was hard to let things go."

In 1999, Cohn and his team decided to eliminate the area superintendencies and reorganize the central-office infrastructure by level (see **Exhibit 4** for the SY02 organizational chart). Harper took over the newly created middle school superintendent's office. This change helped to address some of the misalignment and confusion that resulted from the area structure. Kahl reflected on the struggles to advance a cohesive middle school reform agenda:

Early efforts were very fragmented, because each area superintendent was responsible for a few middle schools, and they each had their own vision for what the reforms would look like. Once the standards work got under way, an understanding among the executive staff began to emerge. We discovered that our standards weren't really all that measurable and that aligned performance assessments were lacking. Slowly, we abandoned many of the earlier reforms—like advisories and heterogeneous groupings—because we couldn't find evidence that they were helping. We wanted teachers to be teaching in their areas of expertise. Now, structurally, many of our middle schools look much like the old junior highs, but the rationale and the instruction are very different.

High school initiative Reform at LBUSD's six comprehensive high schools was not the main focus of LBUSD's efforts during the 1990s. Cohn said: "We decided that the best path to high school reform was to bring better-prepared students to high school." This was a major departure for LBUSD, as high schools and high school leaders blazed the path for reform throughout the 1960s and 1970s. "Parents want safe elementary schools," Harper commented, "but a district is only as good as its high schools. Communities rally around high schools." Local residents, including many LBUSD staff, maintained strong ties based on their high school affiliations.

Despite the decision to focus attention on K-8 reform, LBUSD leaders did not ignore high schools. They encouraged sites to experiment. Cohn hired an outsider from Oklahoma to become a principal at Polytechnic High School, the district's flagship high school, who created the first co-principalship

¹⁷ A series of reports published at <http://www.middleweb.com/Reformingschools.html> including John Norton, "Standards-Based Reform: Now Comes the Hard Part," fall 1999, described the middle school reform work at LBUSD.

in district history.¹⁸ LBUSD also acquired an abandoned naval base as the site for a new high school to serve the crowded western side of the city, which housed many of the city's poorest and newest residents. Harper recalled, "When LBUSD got the land for Cabrillo, people around Long Beach sat up and noticed Carl. They said, 'This guy makes things happen.'" Cabrillo High School opened in 1996. The Board also negotiated with TALB and converted one high school into a classical academy. Wilson Classical High School opened in 1997, the first high school to require a minimum GPA and school uniforms.

In 1999, the Board passed the "High School Initiative."¹⁹ Ninth-grade students who read two or more levels below grade level were targeted for intervention, which included mandatory summer school and specialized classes.

Changing Role of the Central Office

As district officials and teachers reflected on Cohn's superintendency, they commented frequently on the quality of the central-office team. Cohn promoted insiders including Harper, Steinhauser, Dominguez, DeVries, and others to lead reform efforts. Dominguez was surprised at her promotion. She recalled, "Carl appointed me as the director of curriculum when he became superintendent. Initially, I did not apply for the position, because it wasn't something I wanted to do. But he encouraged others to push me to do it. He saw something in me that I didn't see in myself."

In addition, Cohn recruited two nationally recognized experts, Dr. Lynn Winters and Dr. Judy Elliott, to lead the research and special education departments, respectively. These appointments took place in a district where a majority of employees were born and raised in Long Beach.

Research Department

Winters left the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) to join LBUSD in 1995. She was responsible for coordinating testing programs, implementing state accountability programs, and conducting research and evaluation studies. Under Winters's direction, LBUSD's capacity for data collection and interpretation expanded rapidly.

The 13 members of the research department worked closely with teachers, principals, and the curriculum department to implement district-developed end-of-course exams in key subjects and grade levels, which were correlated to state assessments. The department's motto was "serving schools." They wrote and reviewed test specifications for district assessments, built a distribution infrastructure, and scored and reported district and state test results. In addition to its data-processing role, the research office worked to help principals and teachers make sense of the rapidly escalating amount of available information. One middle school teacher observed, "Access to the data really drove the change process for our school. It cut through the emotion." Elementary Assistant Superintendent Karen DeVries added:

Once Lynn and her team got to work, we could look at student and grade-level achievement data. Teachers started realizing that anybody at LBUSD could see their results.

¹⁸ H.J. Green participated in the integration of the Tulsa schools, where he was the first white principal of the formerly all-black Booker T. Washington High School. Because he was the first "outsider" appointed to an LBUSD principalship, many district old-timers felt that "Had H.J. failed, no other outside staff would have been hired by the district."

¹⁹ Information about the High School Initiative is available at http://www.lbusd.k12.ca.us/high/high_school_initiative.htm.

Around the schools, people started to ask tough questions like, “How come this ‘regular’ classroom is outscoring the ‘gifted’ classroom?” Suddenly, we could compare progress and results from different teaching strategies for every child, grade level, and school. This really leveled the playing field and changed the conversation.

When asked to describe her position at LBUSD, Winters laughed, “I’m the sand in the oyster.” Dominguez echoed many of her colleagues when she said, “Lynn is brilliant, caring, and can be viewed as abrasive. She came in with a whole new sense of how to generate data and kept asking hard questions. She was our own internal critical friend, always pushing us forward.” In reflecting on Winters’s role at LBUSD, Cohn added:

She convinced our teachers that data could help them in their classrooms by explaining clearly the link between accountability and their mission of creating bright futures for kids. Many of them didn’t want to believe her, but she won them over.

Special Education Department

In 1999, Elliott moved to Long Beach from the National Center of Educational Outcomes. Introduced to Cohn by Winters, she brought the district’s philosophy of “education for ALL kids” to the office of special education. It was apparent to Elliott that the central office had too many traditional compliance-oriented staff with little or no curriculum expertise. By 2002, more than half of her special education staff were general educators. She also worked to integrate her department’s operations with others around the district by creating four “co-appointment” positions. She established staffers in curriculum, research, bilingual education, and student support services who reported both to Elliott and the respective assistant superintendents of those departments. And, in an effort to foster “customer service and responsiveness to site needs,” Elliott distributed cell phones to her administrators and gave their numbers to principals. She noted, “Having someone on the other end of the phone helped to build trust and credibility, which was important since the tricky compliance issues in special education scare many people.” Elliott reflected:

When I came to this office, the district was fighting fires, running out to schools, responding constantly to crises. One drops important details when always in a crisis mode. I wanted people to stop panicking and realize that we as a district needed to move toward systematically addressing situations that were symptoms of bigger issues. It was apparent to me that folks had always supplied people at school sites with fish and had not taken time to teach them how to fish. Building that capacity takes time, energy, credibility, and education.” I told my staff, “We’re going to teach our schools to fish for themselves now.” Coming here was inspiring, but very challenging. In this town where everyone seems to have gone to high school together, I am a total renegade. I think there are five outsiders in the central office.”

Steinhauser reiterated the importance of working together to educate all the children of Long Beach: “When I worked with the team in the special projects and government programs office, we agreed that LBUSD would not worship at the altar of compliance. It was our obligation to make sure the rules did not get in our way of doing the right thing for kids.” Elliott added, “As we approach the upcoming budget cuts, special education is not first on the chopping block. We’re shoulder to shoulder with everyone else.” District officials and Board members shared this philosophy.²⁰

²⁰ One unique example of LBUSD leaders’ commitment to all kids was captured in the creation of the Mary McLeod Bethune Transitional Center for homeless students. Established within a family homeless shelter in 1991, the Bethune school provided health, social, and academic services to the city’s homeless children and was supervised by Guigni, Cohn, and Harper.

Cohn's Philosophy

"What's best for kids" was Cohn's favorite aphorism. He endeavored to create a culture in which, as one Board member stated, "Nobody cares who gets credit for good ideas."

Top down and bottom up As an area superintendent, Cohn was responsible for two low-performing LBUSD schools in a tough neighborhood. Cohn installed two promising principals, Steinhauer and Randy Ward and charged each with turning his school around. Within months, both schools were seeing dramatic improvements. Cohn commented: "Chris and Randy had very different styles, but both were knocking my socks off in two equally tough schools. I realized that I didn't need to impose one kind of reform; everybody doesn't need to do this work in the same way. By doing things differently, we could learn from each other."

As district superintendent, Cohn continued to seek a balance between "top-down mandates" and "bottom-up reforms." On the one hand, the district wanted to "let 1,000 flowers bloom" and encouraged site-level innovation. On the other hand, Dominguez admitted:

The district was becoming more prescriptive about instruction. Certain things that the superintendent and district leadership felt were critical to our success were nonnegotiable. Nonnegotiable items included some specific training sessions, some materials, and the presence of coaches at low-performing schools. Some "nonnegotiables" were implemented across the district, while others only applied to low-performing schools.

Delegation and risk taking One district leader said, "Carl operated in a nonhierarchical, very personal way. Far from a micromanager, he encouraged debate, was quick to delegate responsibilities, and held people accountable for failures." Cohn hosted a monthly "Cookies with Carl" meeting, which was open to anyone in the district. These drop-in gatherings were well attended, attracting staff from all levels since, as one teacher recalled, "You could really cut through red tape if necessary."

Fostering debate and accountability, however, was a challenge for LBUSD. Tomio Nishimura, a retired Air Force financial inspector who took charge of the district's business and financial operations in 1990, observed:

Coming from the military, I was surprised at the amount of politics that were involved at LBUSD. In the Air Force, everything was cut and dried. As an officer, I was given tremendous authority, which included the responsibility for others' well-being. When I first arrived here, I found that many people were reluctant to make decisions for fear of offending someone. The common solution was, well, let's form a committee. I told my people that they should never be afraid to make a decision, even if it was the wrong one, because indecision was unacceptable. This avoidance of decision making—what some people call the culture of nice—is a problem in school districts.

Harper, a fellow African-American, met Cohn when both were called to assist with lunchtime supervision in the early 1970s during the district's period of racial integration. She recalled one decisive moment that captured his approach:

I remember one middle school reform meeting, when a principal continued to pester Carl with the same question. Carl was friendly, but finally he stopped the meeting and said, "Let me tell you, people who cannot deal with ambiguity might as well put their keys on the table." The room was a hush; you could have heard a pin drop. But statements like that stuck with people.

Selecting Cohn's Successor

When Cohn announced his intention to retire, the Board decided against conducting a national search and selected Steinhauser as Cohn's successor. Board president Bobbie Smith described the selection process:

We knew we wanted continuity. The district was in a good place and moving in a good direction, and we did not want an outside person coming in feeling that they needed to make big changes. Chris was Carl's deputy and a product of Long Beach, and we could predict a very smooth transition. Though Chris lacks Carl's breadth of experience, we trust him, and he was our unanimous choice.

Reflections and Results

As they reflected on the change process, board member Polacheck observed:

We did not identify initiatives just for the sake of having initiatives. They emerged as we discussed our vision for what we wanted the district to become. We made progress as the community coalesced around a positive issue, and then we just got to work on the problems. The process just happened. Maintaining a positive, collaborative, high-energy direction focused on high standards and improved student achievement kept the district moving forward. We kept ourselves focused.

The district used many different measures to track its progress. The state accountability program, developed in 1999 by the California Department of Education, used an academic performance index (API) to rank school improvement. By SY02, 50 schools won the Governor's Performance Award for meeting or exceeding their growth targets. In total, 69% of LBUSD schools met their targets, which exceeded the 52% statewide total. API scores at six LBUSD schools (7% of the total) remained the same or declined.²¹ Scores on the Stanford 9 (SAT9) exam, administered in all California public schools, increased overall, and the largest gains were concentrated in the earliest grades (see **Exhibit 5**). While SAT9 scores improved for students of all ethnic groups, a persistent gap in achievement remained between white and Asian students on the one hand, and African-American and Hispanic students on the other (see **Exhibit 6**).

From 1992 to 2002, dropout rates decreased by nearly two-thirds (see **Exhibit 7**), while the number of students taking advanced placement (AP) courses rose steadily. The 78% pass rate on AP exams at Polytechnic High, LBUSD's flagship school, was the highest rate of any urban high school in the country.²² Attendance rates held steady, at around 95%.

Ongoing Relationships with Stakeholders

When Cohn reflected on his tenure, he cited labor relations as one of the most significant areas of personal learning:

After a pretty heated exchange one day early in my superintendency, TALB's president suggested that we visit schools together to resolve a discrepancy in what we were hearing

²¹ Cited from the California Department of Education Web site, http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/2002Grth_dst.asp.

²² Cited by Carl Cohn, "Turning Education's Rhetoric Into Reality," *Education Week*, February 20, 2002.

from teachers about a number of issues. I worried that such a visit might escalate the negativity, but I went anyway. And, one high school visit turned out to be an experience that influenced the course of labor relations throughout the rest of my time at LBUSD. The truth is I had no idea how difficult a job it was being president of an urban teacher's union. I presumed that teachers and their association leadership were fairly monolithic in their views and disagreements between them would never be shared in front of me. But, I was wrong. After nearly two hours of discussion, I was feeling sorry for the union president because the faculty was beating up on him. Some felt TALB had not done enough to support retirement incentive programs.

I went back to my office and told Tomio to come up with a retirement incentive program that would capture all of the teachers at that high school that wanted to retire. We presented TALB with this new benefit in a one-hour negotiating session, and the practice of my visiting schools with TALB's president became a regular practice. It served to dramatically improve labor relations by suggesting to the larger organization that listening to teachers in a collaborative manner was an important value that I held. And we never had a teachers' strike, and negotiations never lasted more than two days.

One LBUSD negotiator added:

Through shared decision making, TALB and LBUSD worked collaboratively, contributing to a productive climate and good morale throughout the district. Good relations with TALB extended our ability to focus resources on instruction and student achievement rather than contentious litigation.

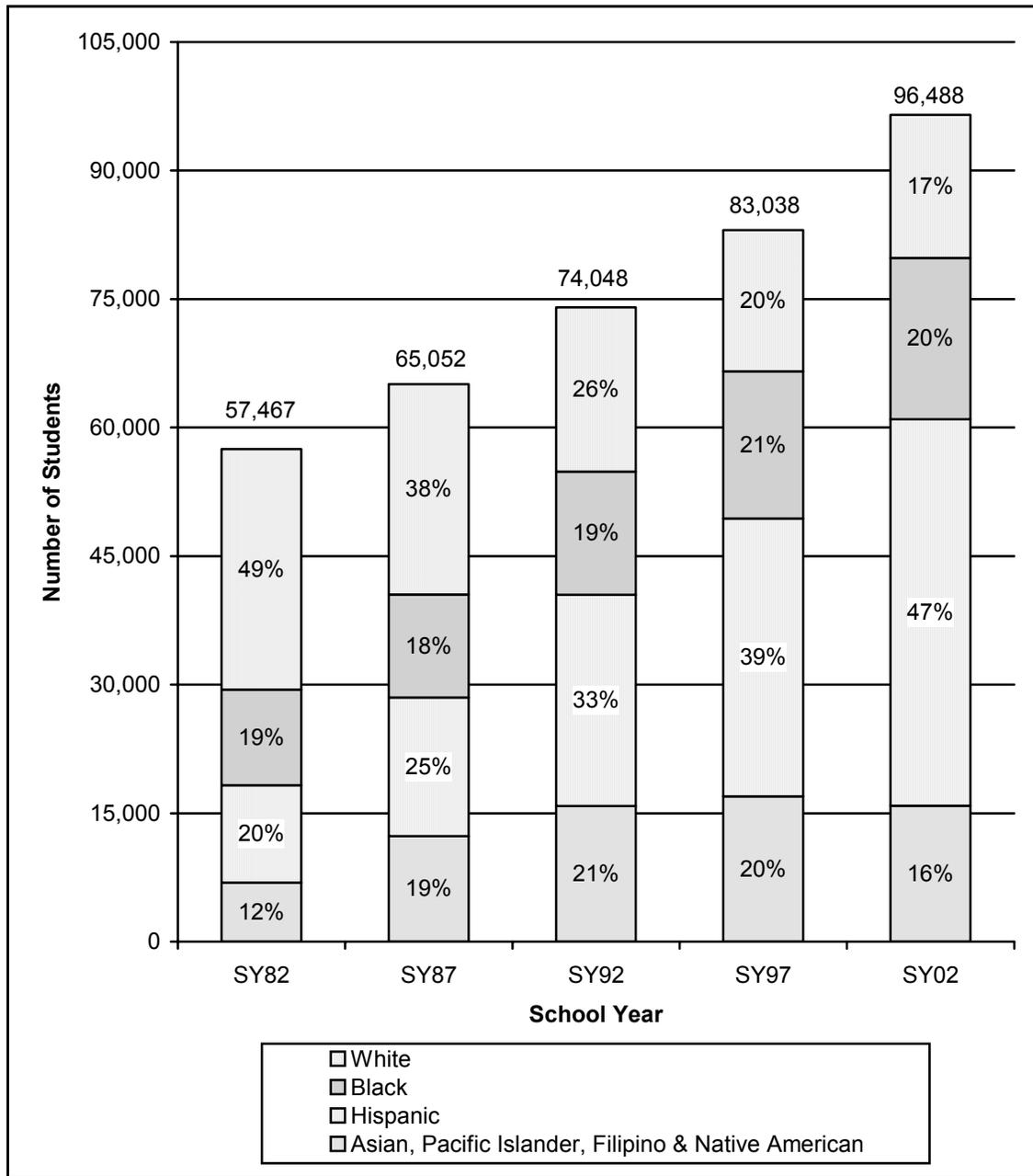
Steinhauser Looks Ahead

Sitting at his desk in September 2002, Steinhauser looked back at the district's achievements during the Cohn era. He pondered which aspects of the change process would apply to the work ahead. With a looming state fiscal crisis and a slowing rate of enrollment growth, LBUSD faced many new challenges. A number of key LBUSD leaders—including two Board members, TALB's executive director, Harper, Winters, and Nishimura—were nearing retirement, and successors needed to be identified. California was also considering a mandatory new literacy program called Open Court, which threatened the district's commitment to allowing site-level innovation. One retired administrator commented:

Chris and Carl share a vision for improvement, and they both care passionately about children. Neither has a flashy style, and their partnership has been successful, partly because they have very different strengths. Carl cared about ideas, not details. As a former counselor, he was a good listener and did a lot of work within the community. He delegated much of the responsibility for building capacity throughout the system to his team. Conversely, Chris is much more hands-on. He knows both instruction and finance and is more extroverted. National policy interests him less; he is focused on Long Beach. People have been working hard, and they are tired. I worry about burnout. And with our recent success, I worry about complacency. There is still so much work to be done.

As Steinhauser sat back in his chair, he glanced overhead and saw the large dollar sign that hung over his desk. "The buck stops here," he said. "I know we need to make the right decisions for the children of Long Beach."

Exhibit 1 LBUSD Enrollment SY82-SY02



Source: California Department of Education.

Exhibit 2 LBUSD Financial Information SY93–SY02 (\$ million)

This statement includes revenues and expenditures from 14 LBUSD funds, including general, adult, preschool, insurance, cafeteria, and construction funds.

	SY93	SY94	SY95 ^a	SY96	SY97	SY98	SY99 ^b	SY00	SY01	SY02
Revenues by Source										
Local ^c	\$44,846	\$31,012	\$35,182	\$40,132	\$64,956	\$76,535	\$103,937	\$86,489	\$91,511	\$174,010
State ^d	332,118	344,978	382,462	344,779	388,658	453,805	481,287	550,008	617,994	702,749
Federal Grants	45,775	49,569	55,875	57,169	57,292	64,707	72,122	76,825	86,028	95,496
Total Revenues	\$422,739	\$425,559	\$473,519	\$442,080	\$510,906	\$595,047	\$657,346	\$713,322	\$795,533	\$972,255
Expenditures by Use										
Direct Instruction ^e	\$201,740	\$211,068	\$234,085	\$245,318	\$273,200	\$303,451	\$334,498	\$377,795	\$441,080	\$466,163
Pupil Support & Site/Central Administration	69,630	69,879	76,581	81,065	89,847	93,277	104,600	112,450	134,727	140,038
Building Services, Upkeep & Construction	93,694	96,529	72,628	83,081	110,927	119,740	162,060	170,193	190,199	275,782
Other Expenses ^f	42,937	38,694	39,785	35,334	38,015	57,718	58,710	57,158	62,408	69,925
Net Transfers/Uses	(2,233)	(2,454)	(2,819)	(2,304)	(2,049)	(2,002)	(2,161)	(2,043)	(2,676)	(2,697)
Total General Expenditures	\$405,768	\$413,716	\$420,260	\$442,494	\$509,940	\$572,184	\$657,707	\$715,553	\$825,738	\$949,211
Operating Surplus/(Deficit)	16,971	11,843	53,259	(0,414)	0,966	22,863	(0,361)	(2,231)	(30,205)	23,044

Source: Compiled by district financial office from LBUSD financial records.

^a State revenues in SY95 included \$63.7 million desegregation claim settlement amount. A "Desegregation Funds Committee Recommendations" report, presented to the LBUSD Board on May 21, 1996, describes how these funds were used to fund maintenance and facilities, Cabrillo High School, K-8 literacy programs and materials, discretionary school funding (allocating \$30/student to schools for four years), and an unrestricted endowment.

^b Construction bond approved by local electorate in SY99.

^c Local property taxes transferred to the state for distribution. This line includes mostly interest prior to SY99, when bond funds became available for distribution.

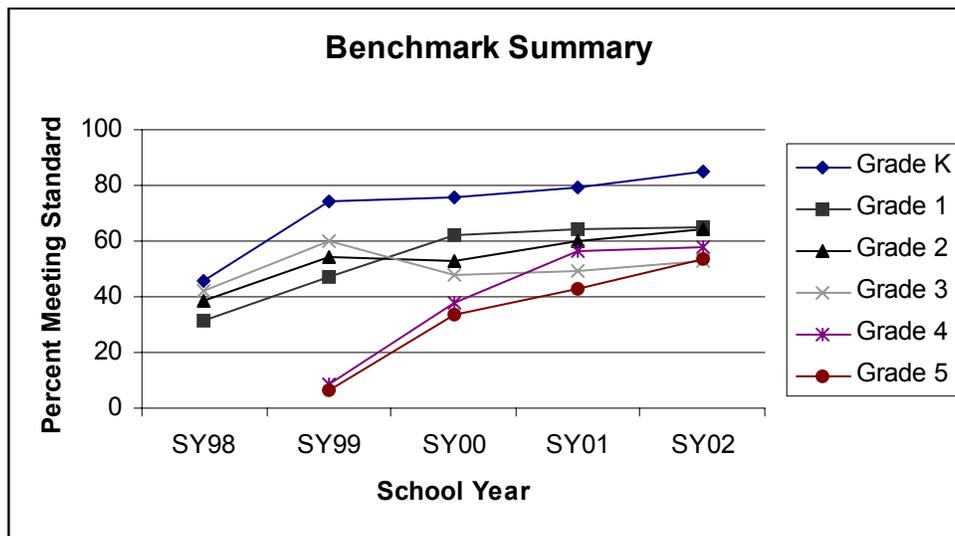
^d Includes state (per pupil) appropriation plus categorical program funding.

^e Ninety percent of LBUSD's general fund, used for K-12 direct instruction, is funded by the state.

^f Includes books, supplies, contracts, and other operating expenses.

Exhibit 3 LBUSD Benchmark Book Assessments Summary

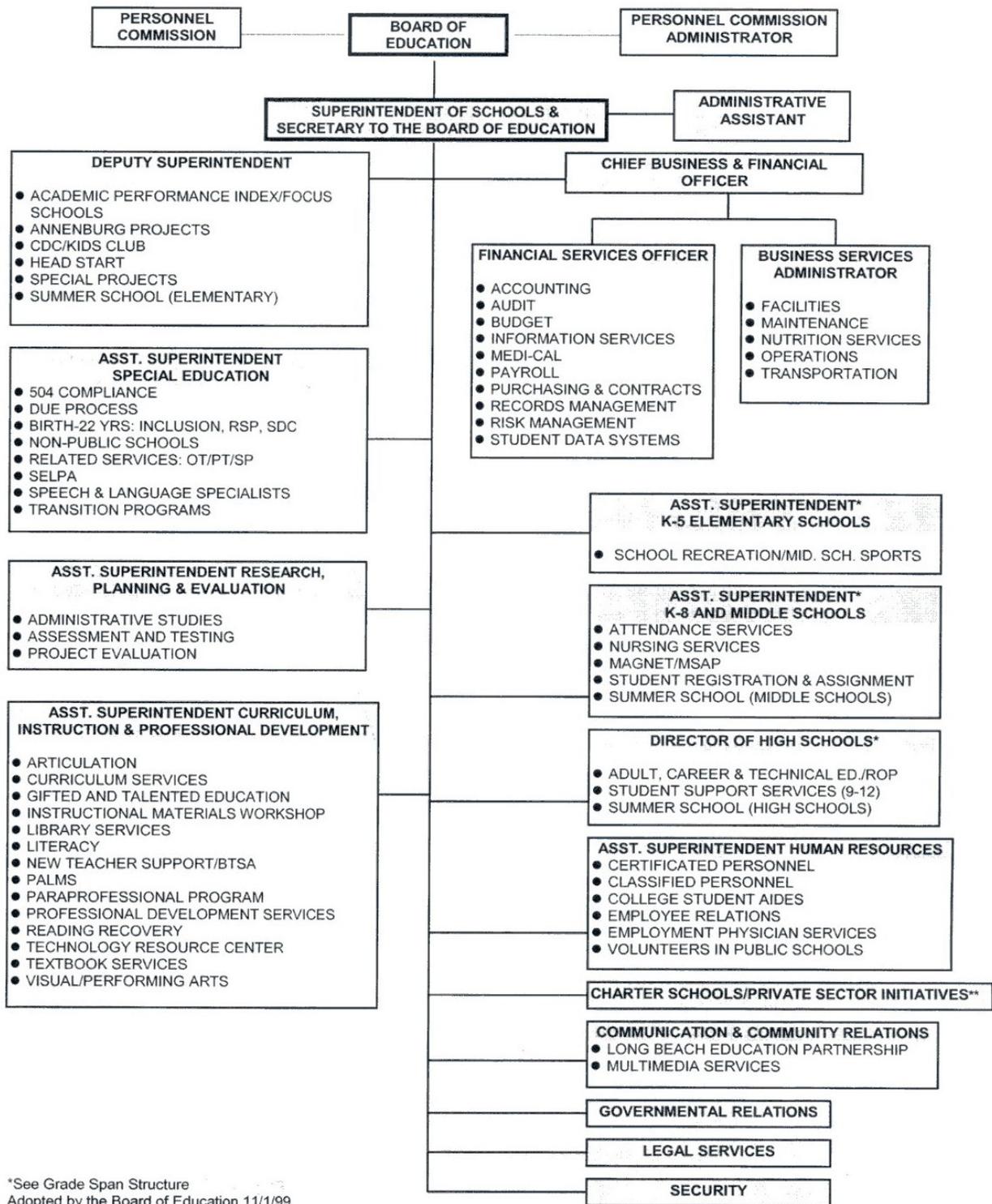
Benchmark Book Assessments test students' reading fiction and nonfiction at grade level. Percentages occasionally dropped from year to year due to internal realignment of the benchmark books with standardized test norms. Benchmark books were also aligned to norm-referenced tests. Data collected showed correlations ranging from .67–.73 for each grade level Benchmark Book Assessment and the spring 2001 Stanford Achievement Test 9 Reading NCE scores.



Met Standard (%)					
Grade	SY98	SY99	SY00	SY01	SY02
0	45.7	74.0	75.4	79.1	84.7
1	31.2	47.4	61.8	64.2	65.2
2	38.8	54.3	52.7	59.7	64.4
3	42.5	60.2	48.1	49.1	53.1
4		8.9	38.0	56.4	58.1
5		6.7	33.6	42.8	53.3

Source: District files. An explanation of the development of LBUSD's Benchmark Assessment program is in "Working Together to Improve Reading in the Early Grades," by K. DeVries, J. Seal, T. Bellmar, T. Suzuki, C. Dominguez, and C. Steinhauser, Chapter 2 in *Partnering to Lead Educational Renewal: High-Quality Teachers, High-Quality Schools*.

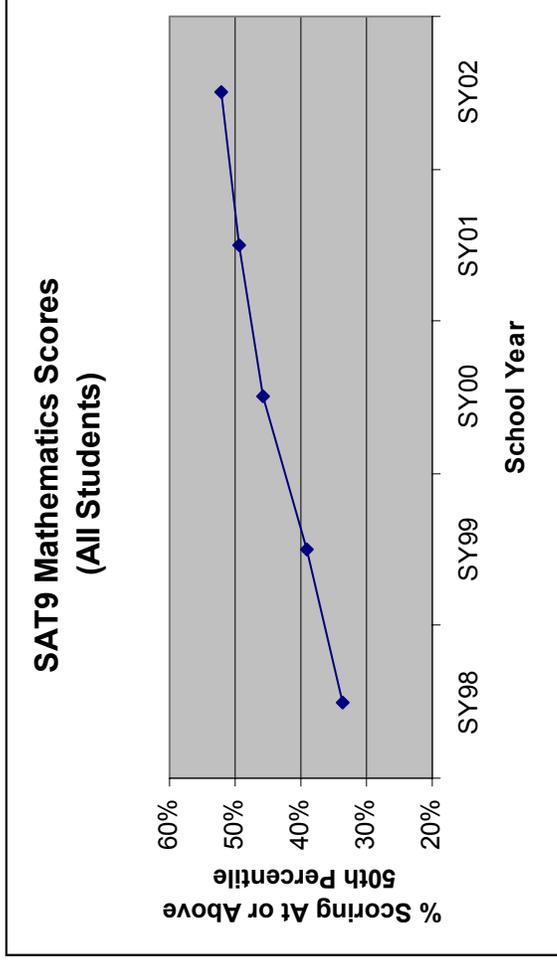
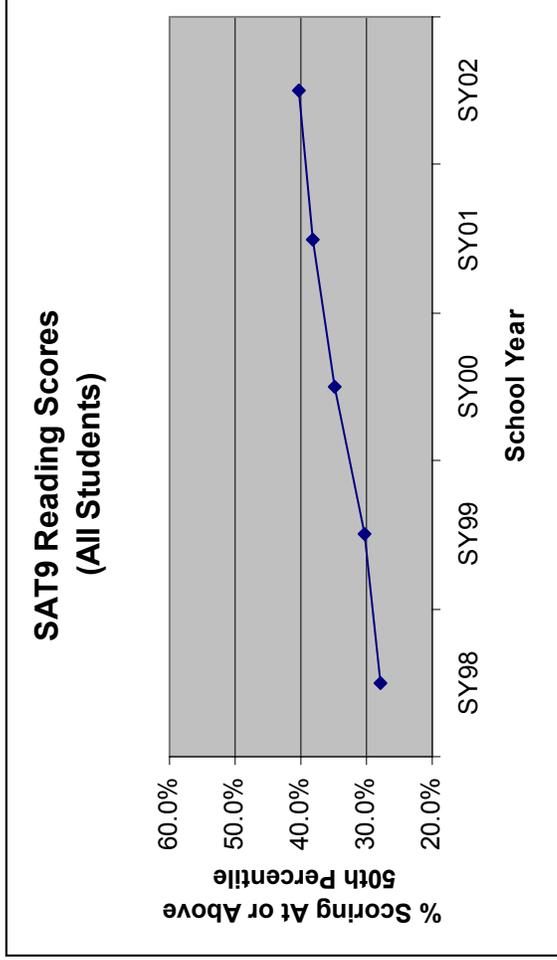
Exhibit 4 LBUSD Organizational Chart, SY02



*See Grade Span Structure
Adopted by the Board of Education 11/1/99

Exhibit 5 SAT9 Reading and Mathematics Scores SY98–SY02 (percent scoring at or above the 50th national percentile rank)

Figures indicate the percentage of students who scored at or above the 50th national percentile rank (NPR), who are purported to have demonstrated achievement at or above grade level.

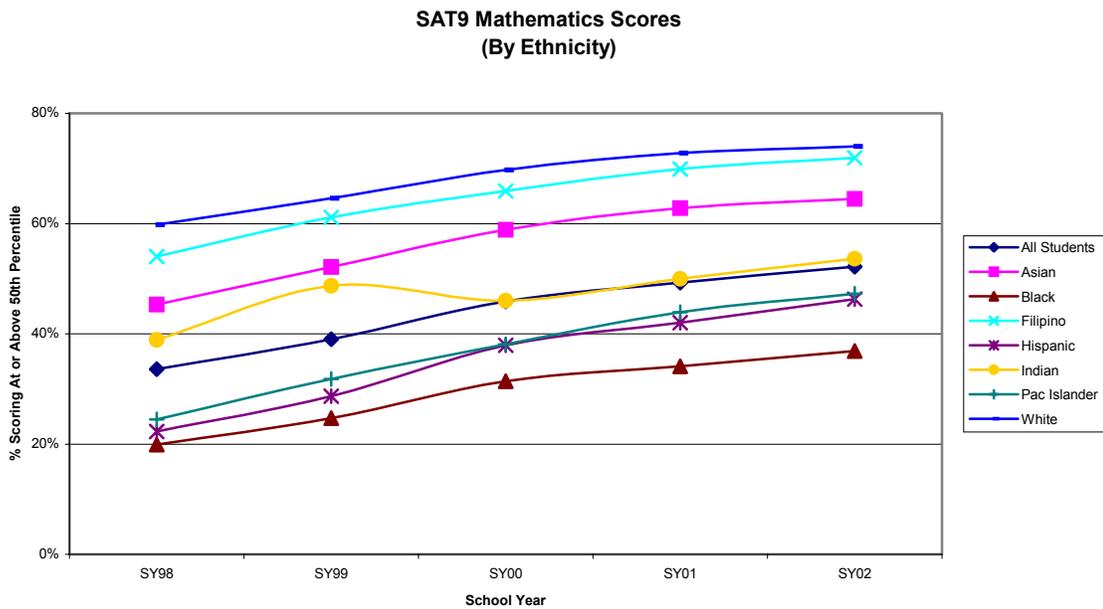
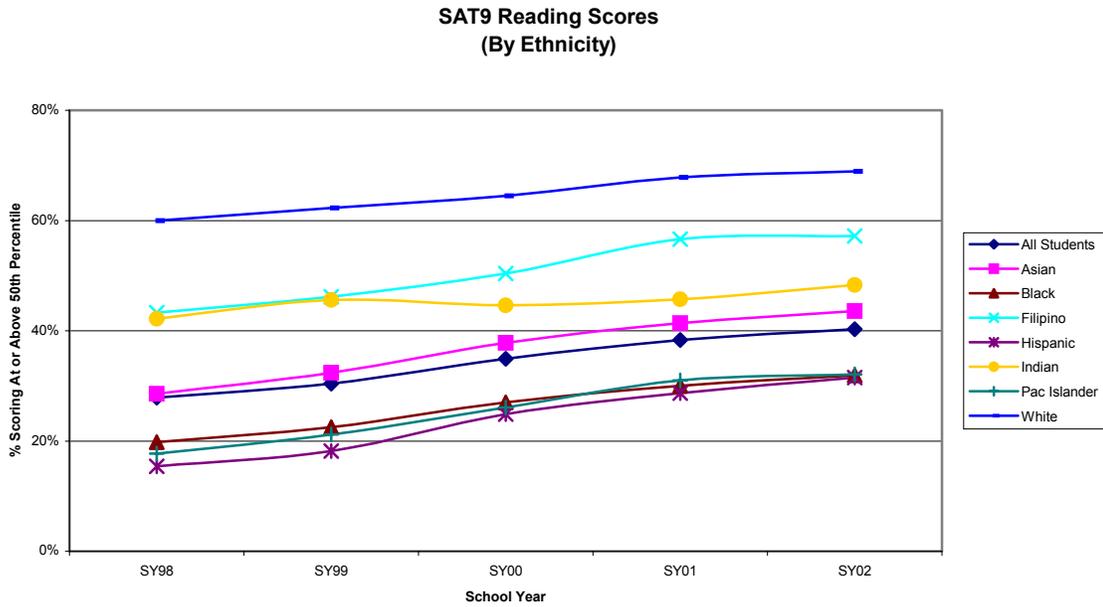


Grade	SY98	SY99	SY00	SY01	SY02	Change SY98–SY02
2	26.6	34.5	42.8	51.0	56.8	30.2
3	25.4	30.0	34.2	37.0	41.5	16.1
4	25.3	30.3	30.6	37.8	40.0	14.7
5	27.8	30.5	30.1	33.8	38.4	10.6
6	27.6	29.8	31.9	35.8	37.0	9.4
7	31.5	31.8	32.7	37.6	38.6	7.1
8	35.4	35.3	35.8	38.7	42.1	6.7
9	26.5	26.9	27.4	25.5	26.1	(0.4)
10	25.7	25.4	25.3	24.6	24.5	(1.2)
11	27.4	27.1	27.7	27.4	26.3	(1.1)
All Students	27.9	30.4	34.9	38.3	40.3	12.4

Grade	SY98	SY99	SY00	SY01	SY02	Change SY98–SY02
2	37.3	48.6	55.6	58.4	65.4	28.1
3	34.1	43.8	53.4	56.2	61.7	27.6
4	28.7	37.9	43.2	49.1	52.6	23.9
5	30.8	36.1	39.6	44.7	51.3	20.5
6	31.8	37.6	43.8	50.9	54.4	22.6
7	28.9	33.7	36.7	44.0	46.5	17.6
8	31.7	34.0	36.4	41.1	46.2	14.5
9	43.5	43.0	47.9	46.1	45.7	2.2
10	36.1	36.4	42.6	40.5	37.7	1.6
11	35.7	37.1	41.7	42.5	37.8	2.1
All Students	33.6	39.0	45.9	49.3	52.2	18.6

Source: District files.

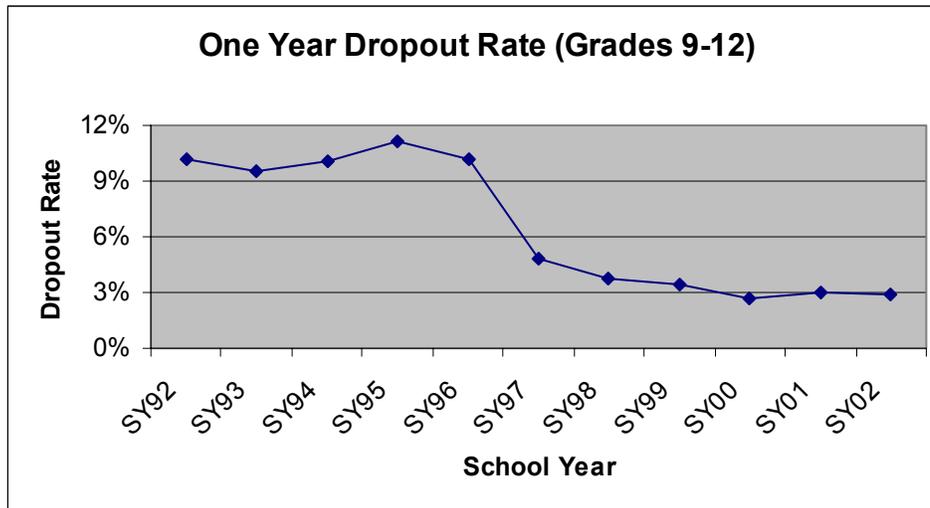
Exhibit 6 SAT9 Reading and Mathematics Scores SY98–SY02 by Ethnicity (percent scoring at or above the 50th national percentile rank)



Source: District files.

Exhibit 7 LBUSD One-Year Dropout Rate for Students in Grades 9–12 (SY92–SY02)

The dropout rate is calculated by dividing the number of 9–12 grade dropouts by the total 9–12 grade enrollment.



School Year	One-Year Dropout Rate	Number of Dropouts
SY92	10.20%	1,886
SY93	9.50%	1,807
SY94	10.10%	1,951
SY95	11.10%	2,194
SY96	10.20%	2,113
SY97	4.80%	1,037
SY98	3.80%	835
SY99	3.40%	799
SY00	2.70%	654
SY01	3.00%	771
SY02	2.90%	771

Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit Web site, <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/ASPGraph3.asp?Level=District&cName=LONG^BEACH^UNIFIED&cCode=1964725>, accessed June 1, 2004.