

# Roundtable News

## Leading Amidst Criticism



*Carl Cohn outlines effective leadership strategies for superintendents*

It's tough at the top. Budget woes. School boundary disputes. Personnel challenges. Unhappy parents. Irritated taxpayers. Charges that schools put the nation at risk. The crises never end. The critics keep coming. The July meeting offered Roundtable members an opportunity to get a handle on responding to these criticisms.

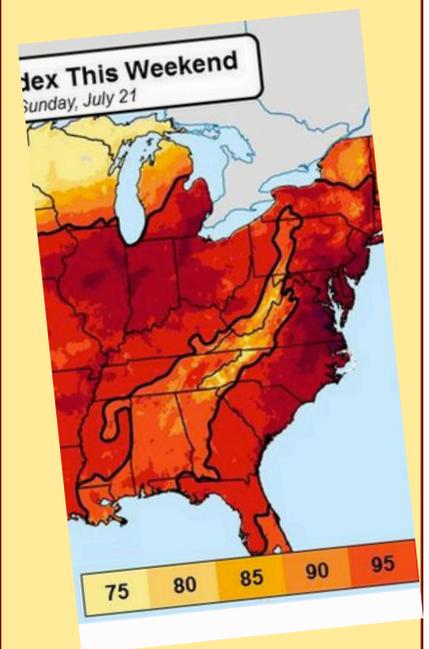
Superintendents face a complex leadership environment in which local issues get caught up in broader debates about school effectiveness and how to structure and fund democratic institutions in support of the public interest. The meeting addressed this environment with sessions that mixed the national picture

and theory with the hands-on experience of seasoned superintendents.

Carl Cohn gave us the benefit of his experience. A panel worried about school closings. Janet Robinson received members' undivided attention speaking of the challenge of holding the Newtown community together in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting. Joshua Starr from PDK International previewed a simulation of equity-based budgeting. And superintendents discussed a new infographic calling for giving schools an honest grade and spoke up about their perceptions of leadership challenges.

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*Record-breaking heat greeted Roundtable in Philadelphia*

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

”I used to think big urban districts faced the biggest challenges,” said former Long Beach superintendent Carl Cohn (r), at the outset of his remarks.

“But when I went to look at the 57 counties in California that voted for Donald Trump in 2016, what I found were communities without hope and with no employment base outside the schools, prisons, and farm labor. That’s why our work is so important. It offers hope.”

In a sparkling presentation, Cohn outlined five “Levers for Success” for a working superintendent. School leaders, he said, need to be able to work effectively with their boards and unions, they need to acquire talent in the district and thought partners outside it, and accountability needs to be owned at the local level, not the state or national levels.

<b>Levers for Success</b>	Board
	Union
	Talent Acquisition
	Accountability Owned by the Local Level
	Thought Partners

**The Lee Iacocca Approach**

Cohn reported adopting the “lee Iacocca Approach” to management: accountability is not a one-time, annual evaluation, he argued, it needs to be an ongoing process of checking and taking stock every 90 days. Cohn had been hired by the board after the uproar about how Rodney King was treated when arrested. The situation for the district and the state was very high stakes and tense.

The message Cohn sent out was: “We have important work to do. We are not going to get bogged down placating the board. We must be freed to work on strategies that affect kids in a major way. That’s our work.”

Cohn got the board to agree to 2-day quarterly retreats (the Iacocca approach) in which detailed accountability sessions provided board members with confidence that

the district was on track. These meetings, open to the press, were closed for his quarterly evaluations.

This meant that regular weekly board meetings lasted less than 60 minutes. (Be still my heart!)

**Teachers Union.** The more time you spend with your teachers and the union leader, the harder it is for teachers to strike or go to war, declared Cohn. “I actually felt sorry for the first union leader I dealt with,” he reported. “When we visited schools, his members beat him to improve retirement incentives. We set them up. Every year after that I made a point of visiting schools with the union chief.”

**Talent Acquisition.** Creating a new assistant to worry about evaluation and data and another new director for special education helped get the district placing its attention on the right things, reported Cohn. The district also focused on needs of students of color and hired assistant principals to monitor instruction daily.

**Local Accountability.** “We need to own accountability, not DC or the state capital. We can’t ignore government agencies, but accountability is our responsibility.”

**Thought Partners.** The Clark Foundation opened doors for Cohn to work with other foundations and to work with leaders in higher education to develop a “seamless system” from kindergarten through the university years.

Social media have transformed the environment in which leaders function, he concluded. “The superintendent’s job is much tougher today than it was in my time.”



## WHEN CATASTROPHE STRIKES “WE ARE FOREVER CHANGED”

It’s hard to know how Janet Robinson, superintendent in Stratford, CT, gets through describing the horror of December 14, 2012, when she was superintendent in Newtown. Sniffles were audible in a room full of professional educators as she described the horror of the Sandy Hook slaughter of 20 first-graders and six adults. It was, she said, a day that means, “We are forever changed.”

On that morning, Sandy Hook Elementary School “seemed like the safest place on earth in this quiet little suburban community.” It was a morning like any other until 9:30 when a troubled young man arrived with three guns, one of them an AR-15 assault rifle, and shot out the security system before killing the principal Dawn Hochsprung and the school psychologist Mary Sherlach who rushed to confront him. First grade teachers Lauren Rousseau and Vicki Soto died throwing themselves in front of their students. Ann-Marie Murphy, an educational assistant to a boy with special needs and Rachel D’Avino, a behavioral therapist, also died trying to shield their charges.

The shooter went on to kill 20 first graders before first responders arrived, when he died from a self-inflicted shot to the head.



*Janet Robinson shares moment with Greg Hutchings (Alexandria, VA) during meeting*

Robinson’s first response on learning that a shooting had occurred at the school was to lock down all district schools, alert all private schools in the community, and send a text alert to parents. She described the surreal chaos when she arrived on scene, with emergency vehicles parked haphazardly everywhere and several helicopters hovering overhead. She had no sense of the number of casualties and first

responders were tight lipped. She knew that some students and teachers had fled the building, with some at a nearby police station, others at a neighbor’s house, with yet others at a daycare center.



*Sandy Hook parents mourn their loss*

But it soon became apparent that some of the staff and students from two classrooms were missing. Students were released to parents who had come running to look for their children, but “it was becoming increasingly apparent that we had more parents than children.” Those parents were invited into a back room of the fire station until more information became available. Identifying the dead children was difficult. Finally, the school pictures were located and first-responders used the pictures to identify each child.

“The room with the anxious parents was the worst place I have ever been... Finally, our governor, who couldn’t stand the sorrow of those families not knowing, told them that if they were in the room, it’s likely their loved one had not survived.”

The aftermath proved its own ordeal. Multiple funerals and wakes, sometimes several a day. Telephone lines clogged with calls. Over 13,000 emails over three days. The website crashed. Thousands of press and media people from all over the world. Truckloads of toys and teddy bears arriving daily. Convinced that students in other schools would be best served by returning to a normal routine, Robinson had school re-open again the following Tuesday. The neighboring Monroe district offered Robinson an abandoned middle school to house the Sandy Hook students after the holiday break and up to 80 volunteers worked on transforming a dreary, abandoned middle school into a cheery elementary school.

“We are all forever changed,” concluded Robinson. Parents who lost children have an empty seat at the dinner table. Other families are suffering nightmares about what might happen next. The innocence of childhood has been shattered. (to p 4)

“We can’t take grief away, but we can control our response. Harvard psychiatrist John Woodall argues for ‘compassionate choice’ – focus outside ourselves and what we can do for others.”

During an intense question and answer period, Robinson made several points:

- Get to know the mental health professionals in your community. You never know when you’ll need them.
- With 26 services to attend, I needed help. I asked a retired superintendent to take over and told staff: I will back any decisions she makes.
- Do whatever you can to “harden” your schools. The key is to delay a sick person with a gun long enough for first responders to arrive.
- Take care of yourself. You don’t have time to think about yourself when you’re working 17- to 18-hour days. Think about that ahead of time.
- As superintendent, you’re not in charge when a disaster strikes. The police are. Then the politicians arrive. “Did I deal with them? No. My problem was the children and their families.”
- Media: The press descends on you. They were knocking on the doors of the families of dead children and the teachers. “I said this behavior was unacceptable. I will do press conferences on such-and-such a topic at these times. If you bother these families, you will not be permitted to attend the press conferences. We will throw you out.”
- The press has to have a story. If you’re not transparent, they will make one up – domestic violence, mother taught at school, school let the shooter in. All of those rumors had to be knocked down.
- We set up separate group to deal with donations and with free tickets to events.

In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, the Roundtable steering committee sent a letter to all 535 Members of Congress (House and Senate). Just nine of these tribunes of the people took the trouble to respond.

### **Key word for success in schools?**

**Susan Enfield: LOVE**

**Greg Hutchings: COURAGE**

**Greg Thornton: CARING**

## **HOBSON’S CHOICES**

Rob Neu of GuideK12 has spent a lifetime in schools, including ten years as a superintendent in Michigan, Washington State, and Oklahoma. He was the ideal moderator for a panel on school closings and conflict in districts that featured Susan Enfield (Highline, Washington), Greg Hutchings, Jr. (Alexandria, VA), and Gregory Thornton of the National Institute of School Leadership and a former superintendent in Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Chester, PA.

Superintendents face tough issues. Neu described his experience in a Michigan district when the Big Three automakers were collapsing and assembly line workers were put out on the street. Middle managers also lost jobs. “Every house but one on my street was on the market.” In Highline, equity is the issue, according to Enfield. “We have schools with full programs, AP classes, and a raft of extracurriculars – and two blocks away we have schools without any of that.”



Hutchings noted his current challenge of adding 5,000 students to a district of 19,000, with everyone upset about the need to redraw boundaries. Thornton, with a lot of experience in Maryland, described a loss of focus on students in Baltimore as the city worried about politics. When he was in Montgomery County it was a “bifurcated system,” with one group of students having everything they needed while some schools struggled to meet student needs. Enrollment decline, whether around white flight, charters, or online academies is a big issue, thought Thornton. When he was in Chester Upland (Pennsylvania) it had 5,000 students; today it has 2,000. “Equity needs to trump equality,” he concluded.

Hutchings described Alexandria as “landlocked.” Property values are prohibitively high so the district can’t build a new high school to relieve pressure on an existing high (to p. 5)

**HOBSON’S CHOICES (CONT’D)**

school with 4,000 students. He described transforming a six-story office building into an elementary school, but younger students could not be expected to go up to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floors, so they were transformed into administrative offices. “Parents don’t want their kids in this school. Not sure how we are going to work this all out.”



*(l to r): Greg Thornton, Greg Hutchings, & Susan Enfield field questions from Rob Neu*

Bond passage was an issue in Highline, reported Enfield, which has a 70% free- and reduced-lunch count. Highline, with a requirement of 60% voter approval, had not passed a bond issue since 2006. A 2017 loss with 59% of the vote set Enfield in motion.

**Kids won’t care about what we want until they know we care about them**

— Greg Thornton

She created a 30-member citizens advisory council by lottery, staffed by the district. The district went to the voters with essentially the same package and won approval by 63%.

Among the good ideas:

- Citizens advisory groups. Parents will believe neighbors when they won’t believe us.
- Putting the best teachers in front of students with the greatest needs.
- Hard conversations around equity. Communicate, communicate, communicate. People will be outraged anyway. You have to communicate.
- Make diversity of teaching force a goal and protect teachers of color during layoffs.

Parents are sending us the best kids they have, said Thornton. They’re not keeping the good ones at home. We can’t do the work of equity ourselves. We need allies in the community. Our kids need support, he said. “They won’t care about what we want until they know we care about them.”

**REBUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES**

Since 1994 there has been noticeable growth in negative attitudes toward government, reported Donald Cohen of In the Public Interest (r). He blamed a partisan strategy in which 30 to 40 years of undermining public institutions represented an “attack on democracy.”

Historically, he pointed out, most people believed in government. Following the Great Depression, people supported Social Security, occupational safety legislation, Medicare, laws governing drug safety and efforts to make automobiles safer.

But a steady drumbeat of criticism from the right wing has helped move

public sentiment against public agencies, including schools, by redefining individual’s relationship to government. People are encouraged, said Cohen, to consider themselves not as citizens, but as consumers. Transactional relationships are encouraged in health, education, and other areas of national life so that “you get what you pay for” and “taxes are your money and you should take it back.”

These attacks were generated by intellectuals, said Cohen. Austrian émigré Friedrich von Hayek argued in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) that government intervention in a free-market economy was the first step toward tyranny. Other contributions



from the world of ideas came from Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago and Russian expatriate Ayn Rand, arguing between them that government is a monopoly, markets work, and individuals are responsible for their own well-being. *(to p. 6)*

These ideas were implemented with clever sloganeering and political strategies, reported Cohen. So, the word “public” began to be tossed aside in discussing government. Markets were to be the answer to inefficiencies. Schools, as one of the largest public entities everywhere, came into this discussion of necessity. Public schools were derided as “government monopolies.” “Freedom of choice” was offered not only as a racist response to *Brown v. Board* but as a preferred state of affairs by Milton Friedman, who came up with the idea of school vouchers. “We need,” said Cohen, to “reclaim the language of ‘public.’ We need to say that government is for the public good and that far from being an inefficient monopoly it is about doing the

things that only we can do together.” It is the public through its government, he said, that “does the things that benefit us all – roads, water systems, clean air and water, infrastructure, a decent environment and schools developing the next generation.”

**Only the government can do the things that benefit us all.**

— *Donald Cohen*

The argument we need to make, he said, is these are the things that make us better. Only the government can ensure that public goods are available to everyone. We are consumers, of

course, but more than that we are citizens. “Tell stories,” urged Cohen. “No one will remember our slides, but all of us will remember Carl Cohn’s story about devastated rural communities in California and how he visited schools together with his union leaders. Everyone has a bad story about schools, including the people in this room. We need to tell the positive stories as well.” Above all, he emphasized, don’t step on your own tongue. “Don’t undermine the ideal of ‘public’ with complaints about your job, or unions, teachers, and school boards.”

**EQUITY-BASED BUDGETING**

Joshua Starr, CEO of PDK International, arrived at the meeting flush with the successful release a month earlier of PDK’s 51<sup>st</sup> annual poll on Public Attitudes Toward Public Schools. It’s a remarkable long-term investigation of what Americans think of their schools and how attitudes have changed over time. He described PDK as an organization committed to values of social justice, engagement, excellence, and results, one intent on changing the narrative about public schools, while embracing complexity and elevating the conversation. He highlighted a few findings from the latest poll. Faced with forced-choice questions, the public is split on traditional teaching versus more technology. The public overwhelmingly supports more career and technical classes (68%) versus honors classes (21%). Public support for wraparound services is impressive: After-school programs (92% favor). Ditto for mental health services (87%), health services (79%), and dental services (65%). Starr was on hand to preview a promising new tool developed by PDK International in concert with James Allen, experienced in developing Educational Leadership Sims (simulations). Experience may be the best teacher. Simulations offer experience in a training situation without bruising public encounters. Ideally simulations offer

school leaders the opportunity to think about how to navigate difficult issues successfully, especially issues in which there is no “right answer.” The new tool focused not so much on budgeting in real numbers but on the experience of facing the many political demands from advocates, board members, politicians, and teachers. Roundtable members found the simulation provocative and thought it would prove useful particularly for aspiring and new superintendents.

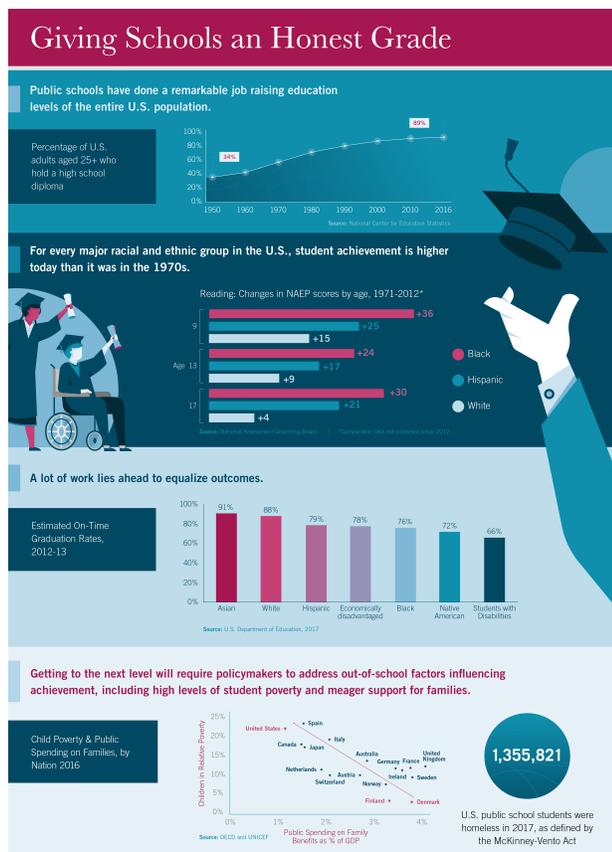


*James Harvey gets slapped down for trying to fund new program that cost Susan Enfield (Highline, WA) and Jeanice Smith (Ann Arbor, MI) their plans for teacher pay hike*

## GIVING SCHOOLS AN HONEST GRADE

Executive director James Harvey presented members with the challenge of communicating the successes of public education in the face of a decades’-long echo chamber about school failure. Educators have had difficulty developing an appropriate response to this criticism, argued Harvey, who called for school leaders to stand up for their profession. “If school leaders aren’t willing to defend the enterprise, why should anyone else?” he asked.

He pointed out that common perceptions that schools used to be better and that today’s students are not learning as much as their predecessors are false. High school graduation rates have skyrocketed since the 1950s and every major racial and ethnic group today is scoring higher on NAEP results than they were in the 1970s. Meanwhile legal school segregation has been ended and out-of-school issues such as the growth of homelessness and poverty, which account for 60-80% of achievement outcomes, are largely ignored in the mainstream school debate.



Despite challenges, public schools have achieved great things. It's time to give them an honest grade.



## Superintendents Speak

### Why are you here?

- This is the real work for us as leaders - not administrative detail work
- Quality of, and ability to rub shoulders with, speakers
- Looking for hope in a safe harbor
- District size doesn't matter here
- Personal insights invaluable — can't get them through reading

### What have you learned?

- Public support for government fell from 80% in 1960 to 17% today
- Great value of telling stories and controlling the narrative
- Issue isn't just schools — need to look at systems
- We are not just school leaders, we have duties to our communities
- This job is hard. We have to love it

### On Monday: What will do you do?

- Bring lessons back to our team
- Write to governor
- Improve communication with intentional effort to tell our story
- Re-examine our security plans
- We have all these security plans but we need to be ready for the unexpected
- Start developing a cohesive plan around privatization

Superintendents worried that focusing solely on successes while overlooking the unfinished agenda of inequitable outcomes would invite criticism. The resulting infographic (left), published in concert with the Horace Mann League), acknowledges that reality. A 16" X 24" copy can be downloaded free on the Roundtable's website, or hard-copy can be purchased for \$10 (including postage) on request.

HERE AND THERE

**How High the Bar?**

*How High the Bar?* a report on NAEP and Common Core benchmarks developed by the National Superintendents Roundtable and the Horace Mann League, was released in January 2018 at the National Press Club, Washington, DC.



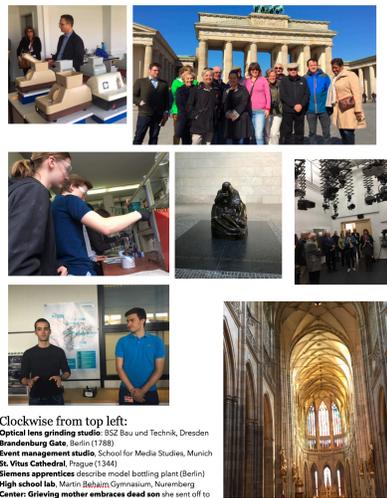
The report asked how well would school systems in other nations do if their students were judged by the Common Core and NAEP benchmarks? The answer: most systems elsewhere don't match the performance of the U.S. system. Copies at: [superintendentsforum.org](http://superintendentsforum.org)

*Visit to Philadelphia Museum of Art*



**CTE in Europe**

The Roundtable examined vocational education and apprenticeships in Europe in May. A free report available [here](#).



Clockwise from top left:  
**Optical lens grinding studio:** SSZ Bau und Technik, Dresden  
**Brandenburg Gate:** Berlin (1788)  
**Event management studio:** School for Media Studies, Munich  
**St. Vitus Cathedral:** Prague (1344)  
**Siemens apprentices describe model bottling plant:** (Berlin)  
**High school lab:** Martin-Babitsky-Gymnasium, Nuremberg  
**Center:** Grieving mother embraces dead son she sent off to war in 1914 (Berlin)

**Notable Tweets**

The Roundtable regularly “tweets” items it thinks might interest school leaders. Here are a few:

3.5 years after ESSA, difficult to see coherent vision of federal role:

<http://tinyurl.com/yydbgtzd>

Let’s call the Juul Company by its proper name: drug dealer. <http://tinyurl.com/yydbgtzd>

For first time in 30 years, sports participation declines. <http://tinyurl.com/y63nws8y>

**Calendar and Contact**

**The Roundtable meeting agenda for 2020 is under development. It will probably include a study mission to examine schools in Chile in June.**

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*Joan Mast (r) new superintendent in Scotch Plains-Fanwood, NJ is introduced to Roundtable by her predecessor, Margaret Hayes, a charter founding member of Roundtable who attended every meeting since the first in 2007*

