

TWO ROCK UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT

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June 27,2005

Sonoma County Grand Jury
Attention: Melinda A. Cabral, Foreperson
P.O. Box 5109
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Dear Ms. Cabral:

Once again the Sonoma County Grand Jury has taken time to do an "investigation" into the "Sonoma County school system" as part of its annual activities. Once again this investigation was meager at best. The findings and recommendations are thus based on incomplete data and the assumptions drawn from this data. The approach taken in the process of preparing your report is highly frustrating and leads to misleading information. So, once again, I respond to your report to clarify your findings and to request that any investigation completed by the Grand Jury actually involve the gathering of genuine facts prior to making recommendations.

FINDINGS

F1. Best practices are consistently discussed and evaluated for use by all districts. Numerous consortiums exist in this county. Cost savings discussions occur regularly. SCOE hosts meetings for superintendents and meetings for business managers. Within all regional areas of the county, district leaders meet regularly to share strategies from within and without the area.

F2. There have been other discussions regarding changing the "status quo relative to consolidation or unification" and other steps to reduce overhead and administrative expenses. Without even getting into the issue of how low administrative costs actually are in small districts, you completely missed the discussions among individual small districts and the fact that Two Rock Union School District and Harmony Union School District have created a partnership to share the cost of superintendent services.

F4 Countywide discussions do occur and steps have been taken to respond to changing demographics in this county. For example, the "Aiming High" initiative is a commitment by the county office and the majority of districts in this county to share best practices and to support each other in working to meet the needs of the changing student population in this county.

F5 The accounting practices changes apply to all school districts as well as other agencies, and not just those in Sonoma County. Using a column from the *Sacramento*

Bee as a source for your "investigation" in Sonoma County simply points out that this is a statewide issue that is not solvable at the local level.

F6 Health benefits are **expensive for both public and private employers** and everyone is wrestling with how to respond. Just as private businesses are requiring employees to pay more of their benefit costs, a simple review of school district budgets and bargaining agreements would show you that school districts have implemented the same cost savings measures. You seem to have missed another fact in that almost every district is a member of a joint powers group that arranges the best prices possible for medical benefits.

F7 Special education **costs and rules are not determined by individual districts.**

Federal and State laws set very firm guidelines and districts have to follow those guidelines. With any simple research you would have found that several special education **consortiums already exist.** Special education students do have to be served and a consortium does not by itself make it cheaper to meet the needs of special education students. Legal guidelines must be met whether a student is served by an individual district or by a group of districts and those guidelines do become costly.

CONCLUSIONS

All governmental agencies in the State of California, not just schools, face a financial crisis. Things will get worse for all agencies unless changes are made at the State level.

Yes, enrollment numbers are dropping in the county. Housing costs are high and young families cannot afford to move into the county. The ongoing discussions that do occur regularly address this topic. A big issue is how to best serve the students in the far flung reaches of this county. Closing schools means that young children would spend over an hour a day on the bus getting to and from school. Quality of education needs to be considered along with finances.

Your conclusion regarding a "parochial view of the problem" does not match reality. Districts do talk and work together. While the system is not perfect, your conclusion that districts do not cooperate with each and do not work together is far from the truth. You need to expand your horizons and do a true investigation prior to making such an overarching conclusion.

Discussions do occur in this county and they do occur regularly. SCOE provides the impetus and setting for these discussions. They may not occur with your knowledge but I am not aware of any law that says all discussions have to be reported to the County Grand Jury.

You and I agree that students are the clients and we all must do what is best for these students. Every study that has ever been completed shows that smaller districts do much better in serving students than do large, monolithic districts. This is not to say that things are perfect. However, any studies of unification/consolidation need to take into account the instructional benefits as well as financial benefits. That information has not yet been included in any studies. If the Grand Jury wishes to draw conclusions and make recommendations, then student success should be a key criteria that is consistently mentioned.

COMMENDATIONS

Based on the investigative procedures section of the report, you interviewed a total of four superintendents. Your report commends these four for being creative with regard to expenditures and expenses. If you had bothered to speak to even just a majority of superintendents you would have found that that creativity exists in all districts. Contrary to what seems to be your perspective, educators are in this business to do what is best for students and not to save jobs.

Dr. Wong has raised the issue of efficiency and effectiveness in the past and he continues to do so through out the county and not just with the ten west county districts. Just because events and actions are not announced to the Grand Jury it does not mean that they don't happen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1 This recommendation is fine as long as finances are not the only criteria for the study. The education needs of all students must be of the utmost importance in any study.

R2 This is already done.

R3 This is already done through the Redwood Empire Schools Insurance Group JP A as well as by individual districts.

Sincerely,

Superintendent/Principal, Two Rock Union School District
Superintendent Designee, Harmony Union School District