

PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Summary

Sonoma County has 40 independent school districts. The percentage of total educational budget that goes to administration varies widely for each district.

The Grand Jury has reviewed the relationship among the size of Sonoma County school districts, their cost of operation, and the performance of students. On average, multi-school districts perform better academically and cost less for administration than do single-school districts. The Jury determined that significant savings could be accrued through a combination of shared administrative services between districts and consolidation/unification of school districts. These savings could be better used in the classroom. The Grand Jury recommends that the Sonoma County Office of Education become more proactively involved in organizational issues among the school districts.

Reason for the Investigation

Today, California education is beset with overwhelming problems. The most serious include student performance, which is only average compared to national statistics, and educational funding that is very tight with little likelihood for improvement.

Under the premise that student performance and funding for schools are closely related, the Grand Jury undertook an analysis of the administrative budget at the school district level to determine whether funds could be freed up for direct instructional expenses.

Background

Sonoma County schools face many challenges. The school situation is continuously in the news. Whether it is academic performance compared to the rest of the country, declining enrollment in many districts, budget shortfalls, or choosing which school to close, parents and the academic community try to provide our students the best education for the money allocated. The Grand Jury found that Sonoma County has more than three times the number of districts per capita than the state average.

In 1998, the Educational Efficiency Initiative, also known as “95-5,” proposed to highlight and penalize districts spending more than 5% of their budgets on administrative costs. Although the initiative was defeated, the California Department of Education approximated the calculations that would have been required. In Sonoma County, school districts ranged from 3.6% to 15%. Only four of the county’s 40 districts were meeting the 5% requirement.

In the past, the Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools has monitored district budgets, managed multi-district services, and provided help when a district requested it. He has not taken a proactive role in addressing other opportunities between districts.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury:

1. Interviewed the following persons:
 - Sonoma County Office of Education: Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Director of Fiscal Services
 - Superintendent of Petaluma City Schools
 - School Principal in Sonoma County
 - Two members of the County Committee on School District Organization.
2. Reviewed the following documents:
 - Academic Performance Index (API), California 2001
 - California Department of Education Analysis of the Educational Efficiency Initiative
 - Statewide Profile: Statistics on California's Schools and Districts
 - Sonoma County Education Facts 2002
 - Spring 2001 SAT Test results
 - Statistical Report, Schools of Sonoma County 2000-2001
 - National Education Association, Rankings and Estimates 2000-2001
 - A Study on Selected Issues of the Proposed Consolidation of the Twin Hills and Gravenstein Union Elementary School Districts
 - Various newspaper articles.

Findings

Number of school districts in Sonoma County

- F1. There are 40 school districts in this county with over 72,000 students and budgets totaling over \$500 million.
- F2. Sonoma County has 1.2% of California's students, but 3.8% of its districts. Of the 58 counties in California, only four (Kern, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Tulare) have more school districts than Sonoma County. San Francisco County has one.
- F3. Sonoma County district populations range from a single-school district with 11 students to a multi-school district with nearly 13,000 students.
- F4. Sonoma County spends approximately \$7750 per student; this is close to the California and national averages. By contrast New York state spends about \$11,000 per student.

Testing performance

- F5. California SAT scores rank below the national average in verbal testing and slightly above in math.
- F6. Sonoma County ranks only slightly above state and national averages in SAT and STAR testing.

F7. Multi-school elementary districts rank higher than single-school districts in academic performance. Smallest districts rank the lowest. (See footnote ¹)

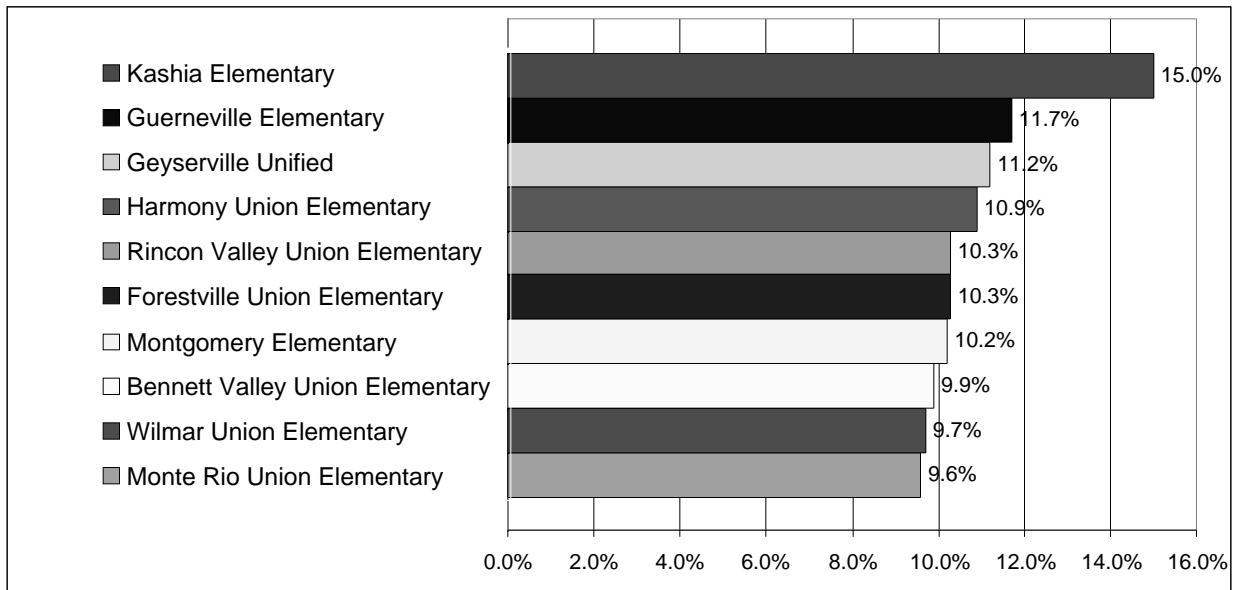
Administrative efficiency

F8. Using information gathered from the Educational Efficiency Initiative, Sonoma County’s average cost for administration is about 6.1% of the total education budget.

F9. Administrative costs vary significantly from district to district (3.6%-15%).

F10. Administrative costs, as a percent of total budget, averaged much lower in multi-school districts than in single-school districts. (See footnote ²)

F11. The 10 districts spending the most on administration range from 15% to 9.6% as shown below:



Conclusions

- Higher administrative spending does not necessarily result in higher scores.
- Single-school elementary districts spend a much higher percentage on administration AND they perform lower in testing than multi-school districts.
- The largest districts in general spend a lower percentage on administration than do the smallest districts.
- Reducing administrative costs in the high-administration districts to the county average can increase funds available for instruction expenses. (Example: Rincon Valley could produce greater than \$500,000 per year.)
- Sonoma County has far too many school districts for its demographics.
- Collaboration among districts (sharing of services) can be a powerful move toward lowering costs or increasing share spent on instruction.
- Consolidation and unification of school districts should be seriously evaluated.

Recommendations

- R1. All districts should review opportunities for sharing costs and services with neighboring districts (e.g. bus, food, administration, etc.) This includes reviewing all overhead costs. All reviews should be submitted to the County Superintendent of Schools by January 1, 2003.
- R2. The Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools should assume a stronger, more proactive role in evaluating, encouraging, and implementing multi-district cost sharing and consolidation.
- R3. Administrators, school boards, and voters, especially in districts with the highest administrative expense percentage, need to look at the bigger picture and move beyond politics. They should better balance their high expenses for administration against those that directly benefit students.
- R4. The County Superintendent of Schools should conduct an objective countywide study, using an independent consultant, to determine the best strategy for sharing costs, consolidation, and unification.

Required Responses to Findings

Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools: F1 through F11

Petaluma City Schools Superintendent/Sonoma County Superintendent-elect: F1 through F11

Required Responses to Recommendations

Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools: R1 through R3

Petaluma City Schools Superintendent/Sonoma County Superintendent-elect: R1 through R4

All District School Boards: R1, R3

All District School Superintendents: R1, R3

¹ Academic Performance Index mean score by school district type:

- **Small single-school** elementary districts (less than 100 students): **734**
- **Larger single-school** elementary districts: **768**
- **Multi-school** elementary districts: **791**

² Administrative expense by school district type:

- **Small single-school** elementary districts: **9.4%**
- **Larger single-school elementary** districts: **9%**
- **Multi-school elementary** districts: **7.6%**
- **High school** districts: **5.1%**
- **Unified (K-12)**: **5.5%**