

Each year the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury has the authority to examine the operation of any agency within the County. It is essential that taxpayers know that their tax dollars are being used wisely. This year the Grand Jury examined the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) to learn its mandate, mission and vision for Sonoma County schools.

## Sonoma County Office of Education: An Overview

### Background

Among other sources, the California State Office of Education funds schools in the 58 counties of California. Funds are distributed to the county offices of education, including SCOE in Sonoma County, which then funds the schools. SCOE performs quarterly audits for compliance to monetary and performance standards. SCOE is responsible for oversight of the 40 districts. It also has primary responsibility for educating those students in three special programs:

- Regional Occupational Program (ROP)
- Court and Community Schools
  - For students in custody at juvenile facilities, or who are expelled for disciplinary reasons and removed from their district school.
- Special Education
  - For students with medical, mental, or physical disabilities and who require individual attention of aides.

SCOE employs approximately 600 Individuals. Half are certificated and work with Court and Community Schools, Special Education and Alternative Education or ROP, and half are classified and work as support staff.

# Reason for Investigation

The State of California has determined that a 10-percent budget cut for schools is a probability with the new fiscal year. The Grand Jury sought to find out the effect this will have on Sonoma County schools and the plans in place to deal with this budget crisis. In addition, the Grand Jury wanted to understand the organization of SCOE, its responsibilities, and the functions of the Sonoma County Board of Education (BOE).

## Investigative Procedures

### Interviews with key personnel:

- SCOE, Superintendent of Schools
- SCOE, Assistant Superintendent of Business Services
- SCOE, Human Resources Director, Certificated
- SCOE, Human Resources Executive Director, Classified
- Sonoma County Board of Education, President

**Documents reviewed: see bibliography**

## Findings

- F1** The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE), under the leadership of the Superintendent of Schools, distributes funds from the State of California Office of Education to the individual school districts depending on the schools' average daily attendance.
- F2** The Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools, elected to a four-year term, has the primary responsibility of providing leadership, support, and fiscal and performance oversight to all the school districts in Sonoma County. In addition, he acts as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to SCOE.
- F3** Sonoma County has 40 individual school districts serving approximately 71,000 students K-12. Each of these school districts has its own superintendent, board of education, teachers, and office and support staff.

## Findings, continued

- F4** As an elected official, the Superintendent is accountable only to the electorate. The County Board of Education approves his salary, but his job performance is not subject to Board review.
- F5** The County Board of Education is composed of seven members who are elected from designated areas within Sonoma County, each area includes more than one school district. Their responsibilities are to approve the budget set by the Superintendent, to provide policy direction and oversight for Alternative Education and the Regional Occupational Program, to review and rule on appeals for student transfers between districts, and to serve as an appeal board for district-level student expulsion decisions.
- F6** The County Board of Education has influence over Alternative Education and ROP, but these programs represent a small part of the budget. BOE certifies learning materials used in the classroom, oversees quarterly reports of Williams Law compliance, manages lease-space requirements, approves the selling of capital equipment, and is responsible for the approval of charter schools designed to serve students throughout the county. (The Williams Law requires frequent monitoring of credentialed teachers assignments to ensure that schools with low performance scores on standardized tests have competent teachers and adequate materials).
- F7** SCOE, under the direction of the Superintendent, is responsible for fiscal and educational performance and oversight of school districts. It is required to report this information quarterly to the State Office of Education.
- F8** The State can assume control over local school districts, or SCOE can fund and assign a fiscal advisor with “stay and rescind” authority to assist the district to achieve fiscal stability.
- F9** The districts of Sonoma Valley and Healdsburg are subject to corrective administrative status after continued difficulties with the Federal Government’s guidelines for the “No Child Left Behind Act.” SCOE has assisted the Healdsburg School District with student performance and fiscal issues, and the State is reviewing the Sonoma Valley’s curriculum, testing, and teacher quality issues.
- F10** The Superintendent negotiates with several unions as their contracts come up for renewal. These unions represent teachers and ancillary staff. They are the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Association of Sonoma County Office of Education (ASCOE), and Regional Occupation Program Teachers Association (ROPTA).
- F11** The Superintendent has a management team of Assistant Superintendents, Directors, and others in leadership roles. They assist and advise the Superintendent in developing and achieving the goals of SCOE, providing oversight and reporting quarterly, as mandated by the State of California.

## Findings, continued

- F12** Projected State budget cuts of 10 percent will decrease or cut art and music programs and reduce the number of teacher's aides. Special Education teacher aides are mostly supported by federal funds and not likely to be affected by state budget cuts.
- F13** SCOE, under the direction of the Superintendent, is increasing its support to the districts with some of the following services:
- Performs Live Scan fingerprinting through the Department of Justice (DOJ) as a clearinghouse for prospective teachers, support staff, and volunteers to protect the security of students.
  - Assists Human Resources at the district level with up-to-date information on new laws and union procedures.
  - Conducts job searches, if requested by the districts, for superintendents and administrators at less cost than outside recruiters.
  - Offers a Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment (BTSA), a two-year program for new teachers.
  - Offers an Aspiring Administrator's Academy, in conjunction with Sonoma State University and Dominican College in San Rafael, for teachers interested in careers in administration.
  - Provides a website and phone-based automated calling system for requesting and assigning substitute teachers and assistants who have registered and been accepted by SCOE.
  - Offers a mentor program for new principals to orient and assist them with their new responsibilities.
  - Assists some of the smaller districts with purchasing supplies in bulk to minimize costs.
  - Assists districts with efforts to close the "learning gap" between native English speakers and English language learners through the Aiming High program.
  - Provides a district assistance intervention team, when requested, to help in "No Child Left Behind" program improvement to address issues and thereby avoid corrective action.
  - Promotes the K-16 Career Development Strategic Plan to assist students to prepare for and obtain meaningful careers with an efficient approach.

## Findings, continued

- F14** School and College Legal Services (SCLS) is a Joint Powers Authority that contracts with schools and colleges throughout California. SCLS provides legal services to SCOE on a monthly retainer. It counsels on employer-employee issues, grievances, collective bargaining, and other aspects of school law. SCOE has a contract with SCLS through which SCOE provides payroll services for SCLS.
- F15** SCOE may support, under appropriate circumstances, teacher's use of Education Code Section 44922. At age 55 until age 70, certificated, full-time personnel may switch to part-time, receive a pro-rated salary, and are allowed health benefits the same as in their full-time position. To qualify, they must have at least 10 years of certificated employment, with the last five being full-time, without a break in service. This is informally referred to as the "Willie Brown" provision, named for its author, former Speaker of the House in the California Legislature.
- F16** SCOE does not support the practice referred to as "spiking", a process where teachers can enhance their retirement benefits by working extra hours in the year before retirement, i.e. summer teaching.
- F17** The issue of elected vs. appointed superintendents has been studied, at the request of SCOE, under the direction of the Superintendent, by a professor at Sonoma State, and previously, by the League of Women Voters in Alameda County. Neither study reached definite conclusions as to what would be the best for the counties involved.
- F18** Unification of Sonoma County's 40 school districts would address the duplication of effort and salaries of forty superintendents, district administrators and support staff.

## Conclusions

- SCOE is doing an efficient job overseeing its responsibilities. The Superintendent has a background in education that has been beneficial to the organization and operations within SCOE.
- The Superintendent includes the next level of management in decision-making. Referred to as the Superintendent's Cabinet, this group meets regularly to discuss issues of oversight and reporting as mandated by the State of California.
- The Superintendent delegates to his staff and has an open door policy to encourage communication. He is always visible and strives to attract and retain the best employees.

## Conclusions, continued

- SCOE has a cohesive team based on cross training. Due to deadlines, different departments are busy at different times, and they support one another when downtime occurs.
- Staff morale has been an issue in the past, but with the exception of the recent projected budget cutback, under the current management structure, a more positive environment has been incorporated into the workplace.
- It is the Grand Jury's opinion that appointing a Superintendent would increase the authority of the Board. The Board at present has no authority to evaluate the performance of the Superintendent but sets his salary and performs pro-forma duties.
- An elected superintendent must take valuable time from his office to run for re-election and if opposed, there is no guarantee that the best-qualified person for the job wins. With a job search, the County Board of Education—or a committee chosen for that purpose—researches, interviews, and approves the candidates, and it is not a political process. Additionally, running for election is costly.
- Historically, the unification of school districts in Sonoma County is a controversial issue. This matter has been studied and commented on since 1916, when there were 147 school districts in Sonoma County. Deep-seated issues of local control make this an emotionally-charged topic. Declining enrollment, changes in demographics, and monetary concerns will eventually reduce the number of districts.

## Commendations

- The Grand Jury commends the Superintendent of Schools for his goal-oriented philosophy of leadership, fiscal oversight, and hiring of quality employees.
- The Grand Jury commends SCOE for its mission to educate all children in Sonoma County with quality occupational programs, special education, performance monitoring, and the desire to expand services in assisting the school districts
- The Grand Jury commends the Director of Human Resources for initiating, under the direction of the Superintendent, the recommendations of the 2006-2007 Grand Jury regarding fingerprinting and background checks for volunteers and others who are in contact with students.
- The Grand Jury commends the Assistant Superintendent of Business Services for her grasp of the issues and enthusiasm for her work.
- The Grand Jury commends the President of the County Board of Education for his knowledge of and desire to improve education in Sonoma County.

## Recommendations

- R1 SCOE must ensure that school districts do not sacrifice important programs or decrease the number of teachers' aides as a way to balance the budget.
- R2 SCOE should explore the possibility of establishing an internship program for education majors at Sonoma State, Dominican College, and Santa Rosa Junior College to give student teachers classroom experience and allow them to assist teachers.
- R3 The Sonoma County Board of Education should explore options to increase its effectiveness. The Board represents a wealth of knowledge and needs to seek ways to change the paradigm of its work and increase its influence.

## Required Responses to Recommendations

SCOE Superintendent of Schools	R1, R2
Sonoma County Board of Education	R3

## References

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