

Sonoma County Office of Education

Misuse of State Vocational Education Funds

The people of Sonoma County trust and expect that the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) spends tax dollars in the best interests of our students. A Grand Jury investigation has determined that State funds allocated to SCOE have been misspent. According to a report by the State Office of Education, some or all of this money will have to be repaid to the State by Sonoma County taxpayers.

SCOE provides several Alternative Education Programs for Sonoma County students in grades 9 through 12. These programs are designated specifically for students at risk of failing to graduate and failing to receive adequate training to enter the work force, thus becoming a burden to society. Alternative education is sometimes partially funded by grants targeting specific aspects of these programs. Are these designated funds being appropriately applied? Are the faculty and staff of these programs being used most effectively and in the best interest of students?

Reason for Investigation

The Grand Jury received a complaint alleging far-ranging budget and personnel irregularities at SCOE. The complaint alleged that Federal funds granted through an alternative education/vocational education program were used for purposes not specific to the goals stated in the grant application. The grant in question is intended solely for vocational/technical career training. Additionally, an award-winning vocational education teacher who brought this discrepancy to SCOE's attention was reassigned to a different position against the teacher's wishes.

Background

The Sonoma County Office of Education offers several programs for students who, for a number of reasons, cannot attend the regular comprehensive high schools in Sonoma County. These programs are called Alternative Education Programs. Students in the programs are at serious risk of school and social failure. Their enrollment in these programs may be due to disciplinary issues, criminal charges, being a single parent in grades 9 through 12, being truant, and/or other causes. Alternative Education Programs are designed to help these students complete their high school education.

The students may, after a stay in one of the programs, return to a comprehensive high school and be eligible for a Regional Occupational Program (ROP) class, pass the General Education Development (GED) test, or pass the California High School Proficiency Exam. In each case, the student should be better positioned to find a job and function as a productive member of society.

Alternative Education Programs receive the majority of their funding through the State, based on average daily attendance. However, there are other special funding streams from grants. The Carl Perkins Fund is a Federal grant, administered by the State, that specifically targets "occupational-specific skills necessary for economic independence as a productive and contributing member of society." (www.ed.gov/offices/OVEA/CTE/perkins)

In the 2006-2007 school year, SCOE applied for and received a Carl Perkins Grant in the amount of \$23,736 for a consortium of school districts in the Sonoma, Marin, and Shoreline Districts. Sonoma County's share of this grant was \$14,130.

Investigative Procedures

Interviews conducted:

- Complainant
- Two staff members in the SCOE Alternative Education Programs
- SCOE Director of Youth Development Support and Leadership Services
- State Department of Education Assistant Superintendent of Secondary, Post Secondary, and Adult Leadership, in charge of High School, Alternate Education, Career Technology, Vocational Education and Adult Education Post Secondary
- State Department of Education Educational Program Consultant—Administrator of Carl Perkins Vocational Education Funds
- SCOE Communications Specialist, Grant Oversight, Curriculum Oversight
- SCOE Superintendent of Schools

Investigative Procedures, continued

Documents Reviewed

- SCOE 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Grant Application
- Confidential Review of 2006-2007 Carl Perkins expenditures commissioned by the SCOE Superintendent of Schools
- Carl Perkins Fund Budget and Expenditure Schedule, 2006-2007 (included in 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Fund Grant Application)
- Revised Carl Perkins Budget and Expenditure Schedule (not found in original Grant Application)
- E-mails, a list of expenditures, correspondence with State agencies, and other documents supplied by SCOE Alternative Education Programs staff members
- The report on the State's investigation of SCOE's use of Carl Perkins Funds

Findings

- F1** Programs that qualified for funding through Carl Perkins vocational-education grants were denied funding by SCOE, and programs and materials not allowed by the Carl Perkins Act were purchased with the grant money.
- F2** SCOE's original 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Grant Application requested funds for: classified salaries (\$7,941 for guidance and counseling) employee benefits (\$1,661 for guidance and counseling) books and supplies (\$3,605) services and other expenditures (\$250).
- F3** After the initial grant application, monies were removed from "classified salaries" and "employee benefits" to "services and other expenditures," increasing the original budget in that category from \$250 to \$4,500.
- F4** The revised expenditures reflecting the final distribution of 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Funds indicates an expenditure of \$4,000 for the SASix software-attendance program that is used by the SCOE Technology Services Unit. SASix is a general education support program not specific to vocational training.
- F5** The State Administrator of Carl Perkins Funds testified that the purchase of SASix software was an **inappropriate** use of Carl Perkins Funds.
- F6** The SKILLSUSA program affords students in vocational/technical education programs the opportunity to compete for awards recognizing excellence in job skills learned.
- F7** An award-winning teacher at the Youth Camp Alternative Education Program asked SCOE for Carl Perkins Funds to allow his/her students to participate in a SKILLSUSA competition. SCOE refused to allocate funds from the program for this purpose, stating that it was **not** an appropriate use of the funds.
- F8** The State Administrator of Carl Perkins Funds testified that these funds **can** be used for SKILLSUSA competition.
- F9** A staff person requesting Carl Perkins Funds for SKILLSUSA questioned SCOE's use of the funds for SASix, and disagreed with SCOE's refusal to allow funds to be used for SKILLSUSA. This staff person, who is not the complainant, was subsequently reassigned against his/her will. The timing of this reassignment suggests poor personnel management at SCOE. Mismanagement of this kind may affect the morale of staff and undermine the support needed to ensure the success of Alternative Education Programs.
- F10** As a result of a State Department of Education investigation, SCOE will be required to repay all or part of the 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Funds it was awarded.

Conclusions

SCOE has misused the 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Funds supplied by the State for use by the Alternative Education vocational/technical training program. This action and related inappropriate personnel decisions threaten to undermine the morale of the Alternative Education staff. In order to have a vibrant and effective program, staff must have confidence in the administration, and be able to work effectively with them. The working relationship of Alternative Education staff and SCOE managers could be eroded by such actions.

Recommendations

- R1** The SCOE Superintendent of Schools must ensure that all funds spent by the office are disbursed as intended.
- R2** SCOE must adhere to requirements for the disbursement of grant monies received for specific programs.
- R3** SCOE must acknowledge that targeted funds are to be used for designated programs, not as general funds.
- R4** SCOE programs receiving targeted funding must be audited to ensure that the funds are spent appropriately.
- R5** SCOE must include teachers and other staff members in decisions concerning the application for and disbursement of funds that may be used in program funding.
- R6** SCOE must ensure that reassignment of personnel is not punitive.
- R7** The movement of personnel, when undertaken, must benefit the students affected rather than strictly be in the best interest of SCOE, as stated in present SCOE policy (SP 4135.00).

Commendations

The Grand Jury commends the staff of SCOE's Alternative Education Programs for the many excellent opportunities they offer to students who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to attend and function well in the County's comprehensive high schools. The programs are tailored to meet the needs of a variety of student difficulties. To succeed, these programs require staff with exceptional skills. The programs are a valuable service to at-risk students, and to society in general.

As a result of a State Department of Education investigation, SCOE will be required to repay all or part of the 2006-2007 Carl Perkins Funds it was awarded.

Required Responses to Findings

SCOE F1, F3, F4, F5, F7, F8, F9, F10

Required Responses to Recommendations

SCOE R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7



