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IMPROVING THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL SYSTEM

Issue

Given the current cuts in funding, are eligible students in the Community School system being served with qualified staff and satisfactory facilities, and what modifications might help stabilize this system?

Summary

The San Mateo County Office of Education provides core educational services at four sites to students on probation. Two high school districts provided similar services to about 40 students at their own district sites. The academic programs at both the County-run Community Schools and the district-run Community Day Schools are similar, with individualized learning plans that lead to a GED, high school diploma, or a High School Proficiency certificate. The Probation Department partially funds group supervisors for the County-run schools. Most of the basic education funds are from the state, based on average daily attendance, with added dollars from various sources for substance abuse, remedial instruction, special education, and mental health counseling.

A Blue Ribbon Panel, representing all concerned agencies in the County, examined the problems caused by decreased funding from the state and the County for this at-risk population of students. The Panel determined that the best solution to insufficient funding would be to combine County and district resources to run County Community Schools, and to locate these schools at no or low-cost sites. The Grand Jury strongly supports this solution.

The Grand Jury is especially pleased that the Panel acted quickly and collaboratively to identify the most feasible ways to maintain the Community Schools programs and to set the stage for fiscal stability and potential expansion. The Grand Jury recommended that the Blue Ribbon Panel, or subsets of it, should be ongoing, and further recommended that the County and the districts should continue to reevaluate progress, to consider partnerships, to address emerging issues, and to develop strategies to keep these schools open and functioning effectively. Filling the critical educational and social needs of these at-risk adolescents must continue to be a priority for all concerned.



IMPROVING THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL SYSTEM

Issue

Given the current cuts in funding, are eligible students in the Community School system being served with qualified staff and satisfactory facilities, and what modifications might help stabilize this system?

Background

To provide access to education for middle and high school students on probation, the San Mateo County Office of Education has provided core academic educational services in three geographic areas of the county and at the Juvenile Justice Center for over twenty years. The goals of these regional schools are to prepare students either to return to their own districts school, complete studies that lead to a district-or county-issued diploma, or prepare for the GED or High School Proficiency certificate. The Community Schools enroll approximately 130 students year-round working primarily on individualized learning programs.

Funding these Community Schools became an overriding problem, creating annual operating deficits that threatened their continued existence. Some of the facilities needed upgrading; some lacked up-to-date instructional materials; and some services such as family counseling occurred only occasionally. With the recent cuts to the San Mateo County Probation Department's budget, the group supervisor positions at the regional centers were no longer fully funded. Therefore, the County Office of Education used reserves to cover operating deficits, increasing the financial shortfall to approximately \$500,000 annually, a situation that cannot be sustained.

School funding is a labyrinth of complex rules and regulations. As an example, there are currently about 120 different categorical funds, and each category is precise in the purpose and administration of grants and funding sources. Most of the funds are from the state, based on average daily attendance (ADA). Some monies are from federal sources for drug and gang-related problems, from Title I dollars primarily for remedial reading and math instruction, and from Perkins Vocational Education. Other sources of funds include special education provided by the County Office of Education for eligible students. Mental health

agencies offer some counseling services. The Prevent Repeat Offenders Program (PROP) for middle school students on probation is supported primarily by federal dollars.

The Grand Jury investigated two types of schools serving County students on probation or expelled from their district schools.

Community Schools. Students are referred, usually by the Probation Department, to one of the four regional Community schools (North, Central, South, and Gateway) due to expulsion from local school districts or for various types of probation violations. Students at the three regional Community Schools range in age from 13 to 18; those at Gateway are 13 to 16 years of age. The 60 Gateway students live at home and are bussed daily to the Probation Department facility in San Mateo. During the five-hour school day, students receive assistance from a variety of programs, including substance abuse programs, special education services, and anger management and conflict resolution programs. For the youth preparing to leave school, counselors assist them in how to take the SAT, enroll in community colleges, or apply for vocational programs. Supervised mental health interns provide one hour a week of individual or group counseling, particularly since many youth have backgrounds as gang members, substance abusers, or were victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Community Day Schools. The Sequoia and San Mateo High School Districts chose to operate Community Day Schools for students requiring alternative education, although both districts do send students on probation to the County-run Community Schools. Typically, Day School students were expelled from their comprehensive high schools, but were not involved with the juvenile justice system. These students cannot return to their home schools to complete requirements for graduation. The district-run day schools are similar to the County schools in their low teacher-student ratio, individualized learning curriculum, and special student needs for alternative teaching methods and on-site counseling. Differences include the lack of a group supervisor from the Probation Department and a six, rather than a five-hour school day. Both types of schools operate on a 200-day school year.

Investigation

The Grand Jury visited and observed a community school, a district-supported community day school, and The Foundry, a community school located in Santa Clara County. Staff and administration from the County Office of Education gave an overview of the County Office's function in regard to Community Schools. The Probation Office explained the role its department fills with the group supervisors assigned to the Community Schools.

The Grand Jury:

- collected data from various sources, including budget numbers for a Community Day School and from the County Office of Education for the Community Schools. The Grand Jury looked at the actual dollars spent for 2003-2004 and the proposed 2004-2005 budget for a Day School.

- reviewed The School Accountability Report Card (SARC) from the County Office for the 2002-2003 school year (the latest information available).
- reviewed the report, “The Cost/Benefits of County Community Schools”.
- obtained and reviewed information from the San Mateo County Blue Ribbon Panel on Court and Community Schools.
- reviewed articles in general circulation newspapers concerning educational funding and the complexity of the funding processes.

Findings

Each Community School class is staffed by an experienced teacher, a teacher’s aide, and a group supervisor under the auspices of the Probation Office, who serves as counselor, probation officer, and mentor. Virtually all teachers are fully credentialed and most have completed state certification requirements to teach English learners. In addition, both a literacy and a math coach help in the schools. The teaching staff presents core subjects primarily through individualized lesson plans, since students enter and leave the programs at various times throughout the school year. Data for 2003-2004 show that, of the approximately 150 students served in the three regional Community Schools, 21 graduated either with a GED, diploma, or a California High School Proficiency certificate. Sixteen transferred to a regular adult school, three enrolled in college, thirty-four were dropped for either poor attendance or behavior, fifteen either moved or dropped out, fifteen were incarcerated, and forty-six continued into the current school year. The number of students served total more than the capacity of the schools since some students remain only a portion of a year. The County Office of Education holds regular graduation ceremonies, with the most recent ceremony graduating 15 students in January 2005.

In 2003-2004, the County spent approximately \$12,000 per Community School student for a variety of services ranging from the basic core curriculum to literacy tutoring and substance abuse counseling. About \$100,000 annually went to facilities, primarily for the leasing and upkeep of the buildings housing the schools.

In response to the reduced funding from the State and the County, the County Board of Education provided the requisite leadership by forming the Blue Ribbon Panel in July 2004. Members, representing relevant city and county agencies and districts, met monthly. The Panel examined a comprehensive review of educational and budgetary approaches to serve these at-risk youth. Members of the Panel attended meetings of statewide associations, such as the Community Day School Network, to encourage the sharing of ideas and solutions to common problems. Along with providing the appropriate education, the members’ major concern was the projected annual \$500,000 budget deficit. The Blue Ribbon Panel determined that the optimal financial and operational model for Community Schools would be to combine the district-run with the County-run schools.

Independent studies demonstrate that a substantial economic benefit exists in educating these at-risk youth. Three recent studies by the Rand Corporation, the University of

California at Los Angeles Graduate School of Management and Research, and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago concurred in their findings that the cost of incarceration far exceeds the cost of education. The San Mateo Probation Department estimates that every dollar spent in prevention (i.e., education, counseling, etc.) saves \$7 in future costs to taxpayers.

Conclusions

The Community Schools are functioning adequately given the economic constraints under which they operate. These constraints, however, result in the almost constant search for money to provide services.

Despite the bare-bones budgets, students are making progress, as shown by increases in test scores from 2003 to 2004 in language and math, and by completion rates, such as numbers receiving diplomas or GED certificates.

The relatively low rates for students dropping out of the Community Schools due to attendance or behavior problems underscores the need to continue supporting these schools with stable funding and easily accessible locations.

Staff at the schools are dedicated to the education and success of these at-risk youth. Experienced teachers and counselors work to help the students learn life skills, including goal setting, dependability, and assuming responsibility for one's actions.

The Grand Jury observed the need not only to maintain a viable Community Schools program, but also to expand academic offerings to a growing number of adolescents. Current thinking by state and local educators anticipates increased placements of troubled youth in local communities rather than incarceration in state-run facilities. It is essential that these at-risk youth obtain as much education and socialization as possible to enable them to be contributing members of their families and of the community.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury supports the County Superintendent of Schools and the County Board of Education in giving the highest priority to keeping these alternative schools open and functioning effectively. The Grand Jury also determined that the following recommendations may enhance the schools' effectiveness.

The County Superintendent of Schools and County Board of Education should:

1. implement the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel, including combining the district-run Day Schools with the County-run Community Schools.

2. convene a smaller subset of the Panel to hold regularly scheduled meetings to examine emerging issues related to programs, facilities, funding, and future growth and to develop strategies to address them.
3. convene a task force of fiscal officers from the County Office of Education, participating districts, Probation Department, and other member organizations of the Blue Ribbon Panel to determine how best to share the costs of these schools
4. continue to evaluate the progress made and the benefits resulting from combining Community and Community Day Schools. The evaluation should recognize any long-term implications of combining schools, including budgetary issues and program effectiveness.
5. require and support parent/guardian or any other concerned adult involvement.
6. work to return youths to their home school districts or to local community college programs by identifying and co-operating with available academic and vocational programs.
7. consider partnerships with educational organizations and agencies to seek additional funding sources, such as Strategic Funding and other nongovernmental organizations to identify and procure funds.
8. continue to participate in organizations such as the Community Day School Network to build on the experiences and research of other similar systems.
9. continue to work to find more cost effective locations including, but not limited to, surplus County or district school sites closer to required ancillary services such as public transportation.

May 20, 2005

The Honorable Norman J. Gatzert
Judge of the Superior Court
Hall of Justice
400 County Center, 2nd Floor
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655

Dear Judge Gatzert,

Please find enclosed the responses of the San Mateo County Board of Education and the County Superintendent of Schools to the recommendations pertaining to the County Office of Education in the Grand Jury's report of April 6, 2005. An informational copy of this document is also being sent to the Board of Supervisors.

If you have any questions regarding this document, please do not hesitate to contact us through the County Office of Education at 802-5550.

Sincerely,

Memo P. Morantes
President
San Mateo County Board of Education

John Mehl, Ph.D.
County Superintendent of Schools
San Mateo County Office of Education

JM/msg

San Mateo County Office of Education Responses to the 2004-2005 Grand Jury Recommendations

THE COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS AND COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION SHOULD:

RECOMMENDATION 1

IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BLUE RIBBON PANEL, INCLUDING COMBINING THE DISTRICT-RUN DAY SCHOOLS WITH THE COUNTY-RUN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS.

MOUs have been completed with Sequoia and San Mateo Union High School District to combine district Community Day Schools with County Community Schools. The combined programs will be located at the Fair Oaks Center in Redwood City and at the Pen-Crest site in San Bruno.

RECOMMENDATION 2

CONVENE A SMALLER SUBSET OF THE PANEL TO HOLD REGULARLY SCHEDULED MEETINGS TO EXAMINE EMERGING ISSUES RELATED TO PROGRAMS, FACILITIES, FUNDING AND FUTURE GROWTH AND TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THEM.

Monthly meetings are scheduled including representatives from Probation, High School Districts and County Office of Education managers and staff.

RECOMMENDATION 3

CONVENE A TASK FORCE OF FISCAL OFFICERS FROM THE COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS, PROBATION DEPARTMENT AND OTHER MEMBERS OF ORGANIZATIONS OF THE BLUE RIBBON PANEL TO DETERMINE HOW BEST TO SHARE THE COSTS OF THESE SCHOOLS.

A preliminary meeting including the Assistant Chief of Probation, San Mateo County Office of Education Associate Superintendent, and Community School managers is scheduled for May 16. The fiscal task force will be discussed.

RECOMMENDATION 4

CONTINUE TO EVALUATE THE PROGRESS MADE AND THE BENEFITS RESULTING FROM COMBINING COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY DAY SCHOOLS. THE EVALUATION SHOULD RECOGNIZE ANY LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF COMBINING SCHOOLS, INCLUDING BUDGETARY ISSUES AND PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS.

Ongoing program review will take place and evaluation reports will be provided to the San Mateo County Office of Education Board of Trustees.

RECOMMENDATION 5

REQUIRE AND SUPPORT PARENT/GUARDIAN OR ANY OTHER CONCERNED ADULT INVOLVEMENT.

Parent involvement is encouraged. Parents participate in an intake interview where expectations are delineated and parent input is sought. Parent meetings may be planned three times per year.

RECOMMENDATION 6

WORK TO RETURN YOUTHS TO THEIR HOME SCHOOL DISTRICTS OR TO LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAMS BY IDENTIFYING AND CO-OPERATING WITH AVAILABLE ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS.

Student transitions are discussed at the monthly Community School Task Force meetings. The Regional Occupational Program (ROP) currently makes presentations to students regarding opportunities for vocational training and it is hoped that ROP may extend classes to community school sites. Career education will be provided as a component of the after school activities planned by the East Palo Alto Boys and Girls Club.

RECOMMENDATION 7

CONSIDER PARTNERSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES TO SEEK ADDITIONAL FUNDING SOURCES, SUCH AS STRATEGIC FUNDING AND OTHER NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO IDENTIFY AND PROCURE FUNDS.

Funding issues are a regular item on the Task Force agendas. Grant opportunities are being researched. The San Mateo County Office of Education Associate Superintendent for Student Services Division is the Co-Chair of the Adolescent Collaborative Action Team comprised of 45 county agencies and community based organizations. Opportunities for revenue enhancement and/or resources for services are sought through this group.

RECOMMENDATION 8

CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE COMMUNITY DAY SCHOOL NETWORK TO BUILD ON THE EXPERIENCES AND RESEARCH OF OTHER SIMILAR SYSTEMS.

San Mateo County Office of Education program managers are members of the Community Day School Network (CDN) and the Juvenile Court, Community and Alternative School Administrators Association (JCCASAC). The Associate Superintendent of Student Services Division is a member of the Student Programs and Services Steering Committee (SPSSC) of the California County Superintendents' Education Services Association (CCSESA). This group meets six times per year to discuss alternative education issues and advocate for legislation and California Department of Education policy that support alternative education students and programs.

RECOMMENDATION 9

CONTINUE TO WORK TO FIND MORE COST EFFECTIVE LOCATIONS INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, SURPLUS COUNTY OR DISTRICT SCHOOL SITES CLOSER TO REQUIRED ANCILLARY SERVICE SUCH AS PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION.

For the 05-06 school year, all community school classrooms, with the exception of the Daly City site, will be in rent-free sites. The sites are located in East Palo Alto, Redwood City, San Bruno, San Mateo and Daly City. These sites are selected to be accessible to students. The sites in East Palo Alto, Redwood City, San Bruno and Daly City are co-located in facilities with community-based organizations that can provide resources and opportunities for extended learning for the students.