

NEVADA COUNTY SCHOOLS

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Civil Grand Jury is charged with reviewing public entities. The Grand Jury had not made a review of the school system for several years.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury visited board meetings of all Nevada County school districts, several more than once. The county superintendent of schools, district superintendents, board members and directors of charter schools were interviewed.

FINDINGS

1. All of the elementary school districts except one in the county are experiencing declining enrollment. This results in a direct impact on their annual budgets since the state bases funding on average daily attendance. School boards and their superintendents are reviewing teaching staff requirements. Some of the districts have limited sharing of teaching staff. Districts at this time do not wish to combine administratively, as this removes the sense of local neighborhood control of schools. Elementary school districts work closely with their parent communities and this is reflected in the active parent volunteer support.
2. There are more charter schools in Nevada County relative to population than in any other county in the state. California law places very few controls on the operation of charter schools. Concerns about fiscal oversight and lack of standards for student assessment, have been expressed by several local board members and professional staff. The charter school officials did not agree with the concerns on oversight and attendance. The legislation authorizing charter schools is being reviewed by state school officials and the Legislature during 1998. Input from leaders of the Nevada County charter schools has been requested by the Legislature. In a letter to the California Network of Educational Charters on October 31, 1997, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin expressed her concern for charter schools' fiscal oversight and average daily attendance accounting.
3. Each school district conducts its own grant research and develops the required documentation in the competition for extra funds.
4. The county superintendent of schools has attempted to improve school environment as well as promote communication between schools and the public.

Examples of his accomplishments are:

- a countywide school newsletter directed to all superintendents and teachers
- school information broadcasts by school personnel on a local radio station
- contributions of computers and funds to the county library
- establishment of the "3R" school for middle school students who have social and learning problems

5. The Nevada Joint Union High School (NJUHS) counselors provide comparison statistics on the performance of incoming freshmen to the elementary districts from which the students came. This provides a means for the elementary school district to compare performance with other school districts.

6. Most of the local school district board of education members participate in a countywide association in which school district superintendents prepare informational seminars to acquaint members with board duties. They also participate in the California School Board Association seminars on school governance which have been identified as being of significant benefit, particularly for new board members.

7. The state requires that all prospective employees and volunteers of school districts be fingerprinted before they start employment; this costs school districts approximately \$70 per applicant. It can take six weeks for each clearance.

8. The Grand Jury found that a conflict had existed throughout the 1997-98 school year between the county superintendent of schools and the superintendent of the NJUHS. It was found that the handling of a sports program problem involving parents of a student and the county superintendent did not include participation of the NJUHS officials. This was in part responsible for the protracted conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The elementary school districts and their respective volunteer parent communities are to be commended for their joint effort in providing the best possible school environment for their students.

2. Charter schools offer different approaches to the learning environment. The lack of state mandated structure and standards, which are required for traditional schools, creates a concern about a sufficiency of financial oversight, accountability and assessment of student performance.

3. The unresolved conflict between the county superintendent of schools and the superintendent of the NJUHS caused unnecessary ill will and showed lack of professionalism on the part of both individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Grand Jury recommends that boards of education be alert to personnel conflict within the school districts' administration and assert more direction and authority if such issues arise.
2. The Grand Jury recommends sharing administrative and central office functions to reduce each district's cost of operation.
3. The Grand Jury recommends that Nevada County schools work together to develop a grant research and writing staff that would be available for all school districts in the county.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Presidents of all of the Boards of Education
Due September 30, 1998

Superintendent of each school district
Due August 30, 1998