

AVENAL HIGH SCHOOL

SUMMARY

The Kings County Grand Jury was made aware of concerns held by some of the staff of the Avenal High School. Some staff members questioned the planning and benefit of certain scheduling implementations as well as the quality of teacher training. Teachers at Avenal High School realize the importance of such issues and how these issues affect the students' performance. A Grand Jury visit to Avenal High School revealed a caring staff and a well maintained facility. While Avenal High School faces many of the same challenges as other California high schools, the Grand Jury found the administrative and teaching staffs at Avenal High School to have the best interest of the students at heart.

BACKGROUND

The City of Avenal is located in the coastal range foothills of the western San Joaquin Valley. Avenal High School, home of the Buccaneers, is part of the Reef-Sunset School District and serves grade 9-12. Avenal High School's program "is designed to prepare their students for their post-secondary journey."¹ The school's total enrollment is 630 students.

Upon discovering some educational concerns of some staff members, the Kings County Grand Jury inquired into the workings of Avenal High School. Pursuant to California Penal Code §933.5, "A grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any special-purpose assessing or taxing district located wholly or partly in the county..."

METHODOLOGY

The Kings County Grand Jury interviewed some of the Reef-Sunset School District staff regarding Avenal High School. The Grand Jury also attended Reef-Sunset School District meetings and visited the Avenal High School to observe some classes during instruction.

DISCUSSION

The Kings County Grand Jury was made aware of concerns held by some of the teaching staff at Avenal High School. The Reef-Sunset School District, which includes Avenal High School, states that it has implemented changes in order to ready its students for higher education. The school now operates under block scheduling, that is, "...a system for scheduling the middle- or high-school day, typically by replacing a more traditional schedule of six or seven 40–50 minute daily periods with longer class periods that meet

¹ Avenal High School Accountability Report Card 2013-2014 published Jan 2015

fewer times each day and week”.² Before instituting this change, the Reef-Sunset School Board conducted an opinion poll of the teachers regarding block scheduling. According to the Board, 60% to 70% of the high school teachers were in favor of using block scheduling.³ The District administrative staff also stated they held meetings with parents of the high school students to inform them of the pending change. Training for the execution of block scheduling was offered to the teachers, with one training session taking place in August, 2014 with the Fresno County Office of Education and the Kings County Office of Education. Only two administrative staff members of the Reef-Sunset School District visited one high school in the area that uses block scheduling. The purpose of this visit was to gather information as to how this type of scheduling works in schools.

During an interview, it was discovered by the Grand Jury that the reason Reef-Sunset School District put block scheduling into practice was to accommodate West Hills College’s teaching schedule. West Hills College offers some classes on the Avenal High School campus, including The Agricultural Academy. Block scheduling is preferable for these types of classes because of its longer instructional periods. The District did not consider building a block schedule just for West Hills College classes and leaving regular scheduling for the other classes. We were informed that block scheduling is more costly to the School District.

There is some apprehension about the use of block scheduling. Some School District staff and teachers are worried that not all instructional time is captured. The teaching periods are long and the students could have trouble staying engaged. It should be noted, however, that according to the Reef-Sunset Unified School District web site, the first semester of block scheduling, Fall 2014, was a success with higher student achievement and a higher number of students passing their courses. Members of the District administrative staff stated that there were fewer discipline problems because of block scheduling as well.

Common Core was adopted by the State of California in 2010 and put into effect in the 2014-2015 school year. “Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade.”⁴ Teachers have had to make many modifications to their instructional methods because of these new standards. Training for teachers has been offered by local education offices to help ease the transition.

² The Glossary of Education Reform www.edglossary.org/block-schedule

³ Appendix (1)

⁴ www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards

The Kings County Grand Jury found additional concerns of the school staff are that Common Core coaching/training offered to the Avenal High math teachers by the Kings County Office of Education was inadequate. There is apprehension the coaches used to train the teachers are not sufficiently qualified for their positions. It was stated in an interview that the teachers' complaints about the coaching were ignored by high school administrative staff. Upon further investigation, the Grand Jury was informed that there was immediate follow-up to the coaching complaints by the administrative staff and the coaches offered by the Kings County Office of Education are properly credentialed.

The Kings County Grand Jury made an unannounced visit to Avenal High School. Members of the Jury divided up into teams and visited classes of mathematics, sciences, agriculture and a West Hill College English class. Members noticed that there were an inordinate number of tardy students during first period classes. A tardy student at Avenal High School is defined as a student who is not seated in his/her classroom at 8:05am. If the student is later than 15 minutes, it is considered a cut class and the student must report directly to the Attendance Clerk. It is stated very clearly in the Avenal High School Student Handbook that tardiness *will* result in detention and /or other appropriate consequences. Teachers will document each tardy a student accumulates. A tardy is only excused due to illness, a doctor's appointment, a family funeral, or a school activity. Otherwise it is considered unexcused. Some members of the Grand Jury observed more than a few students wandering into class after the tardy bell and there were no apparent immediate consequences.

One purpose of the Grand Jury's visit was to see block scheduling in practice. As stated earlier, one concern held by some staff is that the periods are too long and it is difficult for the students to stay engaged. It was observed by Grand Jury members that there is wasted instructional time and not all students stay fully engaged. There is also the added distraction of the Chromebooks used in the classroom. A Chromebook "...is a new category of notebook computers and mobile devices that runs Google's cloud-based Chrome OS operation system. While they lack the processing power and higher-end features of standard laptops, Chromebooks are built primarily for Web surfing and are optimized for this purpose with the Google Chrome web browser as well as near instant-on and instant-resume capabilities."⁵ The school implements the use of Chromebooks in classroom instruction. While their purpose is sound in theory, it was noticed by Grand Jury members that a number of students were using these Chromebooks for things other than class work to include social media, music, and games.

A few of the Grand Jury members visited the cafeteria during the morning brunch. The brunch is available to all students. Food is provided by the District and the menu varies

⁵ www.webopedia.com

daily. The cafeteria staff was friendly and interacted with the students while serving them. The facility was clean and well organized.

Overall, the visit to Avenal High School was positive. It is apparent that the staff and the students are proud of their school. The grounds are well-kept and there are plans for additions and improvements. The students were behaved; discipline problems were not apparent. The staff was friendly and accommodating.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The length of block scheduled classes is too long. The length exceeds most students' ability to stay focused on the lesson.

Recommendation 1

Reef-Sunset Unified School District should monitor and continue to evaluate the use of block scheduling in classes other than the ones offered by West Hills Community College.

Finding 2

The Chromebooks utilized in the classroom are an added distraction for the students. Their use allows the students to "surf the web" for information other than what is being studied in the classroom.

Recommendation 2

Teachers in classes utilizing Chromebooks should better monitor the use of the devices. Repercussions for misuse of the Chromebooks should be timely administered by the teachers.

Finding 3

There appeared to be an inordinate number of tardies at the Avenal High School the day of the Grand Jury visit.

Recommendation 3

Avenal High School tardy policy should be enforced. A common sense approach to interpreting tardy policy should be considered.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the grand jury requests responses as follows:

Required Responses

- Reef-Sunset Unified School Board of Trustees
- Kings County Board of Education

Invited Responses

- Reef-Sunset Unified School District Superintendent
- Avenal High School Principal

Comments

The Kings County Grand Jury thanks the staff of Avenal High School for the tour and information.

The Kings County Grand Jury commends the staff for their dedication to the students and parents.

BELL SCHEDULE 2014-2015

Daily "Block" Schedule: (Monday & Thursday)

07:55-08:00	Passing	(05)
08:00-09:50	1 st Period	(110)
09:50-10:05	Brunch	(15)
10:05-10:10	Passing	(05)
10:10-10:35	SMART	(25)
10:35-10:40	Passing	(05)
10:40-12:30	2 nd Period	(110)
12:30-01:10	LUNCH	(40)
01:10-01:15	Passing	(05)
01:15-03:05	3 rd Period	(110)

(Tuesday & Friday)

07:55-08:00	Passing	(05)
08:00-09:50	4 th Period	(110)
09:50-10:05	Brunch	(15)
10:05-10:10	Passing	(05)
10:10-10:35	SMART	(25)
10:35-10:40	Passing	(05)
10:40-12:30	5 th Period	(110)
12:30-01:10	LUNCH	(40)
01:10-01:15	Passing	(05)
01:15-03:05	6 th Period	(110)

RALLY/CLASS Meeting

07:55-08:00	Passing	(05)
08:00-08:50	1 st Period	(50)
08:50-08:55	Passing	(05)
08:55-09:35	2 nd Period	(50)
09:35-09:50	BRUNCH	(15)
09:50-10:00	Passing	(05)
10:00-10:50	3 rd Period	(50)
10:50-10:55	Passing	(05)
10:55-11:45	4 th Period	(50)
11:45-12:35	RALLY	(50)
12:35-01:15	LUNCH	(40)
01:15-01:20	Passing	(05)
01:20-02:10	5 th Period	(50)
02:10-02:15	Passing	(05)
02:15-03:05	6 th Period	(50)

Wednesday - Early Out PLC / Staff Meeting

07:55-08:00	Passing	(05)
08:00-08:50	1 st Period	(50)
08:50-09:05	Brunch	(15)
09:05-09:10	Passing	(05)
09:10-10:00	2 nd Period	(50)
10:00-10:05	Passing	(05)
10:05-10:55	3 rd Period	(50)
10:55-11:00	Passing	(05)
11:00-11:50	4 th Period	(50)
11:50-12:30	LUNCH	(40)
12:30-12:35	Passing	(05)
12:35-01:25	5 th Period	(50)
01:25-01:30	Passing	(05)
01:30-02:20	6 th Period	(50)
02:20-03:15	PLC	(55)

Minimum Day

07:55-08:00	Passing	(05)
08:00-08:35	1 st Period	(35)
08:35-08:40	Passing	(05)
08:40-09:15	2 nd Period	(35)
09:15-09:30	Brunch	(15)
09:30-09:35	Passing	(05)
09:35-10:10	3 rd Period	(35)
10:10-10:15	Passing	(05)
10:15-10:50	4 th Period	(35)
10:50-10:55	Passing	(05)
10:55-11:30	5 th Period	(35)
11:30-11:35	Passing	(05)
11:35-12:10	6 th Period	(35)
12:10-12:50	Lunch	(40)
01:00	Bus Departure	