

REEF-SUNSET UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SUMMARY

“THE MISSION of the Reef-Sunset Unified School District is to empower and inspire students for life-long learning and relational success in order to be productive members of society.”¹

“THE VISION of the Reef-Sunset Unified School District is to provide rigorous instruction and differentiated learning that focuses on collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking with the effective use of evolving technology.”²

The Avenal School District was formed in 1887. The first schoolhouse was an abandoned homesteader’s cabin measuring 14 by 16 feet. In July of 1903 the Kettleman School District was transferred to the Avenal School District.

The Reef-Sunset Unified School District is located in the Central Valley of California. The district office is located in Avenal which is a city of 15,505 people according to the 2010 census. The district is comprised of eight schools which include Avenal Elementary School, Kettleman City Elementary School, Tamarack Elementary School, Reef-Sunset Middle School, Avenal High School, Sunrise High School, Reef-Sunset Community Day School, and Adelante High School. It is projected that the 2015-2016 district enrollment will be 2,613 students.

The members of district administration possess more than adequate education and qualifications for the positions they hold. These include Master and Doctorate degrees as well as credentials in clear³ administrative services, clear pupil personnel services, multiple subject teaching and single subject teaching. One member of the staff has also received special training in the California Association of School Business Officials (CASBO) Education Partnership Training Program.

The Kings County Grand Jury visited the Reef-Sunset Unified School District after receiving several written complaints and other written communications.

¹ Reef-Sunset Unified School District web site

² Reef-Sunset Unified School District web site

³ “A clear credential is issued when all credential requirements have been completed.”

www.cta.ca.gov

GLOSSARY

CASBO According to the CASBO website, the purpose of the organization is: “The California Association of School Business Officials is the premier resource for professional development and business best practices for California’s school business leaders. CASBO is dedicated to promoting excellence and professionalism in all aspects of school business. Founded in 1928, CASBO serves more than 3,000 members by providing certifications and training, promoting business best practices and creating opportunities for professional collaboration. CASBO members represent every facet of school business management and operations. The association offers public school leaders an entire career’s worth of growth opportunities.”⁴

KCOE (Kings County Office of Education) “The Kings County Office of Education has the primary responsibility to ensure compliance with applicable state and federal laws and regulations and shall investigate complaints alleging failure to comply with those laws and regulations.”⁵

RAP (Responsible Athletes Program) “The Responsible Athletes Program is a functioning non-profit organization that consists of three major components. These components are sports, academics, and special events. The mission is to enable the youth of the Avenal area an equal opportunity to compete, train, and learn the proper balance of a student-athlete.”⁶

RSUSD (Reef-Sunset Unified School District) “The Reef-Sunset Unified School District is a K-12 school district located in the Central Valley of California with an enrollment in excess of 2,600 students. The district office is located in Avenal.”⁷

BACKGROUND

In response to complaints and correspondence, the Kings County Grand Jury visited the Reef-Sunset Unified School District. California Penal Code §933.5 provides: “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...”

⁴ www.casbo.org

⁵ www.kings.k12.ca.us

⁶ www.rapteam.org

⁷ www.rsusd.net

METHODOLOGY

The Kings County Grand Jury interviewed pertinent witnesses, attended regular school board meetings, attended a school board study session, and visited one of the District's schools.

DISCUSSION

Written Complaints

Complaints were received by the Grand Jury regarding the implementation of a block schedule at Avenal High School, district hiring practices, teacher class assignments, and the quality of academic coaching.

The Grand Jury was told that a block schedule was implemented at Avenal High School with a very short time of planning. The administration visited another school having a block schedule but no teachers were included in the visitation process. In addition, teachers were generally not included in the actual development of the block schedule such as the length of time for each class. The feeling that the District Office dictates everything and that there is no shared decision-making or input being welcome was enhanced by going to a block schedule so quickly and with limited involvement.

As a matter of practice, the Reef-Sunset Unified School District begins the hiring for the new school year in April when other school districts begin the hiring process in February. It was suggested that all the quality potential employees are already hired by other districts before the process is begun in Avenal.

It was suggested that teachers who are "in favor" with the administration are given the preferred teaching positions and that those "not in favor" are given what is left including having the "less preferred" students.

It was suggested that academic coaching provided to the district by the Kings County Office of Education by contract is lacking in quality.

General Information

The size of the administrative staff at both the District Office and Avenal High School was reduced by one position. The work now is shared among the remaining administrative staff which puts an added burden on each person affected by an increase in workload.

It is hard to hire personnel for RSUSD because of the geographic location of the school district and the academic status of the students. Some potential teachers who had signed a contract with the district later asked to be released from the contract because of a more desirable contract having been offered from another district. In fact, three such situations

occurred in the 2014-2015 school year. It is thought by the district that waiting until April to announce job openings would eliminate most of these situations.

A block schedule at Avenal High School was started for the 2014-2015 school year. This plan was put into place with only a semester of planning. The Grand Jury was informed that there was community involvement as well as support of the teaching staff for the adoption of the block schedule. Only two members of the district administrative staff visited a school on a block schedule. No members of the teaching staff were included in the visit. Testimony revealed that the block schedule was begun to accommodate a request of West Hills College which was scheduled to offer classes at Avenal High School.

The quality of communication in the District was of concern. Some teachers stated that they felt “left out” of the communication loop from every level of administration. Members of the community also stated that they did not always know what was happening in the schools and district.

Board Meetings

The Grand Jury appreciated the student presentations made at the beginning of each Board meeting by students from some of the District schools. These presentations presented an opportunity for the Board to be informed as to what is going on at each campus while giving students the opportunity to make presentations. While the presentations were appreciated, it must be noted that at times it was difficult to hear the students because of the sound system being used at the meetings. Reports given to the Board from district administrators and others were difficult to hear by members of the audience.

District Administrators and Board Members were not always polite to presenters as presentations were being made. Negative facial expressions and gestures being made toward the presenter and/or audience were noted several times. The Grand Jury observed gestures were also made by District Administrative Staff toward the Board. When the administrator making the gesture saw that the members of the Grand Jury were watching, they stopped.

The Grand Jury appreciates the fact that there is a genuine interest on the part of the Administration to improve the educational climate of the District. This can be seen in the fact that there was a donation to the RAP program of \$20,000 in support of the youth recreation program.

Board Study Session

It was decided at a regular Board of Trustees meeting to have a study session on Friday, February 27, 2015 to discuss the future reconstruction plans for District schools since all of the buildings in the district are older. There were three of the five board members in attendance as the meeting began. A fourth member arrived late and the fifth member did not attend. In addition to the board members attending, the superintendent, the district's architect, two financial consultants, one member of the community and the members of the Grand Jury were in attendance. Generally, the discussion was open with most board members involved. It was noted that one member of the Board appeared to be napping and one texting during part of the discussion.

Because of the age of some of the buildings in the district, a foundation for future reconstruction plans was developed at this meeting. The Board members have understanding of the long term needs of the District which includes a total estimated cost of 16.8 million dollars.

Avenal City Council

The Avenal City Council has joined the Reef-Sunset Unified School District in supporting the RAP program by (1) honoring a member of the Board of Trustees who was instrumental in the development of the program and (2) by donating money in support of the program. The Council also donated \$15,000 in support of the summer swimming pool operation at the Avenal High School pool.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

Communication is lacking among the Reef-Sunset School District, the administrative and teaching staffs, and the community.

Recommendation 1

(a) A better communication system between the district office and the teaching staff should be developed both in person and in writing. Minutes of all department meetings should be sent to the district office in addition to having them available on site.

(b) Members of the district administrative staff should spend one day per semester on each school facility. This would provide an opportunity for the district administration to better understand the concerns and needs of the teachers and school staff. This also allows for a better relationship between the District and the student body.

(c) District Administrative Staff should consult the events calendar to avoid event conflicts when scheduling meetings. Information materials should be made available to all who attend as well as being available to those unable to attend but desire the information.

Finding 2

Members of the administrative team made inappropriate gestures during meetings. There was also a lack of attention from the school administrators during the meetings and their individual conversations were disruptive.

Recommendation 2

The District Superintendent should hold workshops for district administrative staff on proper decorum during meetings and/or when representing the District. All Board members should revisit and adhere to the RSUSD Mission and Vision statements.

Finding 3

It is difficult for the audience to hear what is being said during the district meetings.

Recommendation 3

The District should provide instruction for proper use of the sound system or replace it as needed. The Board President should ask the audience if the audio level is sufficient.

Finding 4

The academic coaches provided by KCOE are credentialed and well suited for the positions they hold.

Recommendation 4

None

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933(c) and §933.05, the Kings County Grand Jury requests responses from:

The Reef-Sunset Unified School District Board of Trustees

Kings County Office of Education Board of Education

INVITED RESPONSES

Superintendent, Reef Sunset Unified School District Board of Trustees

Kings County Superintendent of Schools

COMMENTS

The Kings County Grand Jury thanks the Reef-Sunset Unified School District staff for their cooperation in providing all requested information.

The Grand Jury acknowledges the positive working relationship between the Avenal City Council and the Reef-Sunset Unified School District.