



Round Valley Unified School District – A School Board Left Behind

Summary

Based on a citizen's complaint regarding compliance with law governing special education received in March of 2003 which was the subject of Grand Jury investigations last year as well as this, the 2004-2005 Mendocino County Grand Jury examined issues pertaining to Special Education Services in Round Valley Unified School District (RVUSD) in Covelo. Following this report is Appendix II with more general information about Special Education.

Background

Round Valley Unified School District is located in Covelo and serves approximately 445 students.

Methodology

The Grand Jury studied Federal and State Law and reviewed many websites regarding special education programs. The Grand Jury interviewed members of the Special Education Local Plan Agency, (SELPA), former and current employees, including Special Education personnel of RVUSD, both local and county school administrators, and School Board members. The Grand Jury examined the past three financial audits of the RVUSD, the most recent labor agreements covering RVUSD employees, RVUSD School Board minutes, the Policies and Procedures manuals for RVUSD, a 1991 Mendocino County Grand Jury Report concerning RVUSD, and a 1998 Mendocino County Grand Jury Report concerning SELPA. The Grand Jury performed site visits to Round Valley High School, Round Valley Elementary/Middle School, Yolla Bolly Continuation High School, and the Preschool and Infant/Toddler Program located adjacent to the high school in Covelo. Grand Jury members also attended several meetings of the RVUSD School Board. The Eel River Charter School was not a subject of this investigation.

Findings – Special Education

1. 10.7% of the RVUSD student population is served by Special Education Services. RVUSD has an average percentage of Special Education students compared with other districts in the Mendocino County SELPA.
2. California Education Code gives enormous authority and control to the parents over the education of their children in special education programs.
3. Parents of special education students may not be fully informed of these rights and may not therefore maintain complete, accurate records that could help them to exercise their rights.



4. Some RVUSD students who were qualified for special education services have not received them.
5. Mismanagement of special education services, including retention of staff, has precluded any discernible improvement in the delivery of special education services. An updated California Special Education Management Information System report which shows compliance dates and delivery of special education services, though requested, was not made available to the Grand Jury.
6. RVUSD does not avail itself of free diagnostic testing services and programs from within and outside the County that would identify and prescribe services for special education students.

Findings - Personnel

7. The geographical isolation and housing shortage in RVUSD make it difficult to attract and employ properly credentialed staff.
8. RVUSD has had an extremely high turnover of administrators and special education staff, resulting in the loss of services to special education students.
9. The RVUSD School Board has not acted to reduce turnover of essential Special Education staff, jeopardizing continuity of special education services.
10. Even after a change in personnel, the administration of RVUSD has continued to control and limit the flow of information to the School Board, thereby curbing its effectiveness.
11. RVUSD administration has had a pattern of using verbal abuse and intimidation to control staff at all levels.
12. The Administration has interfered with the employee complaint process and prevented witnesses from appearing before the School Board in closed session on employee matters.
13. RVUSD does not have a qualified school nurse, public health nurse, or licensed physician, available to supervise physical health care services in the school setting in accordance with law. (Education Code §49423.5, Code of Regulations, Title 5, §3051.12).
14. Staff members appropriately trained and certified to administer medications are not available during all school hours, thus compromising the health and safety of the students. (Education Code 49423.5; Code of Regulations, Title 5, Section 3051.12(b)(1)(C)).
15. Training certificates required to administer medications to students are not current.
16. Fax machines that transmit and receive confidential personnel information are not secured.



Findings – General

17. On the most recent California Annual Progress Index, RVUSD had the lowest possible score.
18. Significant other social issues which include crime, drug use and community turmoil, affect the functioning of the school community.
19. Parent apathy is reflected in low citizen attendance at School Board meetings, and low voter turnout for School Board elections.
20. School Board meeting agendas are not posted in a timely manner at conspicuous and accessible places throughout the district as required by the Brown Act. At one meeting attended by the Grand Jury, the only copy of the Agenda that they could find was pinned on a bulletin board over the copy machine inside the District Office.
21. The RVUSD Board members do not receive board meeting packets in a timely manner and are often unable to make informed decisions.
22. In the past three years School Board minutes have not been approved until as much as ten months after meetings.
23. The RVUSD Board Policy and Procedure Manual is not current, has sections missing, and is not available to staff and parents.
24. The RVUSD School Board has not taken valuable training in Board membership when it has been offered by both the Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE) and California School Boards Association (CASBA).
25. The RVUSD School Board has been uninformed, misinformed, and willfully ignorant of its responsibilities and authority.
26. The supervisory authority of MCOE over RVUSD has been ineffective in ensuring that all special education services are delivered to RVUSD students.
27. RVUSD records indicate that some students have been admitted to classes without being properly immunized.
28. Student medications are not dispensed from a central location, in violation of State Education Code and the Policy and Procedures Manual of RVUSD.
29. Basic office management and organization procedures are not in place in the administrative offices, resulting in a loss of time and productivity.
30. Administrative offices in the school have not implemented an effective filing system, resulting in fire hazards and loss of records.
31. Students are allowed access to desks and computers where confidential student and employee information is maintained.
32. In the fall of 2004 the Grand Jury requested to be placed on the mailing list to receive School Board Meeting agendas and minutes of the meetings. None has been received by the Grand Jury.
33. During the course of this investigation the Grand Jury requested documents and records from the RVUSD. Most of the documents had to be picked up personally by



members of the Grand Jury well after the requested delivery date, while others arrived late or were never provided at all.

34. An antiquated and uninsulated heating system in the high school administration building poses a significant fire risk.

Findings - Funding

35. The economic depression in Covelo is a huge contributing factor to the problems of the RVUSD.
36. Throughout the state of California, Federal and State funding is insufficient to cover the cost of special education programs. The difference in cost is drawn from the general fund of local school districts.
37. Per-pupil funding at RVUSD is among the highest of all local districts in Mendocino County.
38. RVUSD has been identified as an underperforming school for the past three years and thus has been receiving additional funds to address its problems.
39. RVUSD, because of its designation as an underperforming school, risks an external takeover by the State unless there is significant improvement.
40. RVUSD incurred a \$100,000 penalty because of an administrative oversight in the filing of paperwork for a one million dollar grant.

Recommendations

1. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD School Board adequately staff and support special education programs which identify and assist special education students at an early age. (Findings 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 17, 25, 26, 36, 37, 38, 39).
2. The Grand Jury recommends that parents of special education students maintain files with all paperwork associated with their child's education. (Findings 2, 3, 4).
3. The Grand Jury recommends that parents take a proactive and participatory role in the education of their children. (Findings 2, 3, 4, 6, 17, 19, 20, 23, 25, 38, 39).
4. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD establish and support a Parent-Teacher Association. (Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 38, 39).
5. The Grand Jury recommends that MCOE assert to the fullest extent its power to oversee, regulate and influence the RVUSD to be more effective in carrying out its mission and protecting students' welfare. (All Findings).
6. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD should make as much use as possible of the free services of The Northern California Diagnostic Center to identify and assist special education students. (Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 36).
7. The Grand Jury recommends that the School Board and community members avail themselves of the free training offered through organizations such as MCOE, SELPA, and CASBA. (Finding 1, 3, 5, 10, 11, 12, 15, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 38, 39, 40W).



8. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD develop policies, procedures and incentive programs to attract and retain qualified Special Education teachers and staff that are certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, and that bring skills and qualities which make them a good fit in this unique community. (Findings 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 23).
9. The Grand Jury recommends that administrators consider recruiting candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas. (Findings 7, 8, 9, 13, 14).
10. The Grand Jury recommends that MCOE Human Resources Department conduct a performance audit of RVUSD administration to correct the abuse and intimidation that pervade the entire organization. (Findings 10, 11, 12).
11. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD immediately contract with adequate medical staff in accordance with State Education Code. (Findings 13, 14, 15).
12. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD immediately make secure desks, computers, and fax machines where confidential student or personnel information is maintained or transferred. (Findings 16, 31).
13. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD immediately purchase a locking display case to post meeting agendas, job announcements, school calendars, and other public notices as appropriate. Such notices must be displayed in a place of public access, in accordance with the Brown Act. (Finding 20).
14. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD develop a calendar and tracking system to assure that all important deadlines are met. (Findings 4, 21, 22, 25, 29, 30, 32, 40).
15. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD immediately update the Policy and Procedures Manual and take steps to insure that these changes are implemented by staff and School Board members. (Findings 23, 25, 29, 30).
16. The Grand Jury recommends that MCOE oversee and enforce compliance with regulations requiring full immunization for all students in attendance. (Finding 27).
17. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD immediately organize and maintain in a professional manner all offices and storage areas. (Findings 29, 30).
18. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD digitally archive as many records and other documents as possible and use secure offsite storage. (Findings 29, 30, 31).
19. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD require all staff to adhere to an effective organizational system that is defined in the School Board's Policy and Procedures Manual. (Findings 23, 29, 30).
20. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD comply with all requests for School Board Meeting agendas and minutes in a timely manner. (Finding 32).
21. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD administrators comply with all future Grand Jury requests for information to avoid possible criminal charges. (Finding 33).



22. The Grand Jury recommends that a fire safety engineer perform an inspection of all RVUSD facilities and that all potential building or fire code violations be immediately addressed. (Findings 34).
23. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD generate additional revenue to compensate for the loss to the district General fund caused by mandated special education services. (Finding 36).
24. The Grand Jury recommends that RVUSD develop and use web-based informational resources to communicate with all concerned parties, and to network with others who share a concern for special education. (Findings 1, 3, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33).

Comments

The Grand Jury believes that all parties, especially parents, should know their rights, responsibilities and obligations so that they work together in the best interests of the students. Appendix II contains some basic information for parents, teachers and others.

The findings in this report paint an initially discouraging picture. Wider community problems, poor communication, failure on the part of many to assume responsibility, lax standards of management, and even administrative misfeasance have created a tangle of problems that could seem almost insoluble.

RVUSD is at grave risk for losing local control. As it now stands, this may be the best solution – absent effective and immediate action by the School Board.

The Grand Jury recognizes the good will and hard work of members of the Covelo community, in particular many of the dedicated and skilled teachers and staff of the district.

Response Required

Superintendent, MCOE
RVUSD Board of Trustees

Response Requested

Director, MCOE, Human Resources Department
Director, SELPA
Superintendent, RVUSD
Special Education Director, RVUSD
Secretary of Education, State of California