



VALLEJO CITY
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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August 22, 2017

Via Email (Cheryl D. Clower)
And
U.S. Mail

The Honorable Robert C. Fracchia
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
Solano County Superior Court
600 Union Avenue
Fairfield, CA 94533

Subject: Response of Vallejo City Unified School District to the 2016-2017 Solano County Grand Jury Report

Dear Presiding Judge Fracchia:

INTRODUCTION

The Vallejo City Unified School District ("District" or "VCUSD") is in receipt of the Solano County Grand Jury's 2016-2017 Report ("Report") entitled "Educational Rights of Solano County Homeless Children and Youth." It is apparent from the Report that the Grand Jury reviewed and considered an extensive amount of information in reaching its Findings and Recommendations regarding the status of Solano County's homeless children and unaccompanied youth covered by the federal McKinney-Vento Act¹ ("McKinney-Vento"). The District respects the function of the Grand Jury to investigate and report on the operations of local government agencies, and the District has fully cooperated with the Grand Jury's requests, including production of documents and interviews with witnesses.

At the outset, the District acknowledges that identifying and serving the needs of homeless children and youth is an ongoing challenge due to a variety of reasons. We recognize that schools in particular play an important role in identifying homeless children and youth because they provide a safe educational environment. All school districts face the same global challenges in identifying children and youth that qualify for McKinney-Vento services.² One such impediment to the identification of homeless children and youth is the transient nature of the families of homeless students. Another barrier to identification can be a family's reluctance to self-identify as homeless because of the stigma associated with homelessness. Well trained, and

¹ 42 U.S.C. sections 11431-11435.

² Hyatt et al., California's Homeless Students: A Growing Population (Sept. 2014) California Homeless Youth Project, California Research Bureau, pp. 3-4.

well intentioned, District personnel encounter these and other barriers related to identifying *all* students who may qualify for services under McKinney-Vento, such as students' mere presence at school, given their homelessness.

In its 2016-2017 Report, the Solano County Grand Jury "chose to investigate the funding, identification, and educational support services provided for homeless children/youth in the community" based on information and data gathered from several Local Education Agencies ("LEAs").³ The District appreciates the Grand Jury's recognition of the complexities associated with meeting the needs of McKinney-Vento qualified students given the limitation in federal, state, and other resources. In light of the limitations, the District has focused financial resources and personnel in ensuring that our homeless students have access to education and social services.

While the Grand Jury generally acknowledges the efforts of school districts "to provide services (even beyond educational needs) for the homeless children/youth," the Report does not identify the specific compliance status of the individual school districts included as a part of the Grand Jury's investigation. (Report, at p. 1.) The District appreciates the opportunity to highlight in its response the resources and services we provide to meet the needs of our McKinney-Vento student population.

The Grand Jury requests that the District reply to its Findings and Recommendations outlined in the Report. This response is prepared and submitted on behalf of the District pursuant to Penal Code section 933, subdivision (c).

RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

The District's Responses to the Report's Findings and Recommendations are set out below. (Report, at pp. 9-10.) It should be noted that this response does not address the statistics and information pertaining to the other school districts that were included as part of the Grand Jury's review.

³ The Grand Jury obtained data for its 2016-2017 Report from the following LEAs: Benicia Unified School District, Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, Travis Unified School District, Vallejo City Unified School District, Vacaville Unified School District, Dixon Unified School District, and Solano County Office of Education. Counts for Rio Vista were noted but were segregated from the countywide totals because these students fall under the River Delta Unified School District.

Finding 1

District documentation presented conflicting statistics in reporting the number of homeless children/youth.

The District disagrees with this Finding as it applies to the VCUSD on the basis that we accurately report the number of identified homeless children and youth.

Recommendation 1

1a All data contained in reporting documents be accurate and verifiable.

1b Reporting entities find more effective ways of identifying homeless children/youth.

Response to Recommendation 1a

As stated above, the identification and accounting of homeless children and youth is challenging. For those students that *are* identified as homeless by the District, our recordkeeping accurately accounts for such students. Specifically, documentation of students that are eligible for McKinney-Vento services is entered into the District's database system by school site personnel and/or District Office ("DO") staff. Throughout the year, school site personnel and DO staff engage in ongoing communication regarding the identification and qualification of homeless children and youth served by the District.

Response to Recommendation 1b

The District makes available information regarding McKinney-Vento services throughout the year. In order to ensure that information is provided to parents/guardians and students, the District distributes information on McKinney-Vento services and resources by mail, on its website, and through *Peachjar* (the District's electronic flyer delivery system). (Please see Exhibit 1, Information For Parents and Exhibit 2, 2017 – 2018 Student Residency Affidavit/Emergency Information.) In addition to these means of dissemination, information is also made available at school sites.

The District is proud to be the only Full Service Community Schools ("FSCS") District in Northern California. As a FSCS District, school sites are provided additional services to support students, including McKinney-Vento students. These support services include family resources centers, pediatric clinics, and mental health support specialists (Please see Exhibit 3, Full Service Community Schools Districts: Logic Model + Theory of Change.) The services provided through our FSCS model include a myriad of support services for our McKinney-Vento students.

As required by law, the District has designated a McKinney-Vento liaison that ensures compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act. Further, the District has an administrator that

oversees the implementation of McKinney-Vento services. In addition to the McKinney-Vento liaison and administrator, the District also has approximately twenty-five (25) Academic Support Providers ("ASPs") who are assigned at each of the District's school sites.⁴ The ASP personnel work closely with the District's McKinney-Vento liaison, Parent liaison, and Community Bilingual liaison to support students at the local school site as part of the District's FSCS efforts. The ASP personnel are a key component of the identification processes of McKinney-Vento students. They also provide ongoing support to homeless children and youth, such as helping students and their families access shelter, transportation, and other services.

The District believes that there are always ways to improve the process by which children and youth are identified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act. As such, the District proactively works toward exploring and enhancing ways to improve upon their identification processes.

Finding 2

Teacher training in identifying and reporting homeless students is a low priority.

The District disagrees with this Finding as drafted on the basis that Teacher training in identifying and reporting homeless students is a priority for the District.

Recommendation 2

Districts establish a high priority for teachers to receive intensive training in identifying and reporting homeless students.

Response to Recommendation 2

Teacher training in identifying and reporting homeless students is a high priority. All administrators, including Principals, Vice-Principals, Office Managers, and Registrars receive training on the McKinney-Vento Act. (Please see Exhibit 4, School Resource for Students Without Permanent Housing McKinney-Vento Homeless Education.) In addition to the training that the District currently makes available, it will be extending training opportunities for teachers, counselors, and ASPs regarding identification of McKinney-Vento students. To facilitate prompt and effective training of teachers, counselors, and ASPs at school sites, the District is scheduled to begin a "Train-the-Trainer" program whereby the Solano County Office of Education's ("SCOE") McKinney-Vento specialists will train the school site Principals, who will, in turn, train its respective staff on identification of McKinney-Vento students.

⁴ Currently, an ASP is assigned to each elementary and middle school and two (2) ASPs are assigned to each high school site.

Finding 3

Providing transportation is problematic in serving homeless students.

The District disagrees with this Finding on the basis that the VCUSD is not experiencing problems in providing transportation to students within our District identified as homeless and who request transportation. For example, for the last two (2) school years, the District provided transportation to all McKinney-Vento students requesting transportation services. In 2016 – 2017, seventy-one (71) students requested, and received, transportation services. In the previous school year, 2015-2016, forty-five (45) students requested, and received, transportation services. It should be noted that while transportation services are available to all McKinney-Vento students, not all students request transportation assistance.

Recommendation 3

3a The Solano County Office of Education and School Districts within the county use established means of communication to share best practice ideas in providing transportation for the homeless students they serve.

3b The Solano County Office of Education and the School Districts within the county form alliances with local transportation providers to meet the needs of homeless students.

Response to Recommendation 3a

The District currently implements Recommendation 3. Specifically, the District meets monthly with the SCOE, school districts, and other local agencies at the Student Services Meetings, which are designed to provide an opportunity to share best practices and create a network of support services for all children and their families. The monthly meetings include discussion of various topics related to supporting students' needs, including transportation services for homeless students. The SCOE, districts, and other local agencies provide updates and share best practices.

Response to Recommendation 3b

The District meets its obligations to provide transportation services through its own transportation department and through SolTrans, the Solano County Transportation Services Provider. When necessary, the District will purchase monthly bus passes from SolTrans for homeless students to travel to and from school, including transportation fare sufficient to cover travel between District boundaries. The District believes in the importance of providing transportation services to homeless students and will continue to support students' ability and stability in attending school by maintaining its partnership with SolTrans. Further, the District is open to continue exploring transportation related partnerships with local agencies through its monthly Student Services Meeting with the SCOE, school districts, and other agencies.

Finding 4

Funding for homeless students creates an on-going challenge within the county.

The District agrees with this Finding and we use a collaborative process to obtain funding sources for the provision of services to homeless students. It is the District's understanding that the previous federal grant funding model for McKinney-Vento services changed several years ago and has made access to available funding more competitive and challenging. The District does not receive any direct block grant funding to serve our homeless student population. The federal allocation of specific dollars to school districts would assist the District in the provision of services to McKinney-Vento qualified students. The District will continue to explore funding opportunities with the SCOE.

Recommendation 4

The Solano County of Education and the School Districts establish a grant writing position to acquire funding for homeless student services.

Response to Recommendation 4

The District agrees that funding for homeless students creates an ongoing challenge. However, the District seeks to work collaboratively with the SCOE to seek funding for homeless students. Specifically, the District works with the SCOE's grant writing office which applies for grants to support homeless children and their families, as part of a consortium with other Solano County school districts ("Consortium"). The District collaborates closely with the SCOE to provide statistics and other necessary information to the grant writing process. The SCOE then provides a share of those grants received to the collaborating school districts. Until the 2015- 2016 school year, the SCOE always received the grant funds for which it applied, which was then distributed to the school districts. Since the SCOE did not receive the McKinney-Vento Act grant for the 2015-2016 school year, neither did the school districts. The District will continue to explore funding opportunities with the SCOE. In fact, the Consortium plans to apply for the next three (3) year grant cycle beginning in 2018-2019 during this upcoming school year, 2017-2018.

Finding 5

Emergency housing for unaccompanied youth is limited to pregnant teens.

The District disagrees with this Finding on the basis that we provide information and referrals to families and students that require emergency housing, not only pregnant teens.

Recommendation 5

The Solano County Office of Education and School Districts work with county, city administrators and local non-profits to provide emergency housing for all unaccompanied homeless teenage students.

Response to Recommendation 5

The District fully appreciates its role as a collaborating institution with other agencies whose mission it is to provide emergency housing to homeless youth, including unaccompanied homeless teenage students. The District works with *A Place-2-Live, Inc.*, *Fighting Back Partnership*, and *Christian Help Center*, organizations that provide shelter and housing assistance to homeless families. In its role as a collaborating institution, the District provides referrals for homeless youth and families as well as unaccompanied pregnant teens. The District takes its role in providing information and access to services for its homeless children and families very seriously by working with a variety of resources in the Vallejo City geographic area. (Please see Exhibit 5, Vallejo Resources For Our Family & Friends In Need Packet.) Further, the District works cooperatively with students' social workers, when applicable, and seeks to find ways to link students with agencies that may be able help student with their specific needs (e.g., food, clothing, domestic violence intervention, legal assistance, etc.) The FSCS's comprehensive programs and academic support providers who work directly with students on a daily basis are best positioned to learn about each student's unique needs and help students access services.

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury plays an important role in the checks and balances system established by the Legislature to monitor the operations of local government agencies. The District has fully cooperated with the Grand Jury at each of the many steps in its investigations and will continue to work on meeting the needs of our McKinney-Vento student population.

Thank you for your concern for our students.

Sincerely,



Steve A. Goldstone, Ed.D
Interim Superintendent

cc: Grand Jury Office at cdclower@solano.courts.ca.gov.
VCUSD Governing Board
Cheri Summers, VCUSD Chief Academic Officer
Phillip Shelley, VCUSD Director of Parent and School Support