

Implementing Major Changes in Education at the Local Level: Building a Plane in Midair

SUMMARY

The Grand Jury reviewed how the Yolo County Office of Education (YCOE) and the five Yolo County school districts are implementing the Common Core State Standards and the new K-12 finance system adopted by the State of California. The Grand Jury discovered:

- **Common Core State Standards** are being implemented in Yolo County, on schedule, with clear implementation guides and plans as provided by the California Department of Education (CDE).
- School Districts and YCOE are required to implement the new **K-12 finance system**, which includes the Local Control Funding Formula (**LCFF**) and the Local Control and Accountability Plan (**LCAP**) during the current school year for the 2014-2015 school fiscal year. At the same time, the templates and regulations for LCAP and LCFF are still undergoing design and approval at the State level.
- YCOE is responsible for evaluating the LCAP for each Yolo County school district and the independent charter school. The Grand Jury learned that this year YCOE faces challenges in evaluating the LCAPs without assessment tools from the California Department of Education (CDE).
- The Yolo County school districts and YCOE are moving forward to implement as much of the K-12 finance system as possible, as regulations and guidelines become available from CDE.

Because of the ongoing changes and delays in CDE providing information to local education agencies, YCOE and school district employees describe the process of implementing the K-12 finance system as “...*similar to building a plane in midair.*”

The Grand Jury commends YCOE and the five Yolo County school districts for their work in implementing these major changes to the education system while waiting for the completion and adoption of needed regulations and guidelines.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The State of California and the State Board of Education (SBE) have enacted significant changes in educational curriculum and financing. The CDE is the state agency charged with developing regulations and templates for implementing these changes. As the SBE adopts regulations, the CDE informs county offices of education, local school districts, and direct-funded charter schools who are responsible for implementing these changes.

In view of the great public interest in these educational reforms, the Grand Jury decided to review how YCOE along with the five school districts is working to implement them. The 2012-2013 Grand Jury reported on charter schools in Yolo County; therefore charter schools were not considered in this year's review.

California Penal Code allows the Grand Jury to investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county, including special districts and any incorporated city or joint powers agency located in the county (California Penal Code 925 and 925a).

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed personnel from YCOE and the following five school districts: Davis Joint Unified School District, Esparto Unified School District, Washington Unified School District (West Sacramento), Winters Joint Unified School District, and Woodland Joint Unified School District. In addition, the Grand Jury reviewed:

- Yolo County Office of Education website: www.ycoe.org
- California Department of Education website: www.cde.ca.gov
- Davis Joint Unified School District website: www.djUSD.net
- Esparto Unified School District website: www.espartok12.org
- Washington Unified School District website: www.wusd.k12.ca.us
- Winters Joint Unified School District website: www.wintersjUSD.org
- Woodland Joint Unified School District website: www.wjUSD.org
- US Legal website: <http://definitions.uslegal.com/l/local-educational-agency/>

Note: the last interviews for this report were completed on February 6, 2014.

DISCUSSION

California has a three-tiered system of public education administration. At the state level, the State Board of Education determines policy for K-12 education in the areas of standards, curriculum, instructional materials, assessment, and accountability. The CDE is the state agency charged with developing regulations and templates for implementing these changes and notifying the local educational agencies. At the local level, the elected school boards of individual school districts are responsible for instruction and operations. YCOE is the liaison that actively links state policy priorities and new initiatives to administrators, teachers, students, and parents in the five school districts in Yolo County.

The Yolo County Office of Education (YCOE) provides the educational services, fiscal oversight, and Special Education Local Plan Area services for the five school districts. YCOE

also serves as a liaison between the California Department of Education and the school districts and the independent charter schools in Yolo County.

The two primary services provided to school districts by YCOE as they connect with Common Core State Standards and the K-12 finance system include the following major functions:

1) Business Services (K-12 finance system):

- approves annual school district budgets and monitors the school districts' financial stability;
- audits budgets;
- monitors and assists the districts regarding property tax collection;
- provides facilities planning assistance;
- assists with financial planning; and
- provides accounting services that includes student body funds, accounts payable, accounts receivable, and payroll reporting.

2) Educational Services (Common Core State Standards):

- delivers specific direct programs for students in special education;
- delivers services for foster and homeless youth; and (note: intersects with K-12 finance system); and
- provides instructional support services to the local school districts and YCOE operated programs in the areas of curriculum, assessment, professional development, resources, awards programs, interagency partnerships, resource development, and statewide/regional initiatives.

Educational Reform: Common Core State Standards

The new Common Core State Standards (Common Core) are educational standards adopted by the State of California. Common Core is a state-led effort that started in 2009 at the initiation of governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia. Developed with input from teachers, parents, school administrators and educational experts on a national, state and local level the California Common Core standards describe what students should know and be able to do in each subject at each grade level. International best practices were also reviewed and incorporated where possible.

The key features of Common Core are:

- contains rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order skills such as problem solving and analysis;

- establishes what students need to learn, but does not dictate how teachers should teach;
- aligns with college and work expectations (including standards that incorporate the use of technology);
- builds upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- establishes clear and consistent standards so that students, teachers, and parents will have a shared understanding of what students are expected to learn.

In addition to California, forty-five other states have adopted the Common Core in mathematics and English. One important idea behind the adoption of Common Core is that consistency across participating states will allow students to move from one state to another and be able to transition into their new school and still be on track academically.

Implementing Common Core requires substantial professional development for teachers and new testing and assessment measures of students. The new instructional methods in Common Core call for a major shift in teaching techniques with the focus on a student’s ability to think critically, to solve problems, and to learn content.

Yolo County school districts, charter schools, and YCOE received \$5.8 million from CDE for the implementation of Common Core. In 2013, funds were apportioned to school districts, county offices of education, and independent charter schools based on the prior year’s enrollment at an equal funding rate of \$200.96 per student.

The CDE developed a *Common Core State Standards Systems Implementation Plan for California* and a *Common Core State Standards Systems Implementation Guide* to help school districts, independent charter schools and County Offices of Education, such as YCOE, develop their own local plan based on their specific needs and resources.

School Financing Reform

California school financing reform for K-12 education was enacted on July 1, 2013 as part of the 2013-2014 California Budget Act. The reform consists of 1) the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which determines funding, and 2) the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which is the roadmap for how money will be spent.

Local Control Funding Formula

LCFF refers to base funding for all school districts and county offices of education with additional funding based on the number of non-duplicated¹ students who fall into one of the following categories:

- students who receive free and reduced-price meals;

¹ Non-duplicated means to count only once. For example, a foster youth receiving a free or reduced-price meal that is also an English Language learner would only count as one student.

- English language learners;
- foster youth.

In the past, schools received what was known as “categorical funding”, meaning schools could only spend money on the specific categories funded. For example, mathematics and reading professional development funds could be used only to provide professional development for mathematics and reading/language arts teachers. Under LCFF, these funds will become part of a general fund that may be used for any educational purpose.

LCFF increases school funding and provides greater flexibility to YCOE and school districts to decide how to allocate funds. The new formula gives them the ability to decide how to best use their funds with input from educators, parents, students, community businesses and other stakeholders.

Local Control and Accountability Plan

The county offices of education, school districts, and charter schools are required to develop, and adopt, a three-year local control and accountability plan (LCAP) which directs how funds are to be spent with input from community members, pupils, local bargaining units, and the public. The LCAP details how funds are to be spent, by each local educational agency², to increase or improve services; establishes annual goals for students; and describes the actions taken to achieve the annual student goals. Local educational agencies complete their own LCAP and address how they will:

- implement Common Core including how English language learners will have access to Common Core and the English language development standards;
- increase Academic Performance Index (API) and student achievement on statewide assessments;
- improve school climate by reducing suspension and expulsion rates, assessing student safety (bullying, safe passage to/from school, gang activity), and students connecting with school (liking their teacher, enjoying physical education or other subjects);
- increase school attendance, high school graduation rates, and reduce dropout rates;
- increase percentage of students who have successfully completed courses for entrance to college and career technical education programs;
- identify the methods used to address the needs of students listed in the Local Control Funding Formula eligible for additional funding;
- improve conditions in any school including safe, clean, and adequate school facilities;

² Each of the five districts and YCOE are a local educational agency.

- provide equitable access for all students to textbooks, instructional materials, and qualified teachers;
- provide meaningful opportunities for parent involvement.

The plan is an active document that will be updated annually to include a) an analysis of student achievement data for the prior year; b) any revisions for the remaining two years of the original LCAP; and c) a new plan for the third year. For example, in 2013-2014 the school districts and YCOE will write a plan for each of the next three school years. In 2014-2015, they will update the plan to 1) add student achievement data for 2013-2014, 2) make corrections to the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 plans, and 3) add a plan for 2017-2018.

Building a Plane in Midair: YCOE and Yolo County School Districts Meet the Challenge

Using available guidelines, Yolo County’s five school districts and YCOE have developed timelines to complete each of their Local Control and Accountability Plans by June 30, 2014 for the 2015-2018 school years. Meanwhile, SBE approved new templates and regulations on January 16, 2014. Local educational agencies received them at the end of January 2014. With only five months left before the June 30 deadline, and numerous new regulations, the school districts and YCOE are facing an intense push to complete their budgets and LCAPs on time.

In addition to completing the Yolo County Office of Education’s LCAP, YCOE is responsible for evaluating the plan for each school district. The Grand Jury learned that YCOE will face a number of challenges in evaluating the LCAPs without assessment tools from the CDE. For example, school districts will self-report the numbers of non-duplicated students who receive free or reduced-priced meals, or who are English language learners or foster youths. Without assessment tools from CDE, YCOE cannot effectively audit the validity of local school district reporting and appropriately determine its effect on school funding

The Grand Jury learned there is a lack of an effective communication system for the new and evolving K-12 finance system. This lack of communication is occurring at the state level and not at the local level. YCOE and school district personnel are doing the best they can to communicate using informal networks to move forward with LCFF and LCAP requirements. The enactment of the new K-12 finance system during the current school year, without the infrastructure already in place, has created an impression of “...*building a plane in midair.*”

FINDINGS

- F1. Because the regulations and templates pertaining to LCFF and LCAP are still being developed by the State of California, it is too early to determine if YCOE and the five school districts will successfully implement the new K-12 financial reforms.
- F2. The five school districts and YCOE are on schedule with implementing the Common Core State Standards.

RECOMMENDATION

R1. By December 1, 2014, YCOE should develop and execute a program to keep the residents of Yolo County advised on the progress of implementing the new K-12 financial reforms.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

- *Yolo County Superintendent of Schools*: Recommendation R1

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

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