

July 19, 2022

Via U.S. Mail

Hon. Stephanie Hulsey
Judge of the Monterey County Superior Court
% Office of the County Counsel
168 W. Alisal St., 3rd Floor
Salinas, CA 93901

Re: The Salinas City Elementary School District's Response to the 2021-22 Monterey County Civil Grand Jury Final Report — "Excellence in Action: Monterey County's Educational Response to Covid-19."

Dear Judge Hulsey,

The Board of Trustees of the Salinas City Elementary School District has reviewed and considered the findings of the Monterey County Civil Grand Jury's Final Report titled "Excellence in Action: Monterey County's Educational Response to Covid-19."

We thank you for the opportunity to review the findings, and we are thankful to the Grand Jury for its thorough review and recognition of the efforts of the education community during these unprecedented times. The Salinas City Elementary School District remains committed to providing the highest quality education for our students.

Sincerely,

Art Galimba
President of the Board of Trustees
Salinas City Elementary School District

Findings

F1. Educators and classified staff in Monterey County are to be commended for their initiative and flexibility in meeting the challenges of Covid-19. From the MCOE Superintendent to the newest part-time classroom aide, county educational employees went beyond their job descriptions in meeting the needs of students and their families during the pandemic.

Response: We agree with this finding.

While the schools of the Salinas City Elementary School District, like all public schools, have approved Comprehensive School Safety Plans and are well prepared to respond to emergencies, the Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges.

At the outset of the pandemic, when Monterey County first entered shutdown, SCESD employees mobilized and organized quickly and efficiently with several goals in mind: Making sure students continued to receive high-quality educational services; and that teachers, backed by District staff, received training and support they would need to do something the majority of them had never done before—teach students a full day of classes via the Internet. We appreciate the hard work every member of the SCESD team put in to ensure continuity and quality of services.

F5. Administrators, teachers and information technology staff in Monterey County are to be commended for making great strides in providing remote learning devices and solving internet access problems during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Response: We agree with these findings.

When the pandemic came to Monterey County, no Local Educational Agency realized that the shutdown would be so protracted. Students initially were given homework packets that would last them a week—a period of time that, in March 2020, was the anticipated duration of the shutdown. When it became evident that rather than a short-term closure the District would need to enact technology-enabled distance learning, District staff and the District's IT department worked to ensure each student had at least one device with which they could access the Internet to participate in distance learning, and that each student had a "Hot Spot" allowing them to access the Internet.

Initially, every single device the District possessed—a total of 5,384—were sent home, mostly to students in grades 3-6, where a "one on one" program—or one device assigned to each student—was already in place. Many teachers had the foresight to tell students, on the last day of in-person instruction, they should take their Chromebooks home.

That left approximately 3,000 students, mostly in TK (Transitional Kindergarten) to Grade 2, without a device. Students are required to use a school-issued device to access school apps, testing materials and other classroom resources. On March 21, 2020, the District conducted a technology survey of TK-Grade 2 parents via our parent communication platform, Parent Square. Of the 1,565 responses we received, 47.7 percent of the respondents indicated they needed a District-issued device, while 10.2 percent of the respondents needed a broadband connection.

By March 24, the District had begun to obtain the necessary devices and began distributing the necessary devices at eight SCESD schools that served as distribution hubs. By Fall 2020, each student had the necessary equipment to participate in distance learning and the District had

purchased 9,400 new Chromebooks to replace the outdated ones in our supply, and to increase our inventory of available devices. That purchase was funded with a grant the District was awarded by the Federal Communications Commission via its Emergency Connectivity Fund program.

In addition, teachers were rapidly trained on how to use the necessary technology to effectively implement distance learning.

F8. Despite a lack of preparedness at many levels of government, MCOE, school districts and staff responded to the impact of the pandemic in a timely manner.

Response: We agree with this finding.

Unprecedented is, at this point, an overused word as it relates to the pandemic, but it is also the best and most appropriate word: The pandemic was unprecedented, and that schools—a bastion of safety and security for children and families—would be forced to close was equally unprecedented.

The steps the District took at the outset of the pandemic—getting devices and connectivity into the hands and homes of our students, and our teachers and staff trained on how to effectively conduct distance learning—are outlined in the narrative above. In addition, the District's Nutrition Services team ensured children received a healthy lunch, as well as snacks, via distribution centers arranged throughout the District.

When it became clear that the 2020-2021 school year would be conducted via distance learning, the District moved to ensure its technologies and support systems remained strong, that the Nutrition Services team was prepared to continue providing meals and snacks to the students and that teachers had the tools they needed to take on the challenge of keeping students engaged and educated via the internet. We leveraged important relationships and resources within the community and with our educational partners as well. For example, the Salinas Union High School District arranged for mobile wireless hubs to be placed throughout its district, allowing its students to access the internet around the community. As many SCESD students have siblings in the SUHSD, the high school district allowed SCESD students to connect as well. The SCESD successfully completed its rollout of both Chromebooks and Hot Spots to all students at the start of this school year.

As that was ongoing, the District also worked with the MCOE to launch the Salinas City Virtual Academy, a fully online public school that operates under the auspices of the SCESD. The Virtual Academy was the first of its kind in Monterey County, and it opened in the 2021-22 school year, with 317 students taught by 13 teachers, supported by two paraeducators, a coach and an intervention teacher, along with a principal, vice principal and administrative assistant.

F9. Monterey County successfully expanded internet connectivity due to the efforts of MCOE, industry partners, the Digital Task Force and school district investment in technology.

Response: We agree with this finding

SCESD worked with many partner agencies, sought grant funding and sought expert opinions from vendors, technology experts and elected officials to ensure each student had the devices they needed, and the ability to connect to the internet. The District obtained an important grant via the Federal Communication Commission's Emergency Connectivity Fund that facilitated the purchase of new Chromebooks so students could work remotely with updated technology.

F10. There is increased collaboration and coordination among agencies that provide services and support, including the MCOE, Monterey County Behavioral Health, the Monterey County Health Department, internet partners, school districts, support providers and community groups.

Response: We agree with this finding.

Increased collaboration was pivotal during the pandemic, and inter-agency cooperation enabled the District to better coordinate service and support of our students, families and employees through the pandemic.

F11. Administrators, teachers, parents and students are all extremely concerned about students' social-emotional issues arising from Covid-19.

Response: We agree with this finding.

According to the American Psychological Association, 71 percent of parents nationwide are reporting the pandemic has taken a toll on their child's mental health. In the District, we are seeing more behavioral challenges and social and emotional health concerns this year than in previous years. In addition to our team of counselors and school psychologists, the District has partnerships with Monterey County Behavioral Health and Harmony at Home to provide supplemental mental health services. This year, the District entered into a partnership with the agency Care Solace, which is free to all families and staff, and assists with connecting those seeking mental health or addiction recovery services with quality providers in a timely fashion.

F12. Administrators, teachers, parents and students are concerned about the learning loss that took place during the 2020-2021 school year. There is an urgent need for mitigation of such loss.

Response: We agree with this finding.

The District agrees that all aforementioned parties are concerned about learning loss that took place during the 2020-2021 school year, and that there is an urgent need for additional support for students who fell behind academically. We have expanded our robust Expanded Learning offerings, including a full-day Summer STEAM Camp that includes tutoring in reading, language arts and math, as well as exploration of science and the arts. In addition, students are able to use a variety of learning programs, including Lexia and Dream Box, for additional immersion into language arts and math, at grade level and at their own pace.

F13. There is potential for significant financial disruption with the continuing loss of ADA and the end of additional federal funding occurring at the same time.

Response: We agree with this finding.

Many districts throughout the state are experiencing declining enrollment and increased absenteeism due to the ongoing pandemic, and absenteeism ramps up each time there is a spike in Covid-19 cases. As federal funding for Covid relief programs comes to an end, the District is taking appropriate action to maintain fiscal solvency and is actively seeking grant opportunities and alternate funding streams to fund new state-mandated programs.

Recommendations

R1. School districts maintain a minimum level of one behavioral support staff member at each school site until the end of the 2025-2026 school year.

Response: This recommendation has been implemented.

The District agrees with the need to have one behavioral support staff member at each site. Currently, each school site has an assigned full-time counselor, and the District contracts with an outside agency to provide eight part-time counselors to provide support at the larger school sites. In addition, the District has 10 psychologists and contracts with Monterey County Behavioral Health and the agency Harmony at Home to provide additional services.

The District has a well-implemented MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) model and a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support coordinator, filled by a TOSA, or teacher on special assignment. All of the aforementioned personnel work collaboratively to provide support to students in all three tiers: Tier 1 (comprising universal supports like Universal Design for Learning and Social-Emotional Learning); Tier 2 (comprising more targeted supports, including small group interventions, tutoring and mentoring); and Tier 3 (comprising individual support for students, families and staff and where mental health clinicians often come into play).

R2. School districts maintain learning loss mitigation programs and extended learning opportunities until the end of the 2025-2026 school year.

Response: This recommendation has been implemented.

Learning loss mitigation is occurring through continued use of MTSS, and a focus of supports for all students. The support includes diagnostic assessments to address disparities in performance outcomes and allows schools to plan for learning acceleration, to be embedded in all instructional decisions and aligned with school and District goals as formalized in the District's LCAP—Local Control and Accountability Plan, in which the District solicits the input from multiple stakeholders.

The California Department of Education (CDE) defines expanded learning as programs that occur before school, after school, summer or intersession that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional and physical needs and interests of students through hands-on, engaging learning experiences and activities. The District has moved to expand its already-robust Extended Learning Opportunity Program, which encompasses Saturday programs, after-school programs, absence recovery opportunities and the Summer STEAM Camp, which is in its inaugural year. The camp runs for five weeks and provides families with a half-day or full-day option at five school locations; all meals and snacks are provided, and students are engaged in language and math arts activities to help mitigate summer learning loss, as well as enrichment opportunities including robotics, engineering, music, dance, theater and outdoor games and sports.