



## BIG SUR UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT PACIFIC VALLEY SCHOOL K-12

January 8, 2019

J. Allen Miller, Foreperson  
2017-2018 Civil Grand Jury  
PO Box 414.  
Salinas, CA 93902

RE: 2017-18 Monterey County Civil Grand Jury Final Report – “School Boards Make a Difference, Improving Education: The Role of Local School Boards”

Dear Mr. Miller:

I am writing in response to the 2017-2018 Monterey County Civil Grand Jury Final Report, Report – “School Boards Make a Difference, Improving Education: The Role of Local School Boards,” as requested.

Our school, Pacific Valley School, is the only school operated by Big Sur Unified School District, the smallest unified school district in the State of California with a current enrollment of 16 students TK-12<sup>th</sup> grade, a teaching staff of 5 fulltime teachers and 2 part time teachers including one who is 1/2 time and the other, myself, who is a 1/3 time teacher. I also serve as superintendent and principal. Scheduling all required courses for all grade levels with adequately trained teachers is our trickiest task, especially at the high school level.

During the past 25 years, the high school program has been successful in graduating nearly 100% of our seniors. Two of our most recent graduating seniors have been awarded college scholarships that cover nearly 100% of their college expenses. One attends UCLA and the other will be starting as a freshman at Middlebury College in Vermont in February. Both of those students attended our school from Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade and graduated with GPAs higher than 4.0, due to having successfully completed Advanced Placement courses.

Our high school curriculum includes not only Advanced Placement courses but also access to online elective and required course options. Our graduation requirements enable our students to meet the admission requirements to all CSU/UC campuses.

Our students have incredible support as the majority of the community often functions as an extended family. With a very low population density in our very rural, remote location, students interact with adult community members on a first name basis. The school is located on US Forest Service property and is next to a US Forest Service campground. The school playground, swings, slides, climbing structure, outdoor basketball court and large, grassy field serve as a community center for all residents and campers on weekends, during vacations and after the end of the school day. Our school’s annual Winter Show is open to all community members free of charge, including the school prepared meal served prior to the show.

Historically our board has been composed mostly of parents of students enrolled in the school. Those parents have helped the school become successful and welcoming to students, staff and community members.

Our current board members include 2 parents of currently enrolled students. Our board president is the eldest daughter of a former board member whose 3 younger offspring attended our school when the family moved into the area for their last 2 and 3 years of high school. Another board member also serves on the non-profit board of the New Camaldoli Monastery. One of our local US Forest Service Rangers recently resigned from our board due to work related demands. He was replaced by a parent who had graduated from Pacific Valley School after attending since Kindergarten. This is his second time serving as a board member. He won his election to the board during the general election in November of 1993, after graduating the previous June. He served on the board for a year or two before moving out of the area to pursue formal education in a trade, and has returned to live in the district with his 2 children enrolled here.

In response to the Findings of the Grand Jury Report, the District is in agreement with F1 - F5. There is always room for improvement and we wish we had the time and the financial resources to make use of all opportunities for better board communication and training.

Historically, many of our board members have attended the CSBA Annual Leadership Conferences. Many have also attended the Monterey County School Board Administration's bi-annual retreat at Spanish Bay. Another board member attended a workshop offered by Lozano Smith Attorneys regarding serving the needs of dyslexic students. Unfortunately, the cost has become prohibitive for board members to participate in the CSBA Masters in Governance courses or the current Annual Leadership Conference.

In response to the Findings F6 - F8, the district partially disagrees.

For F6, MCOE staff could attend a Big Sur USD board meeting to observe and suggest improvements to generate more interest in meeting participation on the part of our parents and staff. Our board meetings are rarely attended by anyone other than the board members, the Administrative Assistant and me. However, the biggest obstacle to more parental or staff participation is the travel distance and their lack of spare time. We do post the board meeting agenda in public locations within the district as well as e-mail the agenda to all staff and parents. I also often provide fresh fruit or other edible treats as a positive reinforcement for attendance and participation.

For F7, the information regarding school board roles and duties on the MCOE website is similar to the posting that BSUSD has on its website, which is from CSBA. The information is designed to give a good general description of Board roles. Details could be inserted.

For F8, we often ponder how best to communicate with our parents and staff. Not only am I serving as a teaching principal/superintendent, but I am also in charge of monitoring and supervising the plant maintenance and transportation programs. Tasks related to those duties do take quite a bit of my time. We are currently in the process of applying for state funding to replace our failing septic system. Because there is no electrical provider serving this area, we maintain our own generator/inverter/solar power/energy storage system, as well as our own water system.

Our office staff is at the bare bones minimum with no room either physically in our office building or financially in our budget to increase staffing. Even though we are a small single-school school-district, we have the same amount of paper work and required reports to complete as Los Angeles Unified. Keeping up with the mandated requirements takes all of the office staff time, leaving little time for assisting the board's communication with the public.

The board members do not have access to the tools or materials nor do they have the time in their own busy lives to consistently communicate with the public other than at board meetings. Our Board President recently created a Pacific Valley School Facebook page in hopes that it would serve as an open forum for parents, community members and alumni.

In response to the Grand Jury's Recommendations, for R1, the District is not familiar with the National School Board Association best practices, but has attempted to update its policies through CSBA's policy update service. However, it has been difficult to schedule a time when my administrative assistant, the board members and I can host a working visit from a CSBA board policy staff member. Several pre-arranged dates have had to be cancelled due to road closures or inclement weather. We do hope to re-start our policy update process soon.

In response to R2, the BSUSD Board is currently focused on reducing expenses to the district budget to reverse a continuing deficit spending trend. The district cannot afford to cover the expenses for board member registration, food and lodging at the CSBA conferences. The Board has expressed interest in less expensive trainings closer to home. The Board may consider some mandatory trainings for new members if they are low cost and close to home.

In response to R3, in prior years our Board has conducted day long board retreats to develop Board Goals. The current Board has not formally discussed goals and student achievement other than during the development of the district LCAP which included the distribution of and responses to the LCAP surveys dispersed to staff, students and parents.

In response to R4 and R5, maintaining the district website with up to date information has been another task that no one on our staff has been able to find the time to do. At our next regular board meeting I will ask if one of our board members is willing to perform that task, including posting information from the board regarding goals, outcomes, board roles and responsibilities.

I hope that I have adequately responded to the Grand Jury's Findings and Recommendations.

If you need anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me personally, or any staff member at our school.

Sincerely,



Gordon Piffero  
Superintendent/Principal/Teacher  
Pacific Valley School  
& Big Sur Unified School District

