

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS:



**How are Districts in
Sacramento County Doing
and What are the Best
Practices for Improvements?**

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SUMMARY

Like a thermometer reading an increase in body temperature, rising dropout and absentee rates register that something is not working properly inside a school district. The Sacramento County Grand Jury (SCGJ) determined that an investigation to discover strategies and best practices that help lower dropout rates and that can be replicated in all Sacramento County school districts would provide a guide for higher student graduation percentages and healthier school districts.

Additional government funding for public education seems unlikely. Proposition 13 (1978) limits the amount of property tax used for education, the percentage of state lottery funding is around 1% and Proposition 13 (2020) authorizing bonds for facility repair, construction and modernization at public schools was defeated in the March 3, 2020 election. The COVID-19 pandemic is another negative unknown factor for education funding. The financial difficulty that the Sacramento City Unified School District is experiencing demonstrates that all stakeholders must work together if the dropout rate in Sacramento County is going to continue to decrease.

The SCGJ interviewed district superintendents from two of the districts with lower dropout rates, two of the districts with higher dropout rates, and the Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools. The SCGJ discovered that most school districts in the County were doing a good job of graduating their students in four years but could improve if they instituted the recommendations of preparing for budget cuts into 2021 and beyond, be proactive in developing community partnerships and implementing activities that encourage students to stay in school.

BACKGROUND

In both the United States and California, public high school dropout rates are declining. According to a 2018 National Center for Education Statistics report, the number of students entering ninth grade and graduating with a traditional diploma after four years increased from 79 percent in 2010–2011 to 85 percent in 2016–2017.

According to an Ohio Department of Education study, best practices have played an important role in achieving these gains. The following practices, organized under six categories, are based on the State Board of Education's Parent and Family Involvement Policy, the National PTA's

National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and Joyce L. Epstein's Framework of Six Types of (Parent) Involvement.

- Create a welcoming school climate.
- Provide family information related to child development and creating supportive learning environments.
- Establish effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication.
- Strengthen families' knowledge and skills to support and extend their children's learning at home and in the community.
- Engage families in school planning, leadership and meaningful volunteer opportunities.
- Connect students and families to community resources that strengthen and support students' learning and well-being.

The California Department of Education mandates that public school districts offer programs that enable students to graduate within four years. The Sacramento County Office of Education ensures that Sacramento County's public high school students can meet graduation goals while receiving quality education services in the following ways:

- Ensure that students are prepared for success in college, career and community,
- Provide educational leadership to the diverse groups that are served,
- Work creatively and collaboratively with partners, and
- Give educators and support staff the training and tools needed for success.

Public education is one of the great hallmarks of modern democracy. Yet every year over 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States, or about 3,300 every day. Fifteen percent of freshmen fail to graduate within four years. There are nine public school districts in Sacramento County with high schools (grades 9-12). These districts serve 245,811 students as of September 2019. The Sacramento County high school dropout rate is 16 percent, according to the California Department of Education School Dashboard in 2018, and overall, the California high school dropout rate is 17 percent, according to the United States Department of Education.

Decreases in funding, higher expectations for a more professional core of highly trained teachers and meeting modern expectations for better-prepared graduates are just a few of the changes in education. A critical component for students transitioning to more advanced, and often, more rewarding opportunities is a high school diploma. These opportunities can include higher education, career or technical training, entering the job market or national service. Individuals and communities alike benefit significantly from students who are better educated and have job skills. Self-esteem, health, relationships and leisure time are contributing factors to a person's well-being, all of which are usually associated with a more successful lifestyle. The February 4, 2020 edition of U.S. News & World Report Best Jobs rankings, lists 25 careers that offer nice work-life balance and strong job growth while only requiring a high

school diploma. According to a study by NPR in 2015, about 84 percent of people in prison have never graduated from high school.

The Grand Jury investigated Sacramento County public schools to determine factors that influence dropout rates. Recognizing the importance of a high school diploma necessary to further personal and social goals, the Grand Jury decided to examine both school districts with higher dropout rates and those with lower dropout rates to determine best practices. School districts with higher dropout rates cannot be dismissed as doing a poor job of getting students to graduate but may be better understood and consequently learned from by examining what factual obstacles are inhibiting the districts from achieving lower dropout rates.

What constitutes a public high school graduate must be identified and defined. The Sacramento County Office of Education was instrumental in assisting the Grand Jury in better understanding the increasingly complex world of public instruction data. The Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools provided the Grand Jury with documents that define the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) as the percentage of students who enter the ninth grade and graduate within four years. The dropout rate is the percentage of students who do not graduate within four years minus a percentage of students that fall into a category with extenuating circumstances such as foster students, special education students and English as Second Language students. Decreasing the dropout rate has a direct correlation to increasing the ACGR.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury conducted significant research into areas related to dropout rates. The following sources provided research material for this investigation:

- American Psychological Association
- B Street Theatre
- California Department of Education
- First Tee of Greater Sacramento
- Homesnacks.net
- Institute of Education Sciences
- Kidsdata.org
- National Education Association
- Point West Rotary Foundation
- Public Policy Institute of California
- Raleys.com/about/giving/extra-credit-grants
- Sacramento County Office of Education
- The National Mentoring Partnership

The Grand Jury also conducted the following interviews:

- Sacramento County Superintendent of Schools
- Superintendent of Elk Grove Unified School District
- Superintendent of Natomas Unified School District
- Superintendent of San Juan Unified School District
- Superintendent of Twin Rivers Unified School District

DISCUSSION

Public education in California is organized into three tiers of responsibility. At the state level, a State Superintendent of Education is elected for a four-year term by popular vote. The second tier in California education is county school districts made up of county school board members elected in a general election by county residents every four years. These boards hire a County Superintendent. The third tier in California Education is local school districts within each county that are made up of board members elected from in-district residents every four years. These boards select and hire a district superintendent, negotiate labor contracts and develop financial budgets.

The State Superintendent of Education coordinates current and new laws and codes relevant to education with county superintendents within the State. Additionally, the State Superintendent of Education is responsible for developing state academic standards and coordinating State and Federal funding of California public schools. Individual county school superintendents are responsible for supervising and occasionally, managing the fiduciary health of local school districts. County Superintendents also coordinate a variety of academic tasks not generally covered by any local school district such as severe special education services, home and hospital education services, juvenile detention education services, and vocational education. Local school districts are responsible for providing a comprehensive K-12 education within their respective district boundaries.

All three tiers of California public education need to collaborate to deliver the best educational experiences possible, which includes education funding constraints, integrating current and emerging education laws and meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Successful public education depends on each party of educators from the State level, to County level and finally to individual districts to provide for and serve California student stakeholders. Administrators, employee unions, parents and teachers must work together to decrease dropout rates, while staying fiscally sound. All stakeholders should have a seat at the table where decisions are made.

Students learn at different rates. They must be proficient in a subject before they advance; necessitating that class availability is scheduled by need. It is much more cost-efficient and effective to have a student retake a class than to be held back a year. Summer school, senior

extension programs, credit recovery and intersessions also help get students back on a graduation track.

After high school, not every student is going on to higher education. Natomas Unified School District uses a “Road Map” system. The technique relies on establishing individual milestones and career paths for each student as well as at set intervals charting their incremental progress toward accomplishing those goals.

Mentoring has significant positive effects on two early warning indicators that a student may be falling off-track:

- High levels of absenteeism
 - Students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52 percent less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37 percent less likely to skip a class.¹
- Recurring behavior problems
 - Young adults who face an opportunity gap but have a mentor are 55 percent more likely to be enrolled in college than those who did not have a mentor.²
 - In addition to better school attendance and a better chance of going on to higher education, mentored youth maintain better attitudes toward school.³

Community partnerships with service organizations like Rotary and Optimist can help provide funding, mentors and volunteers. In the past fiscal year, the Point West Rotary Foundation provided over \$35,000 in grants and hundreds of volunteer hours to Sacramento County school districts.

Area organizations can provide activities that keep students in school. The First Tee of Greater Sacramento works with area schools to help youth ages 7 to 17 learn the game of golf. Eighty-eight elementary schools in our community are teeing off thanks to The First Tees Nine Core Values and Nine Healthy Habits. No one is turned down because of financial constraints. The mission of the B Street School Tour has been to provide entertainment to youth while instilling in them a love for the theatre and a specific appreciation for the art of playwriting. B Street Theatre performs 12 times per week, 38 weeks per year in schools, reaching approximately 200,000 youth annually. The performances are a great way to introduce youth to live theatre by expressing the art of telling stories on stage.

Often local businesses offer grants for schools. For example, Raley’s has a grant program called “Extra Credit Grants.” Accredited K-12 academic institutions (public, charter and private) are invited to apply for funding once per school year. Grant amounts are determined by the size

¹ Public/Private Ventures Study of Big Brother, Big Sister

² “The Mentoring Effect,” 2014

³ “The Role of Risk,” 2013

and scope of the proposed project—there is no minimum or maximum funding request required.

FINDINGS

F1. Public education in California is organized into three tiers of responsibility: State, County and District. The lines of communication are top-down and new responsibilities are added at each level. School districts are governed by a locally elected school board of directors that are responsible for hiring a district superintendent, labor contracts, and budgeting. It is imperative that all levels work together to decrease dropouts.

F2. Government funding is not going to keep pace with the needs of public education. If the goal of decreasing dropout rates is going to be met, then schools and school districts must be proactive in finding new sources of revenue and program support. The impact of the COVID-19 crises on education funding is difficult to quantify currently, but it is going to have a negative effect in 2020-21 and beyond.

F3. Protocols to identify at-risk students are essential to have resources in place when needed. Student connectivity with mentors (coaches, educational staff, and extracurricular staff) is a deterrent to dropping out of school.

F4. Art, music, sports, and technical classes help keep students engaged in school.

F5. Career and technical education provide alternative graduation pathways for students who may not be able or interested in pursuing a college degree. The “Road Map” system used by the Natomas school district needs to be instituted Countywide.

F6. Teamwork for common goals by all invested parties is essential for lowering dropout and raising graduation rates. Simply stated, if the local community wants better schools, then the local community needs to be positively involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of the Grand Jury investigation was to discover strategies and best practices that help lower dropout rates, improve graduation rates, and can be replicated in all Sacramento County school districts:

R1. The Sacramento County Office of Education should facilitate the identification and use of best practices to reduce dropout rates by serving as a clearinghouse for such efforts by different schools and school districts, utilizing its website and other media to share this information, and possibly convening periodic meetings and standing committees focused on this outcome. The County Office of Education should advance such efforts during 2020-2021.

R2. District school boards and employee unions should recognize that because education funding can vary widely from year to year, contracts for wages and benefits should be fair to all invested parties while keeping the district financially healthy. Because of the uncertainty of COVID-19 on individual district education budgets this needs to be addressed for the 2020-21 school year at the earliest possible time.

R3. School districts and school administrators should be proactive in developing community partnerships with service clubs, area 501 (c) (3) s and local businesses. District Superintendents need to look for community grants and develop outreach programs in every school during the 2020-2021 school year.

R4. Sacramento County district school boards should budget for providing a broad array of services for at-risk students, such as promoting volunteers for tutoring and mentoring; hiring more social service professionals, including social workers, psychologists, and counselors; and programs such as summer school, intercession and remediation to help students get back on a four-year graduation track. Schools should further such efforts during 2020-2021.

R5. Sacramento County district school boards should mandate that each school establish at least one new student club, one new sports program, and one other activity that engages students and keeps them in school. Schools should implement this recommendation by June 30, 2021.

GLOSSARY

ACGR (Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate) -- Percentage of students who enter ninth grade and graduate within four years.

Dashboard (California Department of Education School Dashboard) -- An online tool designed to help communities access information about K-12 schools and districts.

High School Dropout -- A student who does not graduate within four years, excluding foster students, Juvenile Hall students, special education students and English as Second Language (ESL) students.

High School Graduate -- A student who completes graduation requirements within four years based on the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the 2019-2020 Sacramento County Grand jury requests a response from the following officials within 90 days:

- David W. Gordon
County Superintendent of Schools
Sacramento County Office of Education
10474 Mather Boulevard
P.O. Box 269003
Sacramento, CA 95826-9003
- Christopher R. Hoffman
District Superintendent
Elk Grove Unified School District (K-12)
9510 Elk Grove-Florin Road
Elk Grove, CA 95624
- Chris Evans
District Superintendent
Natomas Unified School District (K-12)
1901 Arena Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95834
- Kent Kern
Superintendent
San Juan Unified School District (K-12)
3738 Walnut Avenue
P.O. Box 477
Carmichael, CA 95609-0477
- Steve Martinez, Ed.D.
District Superintendent
Twin Rivers Unified School District (K-12)
3222 Winona Way
North Highlands, CA 95660

Mail or deliver a hard copy response to:

- Hon. Russell Hom
Presiding Judge
Sacramento County Superior Court
720 9th St.
Sacramento, CA 95814

Please email a copy of this response to:

- Paul Thorn
Jury Commissioner
ThornP@saccourt.ca.gov
- Ms. Erendira Tapia-Bouthillier
Grand Jury
TapiaE@saccourt.ca.gov

INVITED RESPONSES

- Beth Albiani
Board President
Elk Grove Unified School District
9510 Elk Grove-Florin Road
Elk Grove, CA 95624
- Lisa Kaplan, Board President
Natomas Unified School District
1901 Arena Blvd. |
Sacramento, CA 95834
- Paula Villescuz, Board President
San Juan Unified School District
3738 Walnut Avenue
Carmichael, CA 95608
- Michelle Rivas, Board President
Twin Rivers Unified School District
5115 Dudley Blvd
McClellan Park, CA 95652

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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 fact leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
