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ALPAUGH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

BACKGROUND

There are eight unified school districts in Tulare County. The Alpaugh Unified School District (AUSD) is located in the extreme southwest corner of the county. The western boundary is on the Tulare and Kings County line while the southern border of the district is on the Tulare and Kern County line.

The current campus was constructed in the 1950s. Alpaugh USD, serving 320 K-12 students, provides traditional classroom instruction, an independent study program, and a continuation high school. The elementary, middle school, and high school classes are all located on one campus. They also provide a Pre-School (Early Step) program. Tule Continuation High School is located one block north of the main campus.

The district is overseen by a five-member Board of Trustees which meets the second Thursday of the month at 6:00 P.M.

REASONS FOR INVESTIGATION

On its own initiative, members of the 2011-2012 Tulare County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) visited the AUSD Board of Trustee meetings to evaluate the Board's compliance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and to assess the quality of the school Superintendent's and Board members' district leadership.

The Grand Jury reviewed the 2009-2010 Grand Jury's final report on AUSD which found the buildings to be in extreme disrepair. It was recommended at that time, the district make all necessary repairs.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

1. Attended school board meetings.
2. Toured the school campus.
3. Interviewed relevant witnesses.
4. Reviewed relevant documents.

FINDINGS

1. The AUSD Board of Trustee meetings adhere to all provisions of the Ralph M. Brown Act.
2. The Board authorized the retaining of an architectural firm and submitted school plans for a new campus. The plans must now go to the state architect for final approval.
3. The Board authorized the location of the new buildings adjacent to the current school. This allows students to remain in their current classrooms until construction is completed.

4. The Board will be required to reapply if State funds are not encumbered by May 15, 2012.
5. During a public meeting, the Board approved keeping the existing multipurpose room, which contains the cafeteria and kitchen. However, a new multipurpose room will be constructed. The Board also approved the final design plan showing a two story building which will house all K-12 students and administrative offices. Grades K-6 will be located on the first floor while grades 7-12 will be housed on the second floor. An elevator for handicapped individuals and janitorial use will be included.
6. Following State Law, the Board approved the testing by the Department of Toxic Substance Control which has determined that the soil below the school site is not contaminated, with the exception of a small 18 inches deep, 5 feet wide section which must be removed before the Board allows construction to begin.

CONCLUSIONS

The Alpaugh Unified School Board meetings are very well-run and organized. The board meeting agenda and board packet are presented in a well-done spiral-bound binder for all in attendance. This increases the ability of the audience to easily follow items as presented.

The Trustees are highly informed and well-prepared, with discussion and voting on items as needed. The board members may disagree at times, but they work well together in a very professional manner.

The Superintendent provides detailed explanation whenever it is required and performs his board duties at the highest level of competence. He demonstrates a professional as well as collegial relationship with the board. He also translates minutes and talks to Spanish-speaking parents and public as needed.

The Board of Trustees and the Superintendent conduct exemplary School Board meetings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None

REQUIRED RESPONSES

None

RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND

The Tulare County Grand Jury (TCGJ) is tasked with oversight of public agencies such as schools. This oversight includes monitoring compliance with laws such as California's Ralph M. Brown Act, Government Code §54950 et sec. (Brown Act), which requires meetings and actions of governing bodies of local government agencies and subsidiary bodies created to be open and public. It was intended that the Brown Act implement a strong public policy. This policy ensures the public's right to attend and participate in the meetings of local government agencies.

In addition to compliance with laws, TCGJ monitors the efficiency and appropriate management of public entities which include the manner in which they respond to their client base and the fiscal decisions enacted by elected bodies. This report is not intended to represent an in-depth analysis of these school districts but a review of the manner in which these boards are functioning.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The 2011-2012 Grand Jury decided to follow up on the investigation and report on actual District School Board meetings, meeting practices, and public participation, started by the 2010-2011 Grand Jury. This was done by looking primarily at other boards that were not visited by the 2010-2011 Grand Jury, specifically rural and small schools having one or two campuses only.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

1. Attended meetings.
2. Reviewed relevant documents.

FINDINGS

1. School boards generally had a full complement of members with good attendance.
2. With the exception of a select few, school board meetings appeared to be well run by well-informed Board members.
3. Most of the Board meetings did not have microphones available. But as these boards and the public attendance at them were small, it was rarely difficult to hear what was said during the meetings.
4. Agenda were posted.
5. Agenda packages were available to the public.
6. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was provided for on the agenda or addressed verbally by the Board president.

7. Demeanor of the Boards was professional and business-like, though owing to the personal nature of rural communities, there was more than the usual friendly give and take.
8. Public comment time was either verbally encouraged or noted on the agenda, though few boards had much of a community presence.
9. There did not seem to be obvious or formal bilingual services available to those community members in attendance who might require them.
10. In general, School Board members seemed to be aware of their responsibilities under the Brown Act which reflects appropriate training and attention to the necessities of their positions.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural and small school districts face unique challenges. Often the area the district covers is large, and transportation of students is an expensive challenge with which school boards must struggle. The communities these school districts serve are, for the most part, composed of socially and economically disadvantaged populations with a high proportion of second language learners. Community members, from whom trustees are recruited, may or may not be conversant in the English language.

All Boards visited are proud of their schools and value their independence. Many members of the Boards are also former students and wish to make their communities better. They are dealing the best they can with the dwindling monetary support the districts are receiving from federal and state sources. They are researching the possibilities of moving to trustee districts or staying with at-large elections. Generally, the Boards appeared glad to see the attendance of the 2011-2012 Grand Jury and had friendly interactions with them.

In spite of the above challenges, it generally appears that the rural and small school districts are appropriately meeting, mastering legal requirements such as the Brown Act, and serving their communities efficiently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School District superintendents should continue to provide or obtain the training necessary for their Board members to comply with the Brown Act.
2. Bilingual services should be readily available in both verbal discussions during Board meetings and in the agenda which are available to any community members who may attend.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

None