



August 16, 2023

The Honorable Maria Hernandez
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

SUBJECT: 2022-23 Orange County Grand Jury Inquiry
Response of Irvine Unified School District (IUSD)

Dear Judge Hernandez,

In a letter dated May 19, 2023, the Orange County Grand Jury sent a report, titled, **The ABC's Of Educating Children Experiencing Homelessness in Orange County**. In this same letter, the OC Grand Jury required that the Irvine Unified School District (IUSD) provide a response to each of the Findings and Recommendations 1-6, 8 and 9. Below are the responses to the Findings and Recommendations that are required in compliance with Penal Code 933.05 (a) and (b).

Findings

Finding 1: Many children experiencing homelessness are not identified as such, and therefore do not receive the support and benefits authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act.

The Irvine Unified School District (IUSD) disagrees partially with this finding. The District identifies students experiencing homelessness during registration at the beginning of each school year, and during initial enrollment. Once identified, students and families receive support and benefits authorized by the McKinney-Vento Act. District and site staff are working to increase relationship building and engagement so students and families are encouraged to share information regarding their living situation if it changes throughout the school year.

Finding 2: The lack of mandatory McKinney-Vento Act training of school site office staff, counselors, and teachers contributes to a failure to identify children experiencing homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. The District McKinney-Vento Liaison currently offers training to site and district staff and has been trained by the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE). IUSD agrees that the lack of a training mandate creates obstacles for consistent training across all employee groups. IUSD is currently exploring options to provide consistent training to office staff, counselors, and teachers. The District will develop a training plan for site and district staff involved in student enrollment, counselors and teachers by December 1, 2023, with full implementation of annual training requirements no later than the start of the 2024-25 school year.

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IUSD ... providing the highest quality educational experience we can envision.

Finding 3: There is disparity in the application of McKinney-Vento regulations across Orange County public school districts which results in unequal access to educational benefits for children experiencing homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. As an unfunded mandate, school districts across Orange County must rely on their organizational structures and funding sources to provide services and support to students and families experiencing homelessness. IUSD remains one of the lowest funded districts in California, regardless, staff do everything possible to maximize limited resources.

Finding 4: The majority of McKinney-Vento Liaisons are in full-time positions, but because their work includes multiple non-McKinney-Vento responsibilities, most do not have sufficient time to do the work required by the McKinney-Vento Act.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. McKinney-Vento support duties are shared among district administrative and classified staff. Increased staffing and support would further benefit students and families experiencing homelessness. To this end, IUSD has established positions dedicated to McKinney-Vento students and families.

Finding 5: Many McKinney-Vento Liaisons lack needed experience due to a high turnover rate in those positions.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD has experienced high turnover rates of staff providing McKinney-Vento Liaison duties.

Finding 6: McKinney-Vento Act training is not mandatory for the majority of McKinney-Vento Liaisons.

The Irvine Unified School District disagrees partially with this finding. IUSD staff providing McKinney-Vento Liaison support complete OCDE McKinney-Vento training and participate in county network meetings as part of their expected Liaison duties.

Finding 7: Students experiencing homelessness who are enrolled in an elementary district often do not continue to receive McKinney-Vento benefits when they move to a high school district because the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevents the sharing of this information between districts.

The Irvine Unified School District disagrees partially with this finding. IUSD is a PK-12 district with a student information system that provides information on students at all grade levels. The District does acknowledge that it may be challenging to share information if a student leaves to attend another district.

Finding 8: McKinney-Vento funds depend on school districts submitting grant proposals, but not all districts have employees trained in writing grant applications, resulting in missed funding opportunities.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD has employees who are qualified to write grants. IUSD will continue to seek Grant funding opportunities as they become available. Oftentimes, IUSD is eliminated from receiving grants as the District has a low number of unduplicated students.

Finding 9: School districts that do not apply for grants which fund programs benefiting children experiencing homelessness miss potential revenue opportunities.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD has applied for, and received some grants. District staff will continue to take advantage of grant opportunities, especially as it relates to McKinney-Vento supports and services for students and families experiencing homelessness.

Finding 10: McKinney-Vento is an unfunded federally mandated program; however, school districts which qualify and apply for Title I, Part A funds may obtain revenues that can be used for children experiencing homelessness. These funds are insufficient to meet the needs of the school districts supporting children experiencing homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD utilizes Title I, Part A funds for the McKinney-Vento program. Additional funding is necessary to meet the needs of IUSD students experiencing homelessness.

Finding 11: A lack of reliable transportation for children experiencing homelessness often results in chronic tardiness and absenteeism.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD provides transportation options based on the individual needs of students/families experiencing homelessness. Despite concerted efforts, students experiencing homelessness often have higher tardy and absenteeism rates.

Finding 12: Chronic Absenteeism Rates of Homeless Students are disproportionately high in comparison with the Chronic Absenteeism Rates of All Students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. District data shows IUSD students experiencing homelessness have disproportionately high rates of chronic absenteeism in comparison with the chronic absenteeism rates of All students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged students.

Finding 13: Children experiencing homelessness in Orange County perform at a lower level on standardized tests and have a lower graduation rate than All Students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. District data shows IUSD students experiencing homelessness are performing at a lower level on standardized tests and have lower graduation rates than that of All students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged students.

Finding 14: The percentage of Homeless Students graduating who failed to meet state standards on English Language Arts and Math tests is significantly higher than it is for All Students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. District data shows the percentage of IUSD students experiencing homelessness who did not meet state standards on English Language Arts (ELA) and Math tests are significantly higher than that of All students and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged students.

Finding 15: There is a tendency by school districts to operate in isolation, which prevents productive collaboration on addressing the issue of children experiencing homelessness and the challenges of their education.

The Irvine Unified School District disagrees wholly with this finding. Collaboration between district liaisons occurs when students relocate to another district. In addition, IUSD participates in the Homeless Outreach Promoting Educational Success (HOPES) Collaborative, offered by the Orange County Department of Education.

Finding 16: A significant lack of affordable permanent housing contributes to many families being caught in the cycle of homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District agrees with this finding. IUSD agrees there is a significant lack of affordable housing in Orange County. IUSD families experiencing homelessness report it is the greatest barrier to finding stability for their student(s).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: All Orange County school districts should develop a "Back to School" plan which includes mandatory McKinney-Vento Act training for all district and school administrators, teachers, office staff, and counselors by December 31, 2023, and annually thereafter.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. By December 31, 2023, IUSD will develop a training plan for all district and school administrators, teachers, office staff, and counselors to be implemented by the 2024-25 school year, and annually thereafter.

Recommendation 2: Participation in Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) McKinney-Vento Act training programs for all Local Education Agencies (LEA) McKinney-Vento Liaisons should be mandated by October 1, 2023, and annually thereafter.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. IUSD is in the process of selecting staff for McKinney-Vento Liaison responsibilities. Once staff are identified, the designated staff will participate in the OCDE McKinney-Vento Act training program and will attend annually thereafter.

Recommendation 3: Given that most LEA McKinney-Vento Liaisons are responsible for a number of other duties, and do not have sufficient time to do their McKinney-Vento required work, school districts should identify ways to increase support and/or staff to address the numerous tasks of the Liaisons by October 1, 2023.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. District staff are recruiting and hiring dedicated mental health staff and administrative support staff to address McKinney-Vento tasks and services needed. The hiring process will be initiated before October 1, 2023.

Recommendation 4: By January 1, 2024, for children experiencing homelessness to receive uninterrupted McKinney-Vento benefits, Orange County school districts should add a section to their mandatory enrollment school form enabling parents/guardians to give permission for their school to share information regarding their child's McKinney-Vento status with other districts that their child may be attending.

The Irvine Unified School District has implemented this recommendation. A release of information section has been added to the McKinney-Vento Housing Questionnaire. All students/families complete the McKinney-Vento Housing Questionnaire annually.

Recommendation 5: By October 1, 2023, each Orange County school district should develop and maintain a centralized list of district employees with grant application writing capability so that they are prepared to apply for available grants to assist in educating children experiencing homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District has implemented this recommendation. District staff have a centralized list of staff with grant application capabilities in preparation for available grants to assist in educating children experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 6: By October 1, 2023, a joint task force should be formed by the OCDE composed of a district-level administrator from each Orange County school district and leadership from non-profit organizations who serve homeless families, to address absenteeism, low test scores, and low graduation rates of children experiencing homelessness.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. IUSD will participate in the OCDE-sponsored joint task force (AKA: "Steering Committee") beginning in September, 2023.

Recommendation 8: By May 1, 2024, each Orange County school district administration should develop, and present to the District Board of Education, a plan to lower the Absenteeism Rates of homeless students.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. IUSD staff will develop a plan to lower the absenteeism rates of homeless students in IUSD and will present it to the District Board of Education by May 1, 2024.

Recommendation 9: By May 1, 2024, each Orange County school district administration should develop, and present to the District Board of Education, a plan to improve the performance of homeless students in English Language Arts and Math.

The Irvine Unified School District has not yet implemented this recommendation. IUSD staff will develop a plan to improve the performance of homeless students in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math and will present it to the District Board of Education by May 1, 2024.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Terry L. Walker".

Terry L. Walker
Superintendent of Schools
Irvine Unified School District

Cc: Orange County Grand Jury
700 Civic Center Drive West,
Santa Ana, CA 92701