



"100 Years of Excellence"

# CYPRESS SCHOOL DISTRICT

9470 Moody Street • Cypress, California 90630

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July 14, 2004

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Mr. Alan J. Friedmann, Chair  
Juvenile Services Committee  
Orange County Grand Jury  
700 Civic Center Drive, West  
Santa Ana, California 92701

Subject: **Response to Study of Truancy in Orange County Schools**

Dear Mr. Friedmann:

While the jurisdictional authority of the Grand Jury to require a response from school districts within Orange County related to findings of the Grand Jury's report, "Combating Truancy in Orange County," is unclear, the Cypress School District has chosen to respond in the spirit of our mutual efforts to address educational opportunities for children throughout the county.

As a K-6 elementary District with an annual attendance rate of 96.76 percent, truancy has not been a significant problem and, where attendance issues have been identified, school site intervention has shown itself to be the most effective strategy.

### Response to Findings

1. The web site of the Cypress School District provides an inadequate treatment of attendance matters and lacks explicit expectations for student attendance.

The Cypress School District web site will be reviewed, with modifications made as appropriate, prior to October 30, 2004, incorporating information and Board policies related to attendance and expectations related to student attendance.

8. In 2002/03 only ten of the 27 school districts were represented on the County (Department of Education) SAR Board. Membership in the county SAR Board is open to all county school districts and all school districts – even those without SAR Boards would benefit by their participation.

The Cypress School District, as a K-6 District of approximately 4700 children, has three certificated administrators at District office. These include the Superintendent, Assistant

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Superintendent, Human Resources/Instruction, and the Director, Instruction/Student Services. Adequate administrative time is not available, with this limited personnel, to attend regularly scheduled SAR Board meetings at the county office. However, the Superintendent will make every effort to have administrative personnel attend SAR Board meetings as time permits.

12. Cypress School District does not declare any of their truants to be habitual truants. Failure to identify as habitual truants those students who have been truant for three or more times during the school year appears to place districts out of compliance with the state education code.

For the 2004/05 school year, the District will utilize a feature offered to its clients by the San Diego County Office of Education Student Information System (SIS). Students will be tracked at their individual school sites and, when multiple tardies or unexcused absences are noted by the system, a letter will be sent to parents/guardians identifying their student as having attendance issues. It will be noted that truant behavior will be referred to a Student Study Team (SST) requiring parent participation in the development of strategies to remediate attendance behaviors. At the elementary level, it is most often the lack of parent support for student attendance at school, not the lack of student will to attend, that is the problem. "Habitual truants" will be referred to District office for the potential convening of a local SAR Board to deal with truant behavior.

*I would note that in my 32 years as an educator, your report effectively finds what we as practitioners have experienced in attempting to have the district attorney's office prosecute the parents of chronically truant offenders. The district attorney's office is not manned at an appropriate level to facilitate the prosecution of caseloads throughout the county, which may number in the hundreds. The result is that the strategies, threats of referral and ultimate referral to the district attorney's office, are only so much "smoke and mirrors," as only a handful of these cases ever come to the imposition of penalties and even fewer result in a change of student behavior.*

15. School districts that limit or curtail their participation on the county SAR Board because of budgetary constraints may not be aware of the opportunity for reimbursement through state or federal funding, afforded by Education Code Section 48323.

School districts in Orange County and throughout the state have received no mandated cost reimbursement for either the 2003/04 school year or projected for the 2004/05 school year. The District, in 2003/04, had an estimated mandated reimbursement cost claim of \$183,000. Until mandated cost reimbursements are fully funded, there are no available district general funds to support personnel attendance at SAR Board meetings. Unfunded

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mandates, in essence, become a "general fund encroachment" and the state has issued an IOU to districts submitting mandated cost claims, with the prospect that the IOU will never be paid.

24. A need exists among the school districts that do not have their own SAR Boards for an operating SAR Board (not just an advisory or networking SAR Board) at the county level.

The development and implementation of an effective SAR Board requires the commitment of not only school personnel but of community representatives who would be invited to participate in the attendance review process. If you have a SAR Board in place, the expectation of the committee members is that there is something for them to do. Beginning my twelfth year as Superintendent of the Cypress School District, I have had no school refer students to my attention whose attendance patterns could not be effectively addressed by the local school Student Study Team. Should such a circumstance present itself, which required a concerted District effort to address even a few "habitually truant" students, I would not hesitate to convene a SAR Board with a specific purpose and agenda.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Cypress School District, and as Superintendent, I wish to thank the Grand Jury for their interest in improving educational opportunities for all students by suggesting procedural guidelines relative to truancy throughout the county. I'm sure the Grand Jury is sensitive to the fact that a "one size fits all" formula may not be appropriate in all circumstances, for all districts.

If you have specific questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly, 714-220-6910.

Respectfully submitted,



William D. Eller, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

WDE:jb

cc: Board of Trustees  
Dr. Hunt  
Ellen Basile  
Principals