



FULLERTON JOINT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Office of the Superintendent

August 31, 2004

The Honorable Frederick P. Horn
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
700 Civic Center Drive West
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Dear Judge Horn:

Enclosed is a copy of the responses prepared by the Fullerton Joint Union High School District to the *Findings and Recommendations* of the 2003-2004 Orange County Grand Jury pertaining to "Combating Truancy in Orange County."

Thank you.

Sincerely,

George J. Giokaris, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Enclosure

ORANGE COUNTY GRAND JURY

“COMBATING TRUANCY IN ORANGE COUNTY”

Fullerton Joint Union High School District

In its study “Combating Truancy in Orange County,” the Grand Jury identified areas for all school districts to improve. Of the 25 “Findings” and “Recommendations,” the Fullerton Joint Union High School District was requested to reply to “Findings” 1, 8, 12, 14, 15, 19, and 24 and “Recommendations” 1, 11, 14, and 20. The following are the District’s responses.

FINDINGS AND RESPONSES

Finding #1: The Web sites of the following (named) school districts provide an inadequate treatment of attendance matters and lack explicit expectations for student’s attendance.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District is in the process of amending its Web site to include the following information:

Attendance Philosophy:

It is the desire of the Fullerton Joint Union High School District that all students attend school everyday. Some circumstances may necessitate a student to be absent, and those situations are certainly understandable. Before allowing a student to miss school, it is hoped that parents/guardians will carefully evaluate the reason for the absence and consider the loss of important teacher-to-student interaction and classroom instruction.

School Attendance:

Public school districts in California receive funding from the State of California based on the actual number of students who are present for classes, not on the District’s enrollment. Districts do not receive funding for students who are absent, no matter whether an absence is excused or unexcused. The District urges parents to make sure their students attend school regularly and to schedule medical and other appointments so that a student misses none, or only a small portion, of the school day. The District also asks that travel or other absences be avoided during the time school is in session.

Attendance and tardies are reported and recorded for each class period daily. California State Law requires all persons under 18 years of age who have not graduated from high school to attend school. Students are expected to attend each of their scheduled classes promptly and regularly every day. Regular attendance in all classes is one of the greatest contributing factors to success in school.

Following an absence, parents/guardians are asked to call the Attendance Office at the respective school on the first and each succeeding day of a student's absence. Parents/guardians may also call the 24-hour attendance answering machine at the school to clear absences. Students may also bring notes signed by a parent/guardian to the Attendance Office for approval of absences. The note should include the student and parent/guardian names, date(s) of absence, and reason for the absence.

All absences must be cleared within three (3) days of the student returning to school. Excuses after three days cannot be accepted. Uncleared absences become trancies on the student's record. Trancy may result in the student's failure to earn full units, failure to earn a passing grade, or removal from class. For each three (3) days of unexcused absences within a semester, a student will fail to earn one (1) unit of class credit.

Education Code section 48200 states that no student is permitted to leave school at break, lunch, or any other time before the regular hour of closing without the approval of the school principal or designee. Violations of this code section will be considered trancies.

Excused Absences:

California Education Code section 48200 defines excused absences as:

1. Due to illness
2. Attendance at a medical doctor's appointment
3. Attendance at a funeral of an immediate family member
4. Quarantine by the county or city health officer
5. Jury duty
6. Justifiable personal reasons including (but not limited to):
 - a. religious holidays or celebrations
 - b. appearance in court
 - c. attendance at a funeral
 - d. illness of a child where the student is the child's parent
 - e. attendance at an employment conference (requires previous approval by the school principal)
 - f. working at an election precinct

Students with approved absences are entitled to do makeup work. For completion of the makeup work, a student has only as many school days as approved absences. It is the student's responsibility to ask the teacher(s) about makeup work.

Unexcused Absences:

Unexcused absences are those absences that do not meet the above listed criteria. An unexcused absence is an absence that occurs with the approval of the parent or guardian, without a prearranged agreement with a school administrator.

Procedure for Leaving Campus:

Students wishing to leave campus at any time during the school day must check-out through the Attendance Office. Parents/guardians must provide a written note for the student indicating the day and time the student will need to be off-campus. If a note is not provided, the student will not be allowed to leave campus. Students who fail to adhere to this policy will receive an unexcused absence.

Truancy:

Any student who is absent from school without a valid excuse for three full days in one semester or tardy or absent for more than any 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof, is considered truant (Education Code 48260).

Finding #8: In 2002-03, only 10 of the 27 school districts were represented on the County (Department of Education) SAR Board. In 2003-04, that number has increased by one to 11. Membership on 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.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District responded to the need to increase student attendance and decrease truancy by approving a new position, Dean of Attendance, at each of the comprehensive high schools. The District also has partnerships established with the Police Departments in the cities of Buena Park, Fullerton, and La Habra in order to have full-time School Resource Officers at all of the comprehensive high schools.

District staff members participate in the School Attendance Review (SAR) Boards of the Fullerton School District and the La Habra School District, which are component districts of the Fullerton Joint Union High School District. District students who have repeatedly demonstrated poor attendance or who have been determined to be habitual truants may be referred to either of these SAR Boards.

Finding #12: Cypress School District, Fullerton Joint Union High School District, and Saddleback Valley Unified School District do 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 a school year appears to place those districts out of compliance with the State Education Code.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School takes attendance of students very seriously and believes in working closely with students and parents to improve attendance. At the end of each school day, the parents/guardians of students who have been absent for all or any part of the school day are contacted via telephone. Whenever a student obtains two unexcused absences in a class, a letter is sent to advise the parents/guardians that if the student receives an additional unexcused absence the student may be considered a habitual truant. If a student receives three full-day unexcused absences in any one semester the parent is contacted, the student is identified as a habitual truant, and an attendance contract is established. If the student breaks the

attendance contract the student and parents/guardians are referred to the District Attorney's Office.

Finding #14: Some schools districts believe that SAR Boards are ineffective, particularly at the high school level; that SAR Boards are "a lot of work for no consequences at the D.A. Level;" and that threats of SAR Board intervention and consequences that are not reinforced by the District Attorney's office make the efforts of a SAR Board hollow and ineffective.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District partners with the Fullerton School District and the La Habra School District in establishing School Attendance Review (SAR) Boards. District students who have repeatedly demonstrated poor attendance or who have been determined to be habitual truants may be referred to either of these SAR Boards.

Finding #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 the *Education Code Section 48323*.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District annually applies for (and receives) state reimbursement for truancy intervention programs, including participation in the County SAR Board, under the authority of the *California Education Code*.

Finding #19: Periodic training of school administrators in preparing SARB-referral documentation packages would be beneficial.

Response: School administrators in the Fullerton Joint Union High School District receive on-going training. Assistant Principals of Student Affairs are provided with a SARB handbook that outlines the proper procedures for documenting the measures that are taken to address individual truancy cases.

Finding #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).

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District partners with the Fullerton School District and the La Habra School District in establishing School Attendance Review (SAR) Boards. District students who have repeatedly demonstrated poor attendance or who have been determined to be habitual truants may be referred to either of these SAR Boards.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES

Recommendation #1: Each of the (named) school districts improve their respective Web sites with an enhanced treatment of attendance matters that includes explicit expectations for student's attendance.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District is in the process of updating its website to address truancy and attendance issues. Information will be available at www.fjuhsd.k12.ca.us. The complete text of the information to be posted on the Web site is noted in the response to Finding #1.

Recommendation #11: Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School, and Saddleback Valley Unified School Districts each bring itself into compliance with the provisions of the *California Education Code* by identifying habitual truants, beginning with the 2004-2005 school year and continuing thereafter.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District has taken steps to identify habitual truants in the District's student information system effective with the 2004/05 school year and continuing thereafter.

Recommendation #14: All Orange County school districts become aware of the opportunity for reimbursement through State or Federal funding, afforded by *California Education Code Section 48323*, for participating on the County SAR Board.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District annually applies for (and receives) state reimbursement for truancy intervention programs, including participation on the County SAR Board, under the authority of the *California Education Code*.

Recommendation #20: School Districts that are not involved in the Truancy Response Project become involved as a means to significantly improve their truancy problems and to increase awareness among parents and students of the importance of regular attendance.

Response: The Fullerton Joint Union High School District has appointed the Director of Educational Services and McKinney Vento Liaison to represent the district in all matters pertaining to truancy and attendance. In that capacity, the Director attends Orange County Department of Education truancy/attendance meetings.