Report Title: SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MARIN

Report Date: April 26, 2002

Response by: Lagunitas School District

Title:Thelma Weiss, President of the Board of Trustees

FINDINGS

- I (we) agree with the findings numbered: 1-4, 6
- I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: 5

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefor.)

We generally agree with findings 1-4 except as noted in the responses to the recommendations. We disagree partially with finding number 5, i.e. "The appointment of this person (ombudsman), hired by a non-profit organization not connected with either Lagunitas School District or SELPA (but funded by SELPA), would be a good, immediate step as the Strategic Plan kicks in."

While there is no disagreement with the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution techniques as a powerful tool to resolve disagreement(s) between school districts and parents before they rise to a State-level complaint, in the past year the Marin SELPA has undertaken significant steps in building a format and process for addressing parent complaints. Specifically, twenty-two parents and school district employees received a five-day training on Essential Skills for Mediation. These participants have agreed to become neutral, third party mediators (like an ombudsman) who will work with parents and school districts to attempt to resolve differences. Since this training and subsequent agreement has just begun the implementation phase, it is premature to move to an ombudsman position, especially when the cost of the position would place a serious burden on small districts like the Lagunitas School District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendations numbered 1- 4, 6 have been implemented.

(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)

Recommendation #1
The MCOE and all school districts should inform the general public about the role of Special Education in the public schools, the range of services available to children with special needs, and the dedication of the teachers of those children.

Responses:

The Lagunitas School District participates in a variety of activities to inform our public about special education.

- Discussion by Lagunitas School District, the Marin County Office of Education (MCOE) and Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) staff of special education operations countywide at school district board meetings which are open to the public and for which agendas are widely published in the community, as required by law.
- Participation in regular meetings of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). This committee, open to the public, is composed of parents, both special education and regular education parents, district and county office personnel including teachers of special education and regular education teachers as well as administrators, and community agencies. This group meets monthly to discuss special education issues countywide and to advise the governing bodies of the SELPA.

- Annual information sent to parents in accordance with law contains information on all district services and parents and students rights related to those services.

Recommendation #2

The MCOE and all school districts should inform the public that state and federal funding is inadequate, and that the shortfall forces school districts to divert money intended for mainstream education into federal and state mandated Special Education.

Response:

Each year, school district budgets are developed in public board meetings and often involve a process that includes a district-wide budget committee composed of parents, interested community members, and board members. These committees help the district boards of trustees with input on priorities. They also are acutely aware of the shortfall in adequate funding for special education.

What we must avoid in raising awareness is the pitting of regular education parents and students against special education parents and students. That is to say, we must never "blame" the special students for the fact that their requirements for education and services result in a deficit that must be made up out of general funds. We can never forget that special students do not make a choice to be handicapped and parents do not choose to have special education children. Every child is the responsibility of the school district, county office of education, and the community.

Additionally, as a member of the Joint Legislative Advisory Committee (JLAC) along with the 19 school district, Lagunitas School District participates to address issues of inadequate state and federal funding for special education.

Recommendation #3

The Marin County Schools Legislative Advisory Committee, in coordination with all school districts, should continue and intensify its lobbying efforts in Sacramento and Washington for adequate funding for Special Education and, as a result, mainstream education as well.

Response:

The Lagunitas School District has participated in the development of the Marin County Schools Legislative Advisory Committee priorities and endorses the efforts of this committee to lobby for adequate funding.

Recommendation #4

SELPA and all school districts should give serious consideration to centralizing the assessment process as much as possible, while still maintaining the personal touch necessary for good assessments. At the very least, there should be, as one of our respondents described it, "an organizing principle" behind every assessment.

Response:

The end goal of this recommendation is a concept that the Marin County Office of Education, the school districts, and the SELPA have been working to implement over many years. Rather than seek a "centralized" assessment process, what should be sought is a standardized approach that is seamless from district to district. Of course, the individual nature of the student's need for assessment must always be recognized.

One of the ways to be sure that districts and the county office who operate special education programs approach assessment in the same way is to centralize the training of staff (psychologists, teachers, speech therapists, etc.). Already, much training takes place on a SELPA-wide basis and districts who set up their own training often invite other district personnel to participate. Lagunitas has participated in Countywide training for both certificated and classified staff.

- Recommendations numbered 6 has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

Recommendation #6

The Grand Jury urges all school districts to give the new SELPA Director and his staff all the help it can offer to complete the proposed Five Year Strategic Plan as scheduled.

Response:

Once the SELPA Strategic Plan is finalized – Lagunitas School District will support the SELPA Director and staff to implement the plan. We will be actively involved through the Advisory Steering Committee (ASC) the Business Advisory Committee (BAC) and the Operational Steering Committee (OSC), the governing body of the SELPA.

- Recommendations numbered N/A require further analysis.

(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.)

- Recommendations numbered N/A will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

Date:_____ Signed:_____

Number of pages attached - 3 Pages Total