

Introduction

This report provides the West Contra Costa Unified School District with the second of four six-month progress reviews of its efforts to address the improvement plan recommendations that were presented to the district in the July 2001 Assessment and Improvement Plan. The Assessment and Improvement Plan provided a systemic, comprehensive assessment in five areas of district operations:

1. Community Relations
2. Personnel Management
3. Pupil Achievement
4. Financial Management
5. Facilities Management

This six-month assessment continues to be based upon the existing legal and professional standards that were used in the Assessment and Improvement Plan and that are applicable to all California school districts. Independent and external professional experts from both the private and public sectors assisted in the research, identification and categorization of the standards utilized in the assessment of the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

The process of systemic assessment, prioritization and intervention used to develop the Assessment and Improvement Plan provided a foundation upon which to increase the overall capacity and productivity of the district by establishing a baseline by which progress can be measured. Six-month progress reviews provide the district with a measure of progress in achieving the professional and legal standards.

The district is not expected to address all of the professional and legal standards in the Assessment and Improvement Plan in a six-month period. Targeting a few standards at a time allows the district to focus its improvement efforts on standards that are most pressing. The district and the FCMAT providers collaboratively determine the standards in each operational area that will be targeted for review during each six-month review period.

In the Assessment and Improvement Plan, FCMAT provided both an analysis of the issues in West Contra Costa and a priority listing of those needs that are most pressing through its comprehensive audit. This second six-month progress review provides current ratings on those standards identified by FCMAT and the district that continue to be pressing. The findings presented in this report represent a snapshot of the district.

FCMAT would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the district Governing Board, administration and staff during these follow-up progress reviews.

Historical Background

On September 22, 2000, Assembly Bill 2265 was signed into law. In part, the bill required the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team to conduct assessments of the West Contra Costa Unified School District in the five major operational areas. The bill allocated \$800,000 to FCMAT for that purpose, and required the team to file status reports every six months with various entities, including the Legislature, on the school district's progress in meeting the recommendations of the various improvement plans. This is the second of four six-month reports that will monitor the district's progress over a period of two years.

Study Guidelines

FCMAT's approach to implementing the statutory requirements of AB 2265 is based upon a commitment to a standards-based, independent and external review of the West Contra Costa Unified School District's operations. FCMAT performed the initial assessment and developed the Assessment and Improvement Plan (July 2, 2001) in collaboration with four other external providers selected through a competitive process. Professionals from throughout California contributed their knowledge and applied the identified legal and professional standards to the specific local conditions found in the West Contra Costa Unified School District. The FCMAT providers continue to provide their expertise as participants in each six-month review process.

Five basic tenets are incorporated in the Assessment and Improvement Plan and in the six-month progress reviews. These tenets were based on previous assessments conducted by FCMAT in school districts throughout California and a review of data from other states implementing external reviews of troubled school districts. The five basic tenets are:

1. Use Professional and Legal Standards

Our experience indicates that for schools and school districts to be successful in program improvement, the evaluation, design and implementation of improvement plans must be standards-driven. FCMAT has noted positive differences between an objective standards-based approach versus a non-standards-based approach. When standards are clearly defined, reachable, and communicated, there is a greater likelihood they will be measured and met.

In order to participate in the process of the West Contra Costa Unified School District review, potential providers responded to a Request for Applications (RFA) that identified these standards as the basis of assessment and improvement. Moreover, the providers were required to demonstrate how the FCMAT-identified standards would be incorporated into their work. It is these standards on which the improvement plans for the West Contra Costa district were based. The standards, while identified specifically for the West Contra Costa Unified School District, are benchmarks that could be readily utilized as an indication of success for any school district in California.

Every standard was measured on a consistent rating format, and each standard was given a scaled score from zero to 10 as to its relative status of completeness. The following represents a definition of terms and scaled scores. The single purpose of the scaled score is to establish a baseline of information by which the district's future gains and achievements in each of the standard areas can be measured.

Not Implemented (Scaled Score of 0)

There is no significant evidence that the standard is implemented.

Partially Implemented (Scaled Score of 1 through 7)

A partially implemented standard lacks completeness, and it is met in a limited degree. The degree of completeness varies as defined:

- 1) Some design or research regarding the standard is in place that supports preliminary development. (Scaled Score of 1)
- 2) Implementation of the standard is well into the development stage. Appropriate staff is engaged and there is a plan for implementation. (Scaled Score of 2)
- 3) A plan to address the standard is fully developed, and the standard is in the beginning phase of implementation. (Scaled Score of 3)

- 4) Staff is engaged in the implementation of most elements of the standard. (Scaled Score of 4)
- 5) Staff is engaged in the implementation of the standard. All standard elements are developed and are in the implementation phase. (Scaled Score of 5)
- 6) Elements of the standard are implemented, monitored and becoming systematic. (Scaled Score of 6)
- 7) All elements of the standard are fully implemented, are being monitored, and appropriate adjustments are taking place. (Scaled Score of 7)

Fully Implemented (Scaled Score of 8-10)

A fully implemented standard is complete relative to the following criteria:

- 8) All elements of the standard are fully and substantially implemented and are sustainable. (Scaled Score of 8)
- 9) All elements of the standard are fully and substantially implemented and have been sustained for a full school year. (Scaled Score of 9)
- 10) All elements of the standard are fully implemented, are being sustained with high quality, are being refined, and have a process for ongoing evaluation. (Scaled Score of 10)

2. Conduct an External and Independent Assessment

FCMAT employed an external and independent assessment process in the development of the Assessment and Improvement Plan. The report presented findings and improvement plans based on the external and independent assessment from four separate professional agencies:

- California School Boards Association (CSBA) – Community Relations
- Schromm and Associates – Personnel
- MGT of America – Pupil Achievement
- School Services of California – Financial Management and Facilities Management

Collectively, these professional agencies constitute FCMAT’s providers in the assessment process. Their external and independent assessments serve as the primary basis for the reliability, integrity and credibility of the review. These providers continue to assist FCMAT in conducting these six-month progress reviews.

3. Utilize Multiple Measures of Assessment

For a finding to be considered legitimate, multiple sources need to be utilized to provide the same or consistent information. The Assessment and Improvement Plan and subsequent six-month progress reports are based on multiple measures. Testing, personal interviews, group meetings, public hearings, observations, review and analysis of data all provided added value to the assessment process. The providers were required to utilize multiple measurements as they assessed the standard. This process allowed for a variety of ways of determining whether the standards were met. All school district operations with an impact on student achievement, including governance, fiscal, personnel, and facilities were reviewed and included in the improvement plan.

4. Empower Staff and Community

The development of a strong professional development plan for the board and staff is a critical component of an effective school district. The success of the improvement plans and their implementation are dependent upon an effective professional and community development process. For this reason, the empowerment of staff and community is one of the highest priorities, and emphasizing this priority with each of the four partners was critical. As a result, a strong training component for board, staff and administration was called for consistently throughout the initial report.

Of paramount importance is the community's role of local governance. The absence of parental involvement in education is a growing concern nationally. A key to success in the West Contra Costa Unified School District is the re-engagement of parents, teachers, and support staff. West Contra Costa parents care deeply about their children's future and want to participate in improving the school district and enhancing student learning. The community relations section of the initial report provided necessary recommendations for the community to have a more active and meaningful role in the education of its children.

5. Engage Local, State and National Agencies

It is critical to involve various local, state and national agencies in the improvement of the district. This was emphasized through the Request for Applications (RFA) process, whereby state-recognized agencies were selected as partners to assist with the assessment and improvement process. The California Department of Education, city and county interests, professional organizations, and community-based organizations all have expressed and shown a desire to assist and participate in the improvement of the West Contra Costa Unified School District.

Study Team

The study team was composed of the following members from FCMAT and the FCMAT provider groups:

For FCMAT:

Joel Montero
Roberta Mayor
Laura Haywood

For California School Boards Association: (Community Relations)

Davis W. Campbell	Mina Fasulo
Diane Greene	Cheryl Magee
James Morante	Bode Owoyele
Kitty Simpson	Philip Escamilla
Stephanie Goodlett	

For Schromm and Associates: (Personnel Management)

Richard A. Schromm	Jack M. Weinstein
Charles Diggs	

For MGT of America: (Pupil Achievement)

Janelle Kubinec	JoAnn Cox
Karin Bloomer	Megan Atkinson
Fred Forrer	

For School Services of California: (Financial Management)

Ken Hall	Ron Bennett
Wes Stewart	

For School Services of California: (Facilities Management)

Ron Bennett	Curt Pollock
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Executive Summary

The West Contra Costa Unified School District Governing Board, administrators, and staff continue to work to address the recommendations made in the West Contra Costa Unified School District Assessment and Improvement Plan (July 2, 2001). This report is the second in a series of four six-month progress reviews of this effort, and provides new ratings on several standards that were reviewed during this period.

Assembly Bill 2265 (Aroner) requires FCMAT to conduct assessments of the West Contra Costa Unified School District and complete improvement plans in five district operational areas: community relations, personnel management, pupil achievement, finance, and facilities. The bill also requires the team to file status reports every six months with various entities, including the Legislature, on the school district's progress in meeting the recommendations of the improvement plans.

The Assessment and Improvement Plan includes a complete list of the various findings and recommendations for district improvement. The assessment team initially visited the district in spring 2001 and published the Assessment and Improvement Plan for the district in July 2001. The first six-month progress report, reviewing specific, targeted standards, was published in early January 2002. This second six-month progress report provides an assessment of additional targeted standards identified for the district to address during this period.

Principal Findings

The district has made significant progress in a number of operational areas that are detailed in this report, and the average rating in each operational area has increased. However, there are several major concerns, identified by the assessment teams in the initial assessment of the district, in which little or no change has occurred. These areas of concern continue to impede the district's efforts to implement the recommendations for improvement presented in the initial Assessment and Improvement Plan. If these areas are not addressed, the district's future fiscal solvency will remain at risk.

- The district's administrative data systems need to be improved. Information regarding staffing is poor. The district needs to review the status of its technology arrangement with Bi-Tech and continue to work to provide a reliable informational data system for the district. A position control system, linking staff positions to approved budgets for those positions, has not been fully implemented. Substitutes and temporary employees are still being hired to provide extra help in unauthorized positions for which no budget is available. Temporary employees work less than 185 days in the year and are released. However, they often are rehired as temporary employees the following year. The assessment team believes the district may be at risk in continuing this practice. There is insufficient control over the utilization of substitute and temporary employees.
- The provision of lifetime medical benefits for retirees and dependents, which costs the district approximately \$5 million per year, continues to pose an unfunded liability for the district. The rising costs of employee benefits will increase the district's annual cost for the program. There is no long-term plan to fund these increasing costs. The district needs to attempt to negotiate the cessation of lifetime benefits for new employees.
- The district must not utilize one-time resources for ongoing costs of salaries or programs. The district will be hard-pressed to provide step and column increases, let alone any salary increases, under current budget conditions. The district faces long-term financial burdens of funding lifetime medical benefits for retirees and other long-term liabilities.

- The district faces difficult negotiations with its employee unions. On June 13, the district announced the negotiation of a tentative settlement agreement with the teachers' association after impasse over several issues, including salaries and staff development requirements. The negotiations with the classified union, which are beginning, will need to address the difficult issue of seniority as well as salary and continuing benefits. Also at issue is the district's need to hire the most qualified individual for new positions, rather than the most senior on the substitute list. Both the employee unions and district administration need to understand the multi-year cumulative effects of any bargaining agreements.

A summary of the findings in each of the five operational areas assessed during the past six-month period is presented here. Additional detail of the progress made on the individual standards identified for review during this six-month period follows in the body of this report.

Community Relations

Community Relations includes the areas of communications, board policies, board governance, community collaboratives and advisory councils. The district is making substantial overall progress in the community relations area. The board, Superintendent and senior staff have a strong focus on student achievement and have achieved improvements in communications, policy and governance in particular. The district's employment of an administrator to specialize in community relations and parent involvement should assist the district in this goal.

The district has improved to the point that it is now operating at a level consistent with other districts of their size and demographics. Improvement is possible, however, and the district has indicated an effort to continue to strengthen its progress in policy services.

There have also been important changes in the governance process. Clearly the board and Superintendent have established a good working relationship. Many of the problems that plagued the board in previous years appear to have been resolved. Board members are articulate and community oriented. They work diligently in the community and approach their governance responsibilities in a serious manner. Board meetings are efficient, and, for the most part, orderly and operated in a civil manner. Board members have taken steps to participate in board training programs and to improve their governance skills whenever possible.

Progress also has been made in the communications area. The improvement reported in the first six-month progress report has been sustained. A number of new communications strategies have been undertaken and progress has been made on implementation of the district's comprehensive communication plan. The plan appears to be gaining acceptance and becoming mainstreamed in the district's internal operations.

The review of the Community Relations area included the assessment of 19 professional and legal standards during the second six-month progress review period. The average rating of all assessment standards for this operational area has increased as seen below, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

July 2, 2002	6.27
January 2, 2002	6.92
July 2, 2002	7.38

Personnel Management

The district has solicited district administrators' input on negotiations, both for the United Teachers of Richmond, Local #1, and School Supervisors Association units. Presentations were held with the Governing Board to discuss bargaining proposals and bargaining strategies regarding changes that are needed to improve site and district operations. School principals have been added to the district bargaining teams. The district was at impasse with the teachers' association at the time of this review, and negotiations with the classified union were just beginning.

The Personnel Services Division has met a couple of times with appropriate stakeholders to review the district's use of substitute and short-term (temporary) employees. The parties were unable to develop or agree on any guidelines to change current practices and ensure that substitute and short-term employees were utilized in accordance with Education Code requirements. Thus, no changes have been made.

Personnel Services currently is examining the requirement that all clerical and instructional aide substitutes are interviewed prior to hiring. Since substitutes ultimately represent over 90 percent of the applicant pool by seniority, it is imperative that a process be in place to ensure only qualified substitutes are hired.

The Personnel Services Division has met the assessment team's expectation for the holding of regularly scheduled staff meetings. The Personnel Services Division has developed and distributed a "Quick Reference Personnel Directory" that identifies key personnel office functions, contact persons and telephone numbers. The Classified and Certificated personnel departments have identified at least one backup staff member for each position in the division. All staff members have developed desk manuals for their respective work stations that include reference materials and directions for completing some tasks.

The Recruitment Plan and Recruitment Manual have been improved. The Recruitment Manual serves as the in-service tool for recruiters. Specific individuals representing principals from the hardest to staff schools, central office staff and administrators with expertise in critical shortage areas have been selected to serve on the recruitment team. The Personnel Services Division had a separate recruitment program budget this past year of \$250,000 to cover all non-personnel costs.

The Personnel Services Division utilizes the services of Cooperative Organization for the Development of Employee Selection Procedures (CODESP) for testing questions. Questions are reviewed with the selecting administrator to ensure appropriateness. Classified job descriptions are being revised, including updated qualifications to facilitate the matching of testing material with the job requirements.

The district has developed staffing formulas for all classroom and classroom support certificated positions. The district also has written staffing guidelines for secondary clerical staffing. Elementary school clerical staffing is based on an unwritten staffing formula. Although the district has staffing guidelines for custodial positions, financial issues have precluded their adoption. The district needs to combine its staffing guidelines into one written document.

The review of the Personnel Management area included the assessment of 25 professional and legal standards during the second six-month progress review period. The average rating of all assessment standards for this operational area has increased as seen below, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

July 2, 2002	5.30
January 2, 2002	5.83
July 2, 2002	6.48

Pupil Achievement

The district has again made significant improvements in the area of Pupil Achievement in the second six-month review period. The first six-month review included a cross section of the FCMAT standards for pupil achievement, with some emphasis placed on planning processes. This second six-month review again includes a cross-section of standards, with some emphasis placed on curriculum management and categorical programs such as special education, English Language Learners, and Gifted and Talented Education.

The district has added depth to its strategic vision in the form of refined goals, objectives, and action plans directed toward improving student achievement for all students in the district. Areas of significant improvement include:

- The Special Education Department has significantly reduced its backlogs in individual education plans (IEP) requiring review, assessments, and reassessments. Since the initial review, the district has successfully addressed 23 out of 25 areas that the California Department of Education found as non-compliant in the area of special education.
- The district has developed a detailed Educational Technology Plan that includes a description of how activities will be evaluated and monitored.
- The district has outlined established goals, objectives, and action steps to elevate the achievement of all students in the district, especially students that are traditionally low achieving.

Areas in which the district has made improvements but that require additional attention include:

- Developing a curriculum management plan to reinforce and support the adoption of new curriculum and learning standards.
- Ensuring that teachers are prepared to effectively use the available curriculum and learning tools to support high levels of pupil achievement. The district provides teachers with numerous opportunities to receive training, but relies on teachers to volunteer to participate. The district's ability to fully address recommendations and improvement steps related to pupil achievement is linked to its ability to negotiate changes in its collective bargaining agreements. The district should continue to involve union representatives in its planning and decision making processes to support a shared commitment to address necessary changes.

The Pupil Achievement review included the assessment of 20 professional and legal standards during the second six-month progress review period. The average rating of all assessment standards for this operational area has increased as seen below, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

July 2, 2002	2.76
January 2, 2002	3.45
July 2, 2002	4.24

Financial Management

The Fiscal Division has been operating without the services of a full-time Assistant Superintendent for Business, and the Director of Fiscal Services has been out with a serious medical problem. Nonetheless, as is evidenced in this report, the district has made substantial progress in addressing the recommendations identified in the initial Assessment and Improvement Plan.

There has been significant progress in the following areas:

- The staff development program has been well organized and advertised. While participation could be improved, the structure of the program is outstanding.
- The internal auditor's position is in the final stages of interviews and the position will be filled shortly. The district has adopted policies related to the internal audit process.
- The district has managed to file all county and state reports in a timely fashion—in fact, the district was the second in the county to file both the first and second interim reports.
- By going online with the Bi-Tech system, the district now has the ability to encumber purchase orders against the budget until payment is achieved.
- The district has continued to improve in the area of budget monitoring, with revisions being made on a regular basis per established procedures with Governing Board approval.
- Board policies and procedures for year-end closing have been adopted, a schedule developed, and a checklist for staff is in the process of being developed.
- The district has issued a requisition for a card-lock fuel pump at the maintenance yard. In addition, the negotiations with Union 76 and AM/PM suppliers for a card-lock system to address the fueling needs across the district are complete.

The following areas need additional attention:

- Fraud protection policies have not been presented to the Governing Board for adoption.
- Fully automated position control has not yet been achieved.
- The district has not taken full advantage of the various programs of the county Bi-Tech software program.
- Time cards continue to be manually processed as a result of the district not having a fully automated position control system.
- In many instances, student body budgets are not being submitted, reviewed, or audited by the district.

The review of Financial Management included the assessment of 20 professional and legal standards during the second six-month progress review period. The average rating of all assessment standards for this operational area has increased as seen below, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

July 2, 2002	4.38
January 2, 2002	4.68
July 2, 2002	5.16

Facilities Management

The West Contra Costa Unified School District continues to make good progress in improving its facilities. This progress is primarily attributable to the passage of Measure M, a local \$150 million general obligation bond, and the issuance of a contract for a master architect, as well as hiring additional district staff. These items have allowed the district to begin the planning process and to make improvements to the schools. Without Measure M, the district could not afford to modernize the majority of its campuses. Without the acquisition of the master architect, the existing district staff could not process the volumes of paperwork associated with all of the construction and modernization.

Since the initial review, the district has made major progress in:

- Developing and providing training on a district safety plan.
- Updating the Materials Safety Data Sheet binders at all school sites
- Obtaining Division of the State Architect certification for all but two of the portable classrooms.
- Hiring a master architect to coordinate all of the facility needs of the district

The graffiti abatement problem in the district is not a situation that can be solved overnight. The problem at some schools is being reduced by improved lighting and police patrols. The district also is attempting to reduce graffiti and vandalism by using exterior surveillance cameras to record trespassers.

The review of the Facilities Management area included the assessment of 17 professional and legal standards during the second six-month progress review period. The average rating of all assessment standards for this operational area has increased as seen below, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

July 2, 2002	5.26
January 2, 2002	5.53
July 2, 2002	5.98