



West Contra Costa Unified School District

Governance and
Community Relations

Comprehensive Review
July 2003

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By the time of the January 2003 progress report, the district was making good progress on implementing the standards in the Community Relations operational area. At that time no individual standard was receiving less than a rating of six and the vast majority of items were rated seven or above. Because of this, it was decided that a general summary of the progress of the district in each of four sub-areas would be more useful in the final report than reporting on only a few specific standards. Accordingly, this report provides such a summary and overview.

Where the district received a seven or above on the standards, no additional comments beyond those in the summary are provided. In the few instances where the district did receive a six as the final rating on a particular standard, comments reflecting the rating as of this date are provided. In addition to the summary comments for each subsection, a history of the ratings for each standard is also provided.

Communications

The district's communications structure has demonstrated significant improvement and consistency since the first observations of its operations, procedures and protocols. The district is, at this time, fully implementing the FCMAT standards relative to media relations, internal and external communications, and the maintenance of a proactive communications plan.

The district has sufficiently addressed the concerns and recommendations raised in the initial assessment report, including becoming more consistent in the production and delivery of communications activities – such as the district newsletter, press releases, outreach efforts to both the community and local media, and the development and maintenance of the communications plan.

The most recent and vivid example of the district's communications improvements was a proactive letter/release to parents, community members and the media regarding the district's awareness and attention to the dire state budget situation. The information was brief, direct and simply reassured the community that the district was taking appropriate measures to deal with the situation. The letter was also translated into Spanish. The district should be applauded for proactive efforts such as this.

The district's internal/external communications operations also continue to demonstrate improvement. Most notably, the district instituted "listening team visits," which consist of the Superintendent and Cabinet members discussing day-to-day issues – emphasizing literacy and student achievement – with school site employees during lunch periods. There are 20 visits currently scheduled. Similarly, the district has also held several district staff focus groups, including principals and administrators, classified employees, and unrepresented employees. Each of these focus group discussions is also centered around literacy and how the district can support staff to implement the efforts effectively.

Additionally, the district provides a "Suggestion Box," located in the district office and on the district's Web site.

The district has been very aggressive and active in working with local community groups and businesses. Several campaigns and programs have been instituted and sustained, including “West County Reads,” “Marketing Groups” (consisting of the local Chamber of Commerce, business community, parent and district representatives), and “Leading for Literacy.” Also, the district rotates its board meetings to various neighborhoods within the district.

The most significant improvements have been in the district’s communications plan. The district has updated the plan on several occasions and has incorporated additional opportunities and activities to the plan, which demonstrates that the district understands the purpose behind such a document.

Also, the district has successfully integrated the common theme/message of “improving academic achievement for all students” into various aspects of its communications operations – providing focus and direction for the department and district.

Communication devices, such as press releases (Apple Bites), weekly e-mail updates (Friday FYI) and other information have been distributed on a very consistent basis. The information is pertinent to district business and many times refers back to the core message of student achievement and literacy.

The remaining challenge for the communications department is the balancing of long-term goals and projects while continuing to attend to day-to-day operations – a common occurrence in any business setting. Although the district has recently engaged in several positive, proactive endeavors in the community, it remains critically important that the district doesn’t lose sight of maintaining the weekly updates, e-mails and press releases that have been successfully become part of the district’s communications operations.

Parent/Community Relations

The district has made significant gains in the area of Parent/Community Relations. In addition to increased professional development for administrators, teachers and classified staff on effective communications with parents, the district has hired an administrator to coordinate a comprehensive parent and community involvement effort. That administrator was hired in November and developed a comprehensive work plan to guide the district’s efforts in this area. The work plan focuses on a variety of venues for expanding parent involvement, including effective parenting, communication with parents and schools, parent volunteerism, parent support for homework, parents as partners in school-based decision-making, and community collaborations. In addition, the work plan seeks to strengthen district support for schools in enhancing parent involvement.

Most recently, the district has begun the process of convening community forums, or “Community Conversations” to provide an opportunity for “citizens to ask questions, give input, and share their concerns regarding public education issues.” These forums will be held regularly through November and at a different time and location than school board meetings, making it more accessible to individuals who find the time and/or location of school board meetings to be inconvenient for meaningful participation.

The district has strengthened trainings for school site and district level advisory committees, focusing on roles and responsibilities, helping parents to play a more meaningful role in the

schools. The district has also put into place a process for the development and review of School Accountability Report Cards (SARC), which will assist the district in both state and new federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) compliance mandates for SARCs. Consistent with the new NCLB mandates, the district must strive to complete and make available SARCs at the beginning of each school year. The SARCs for the 2001-02 school year are not yet available, but a summary fact sheet has been developed with salient information from the SARC. In order to comply with NCLB, the 2002-03 SARC must be available before the beginning of the 2003-04 school year.

The district's strategic goals are very evident throughout the district and are used as a communication tool with the community. Included in those goals is a commitment to "Engage families and community in supporting the instructional focus," which is a regular reminder to the community, district and school sites of the value placed on parent involvement.

Community Collaboratives, District Advisory Committees, School Site Councils

Significant strategies have been put into place to strengthen the role of school site/district councils, particularly in assisting council members in understanding their roles and responsibilities, and by ensuring that councils have full representation from parents and teachers alike. The district has provided sites with detailed responsibilities of English Learner Advisory Committee (ELAC) members and has enhanced the ELAC tool kit to ensure more effective participation by members. Comprehensive handbooks are provided to all school site councils.

The district has also instituted a review process of site and district council minutes to determine that meaningful participation is occurring and that the councils are fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. Councils must also report to the board on how they will monitor the effectiveness of site plans and received training on how to monitor plans to make the monitoring process more meaningful and relevant. Rosters of councils are also reviewed to ensure the composition meets all statutory requirements.

Policy

From the review of the district's policy manual, it has been evident that the district historically has made keeping policies up-to-date a priority. As Richmond Unified School District, the district worked with the California School Boards Association (CSBA) as policy development clients in 1987; many of the current board policies are from that process. As the West Contra Costa Unified School District, the district continued to rely on CSBA to provide current samples for district use. A good effort has been made to keep the policy manual compliant with law and reflective of district practices and philosophy.

The initial assessment review of policies found that the district had most of the state and federally mandated policy language, although some items did need updating. Some of the mandated policies originally thought to be missing were found in a useful parent handbook, *Basic Commitment Policies*, although because they were not also placed in the appropriate location in the policy manual, reviewers did not find them.

The previous practice had been for an outside legal firm to review proposed policy and send a revision to the personnel office that had responsibility for board policy. Currently the district has changed its process for legal review of policy from using an outside legal contractor to having an in-house legal counsel who will have oversight of the revision and adoption of policy. In addi-

tion, the proposed policy revisions provided to the team gave evidence that district staff members are involved in regular review of policy.

The district had established a process of each year collecting the policy manual binders and updating all the pages before redistributing them to sites and other offices. They were seeking a less cumbersome system, and have decided to subscribe to the Governance and Management Using Technology (GAMUT) Online system in order that all site, staff, board members, and the community would have easy access to the district board policies on the Internet.

CSBA policy services staff are in the process of creating a completely electronic document that accurately reflects the existing set of district board policies. The goal is to enable the district to have its policy manual available to the district staff and community on the Internet. Although the initial plan was to have district material online by the first of 2003, the development of the electronic document from new and old electronic and paper formats has been slow. CSBA anticipates that the document will be ready by June 2003. The next step will be to work with district staff to update some of the current policies and to identify areas where new policies should be added. The district has made the commitment to continue with this necessary process of maintaining an accurate and compliant policy manual.

Board Roles/Boardsmanship

The review of this area goes to the heart of governance. From the beginning of the study, it was clear that the Superintendent and board had made improving governance a major priority. In the recent past, prior to the current Superintendent, district governance in the district had been characterized by turbulence and ineffectiveness. The perception of previous boards has been primarily negative, focusing on the “circus”-like atmosphere surrounding board meetings and frequent volatile exchanges among board members and between board and staff. As a result of the Superintendent’s and board’s commitment to improvement, the initial ratings in the area of governance were higher than anticipated at the beginning of the review. Additionally, over the four progress review periods following the initial report, substantial improvement on each of the standards was observed to the point that as of this report, the board roles and relationship standards have been fully met and appear to be sustained. This is a major accomplishment for any board, much less one in a complex urban district.

The board does, however, face serious challenges to the progress achieved in governance to date. The district must cut over \$14 million from its budget this year. There is nothing more difficult for community-elected board members than facing the organized pressure from constituent groups that elected them to “save” programs that need to be saved. These kinds of choices create an untenable environment for everyone. That the money must be cut is a fact; while the margins can sometimes be manipulated, the major cuts are a reality. Board members must often choose between rational, good government leadership as a board team making the tough decisions that will keep the district viable and functioning, and behavior that wins favor with constituent groups. The wrong decision will haunt the board for years to come. If the board chooses not to continue its solid leadership as a board team, the entire governance structure can begin to unravel.

Board members have traditionally participated in ongoing education and professional development. They have a history of involvement in CSBA workshops, and seminars including the new

board member institute and the CSBA annual conference. They also have attended the California Association of Urban School Districts meetings, various School Services of California events, and the Coalition of Black School Board Members. In addition to external training opportunities, the board has held numerous study sessions and board workshops with outside trainers and facilitators.

A major function of any board is the establishment and adoption of the vision, mission and goals for the district. One of the first tasks of the new Superintendent when she began her tenure in the district was the formulation of a comprehensive strategic plan. The board and all major stakeholders in the district were involved in creation of the plan. The plan became the basis for the instructional direction for the district and has been fully embraced by the board. Last year, the vision, mission and goals were reviewed and the board was fully represented in those discussions. The board communicates a common vision, supports the emphasis on student achievement and attention to the developing child and to equity throughout the district.

The key to any effective board lies in the relationships it establishes and maintains both among board members and between board members and staff. This has historically been a problem for the district's boards. The current board has clearly striven to improve relationships and establish a culture where board members can work together in productive fashion. Maintaining positive, constructive relationships is extremely difficult. Given that reality, the district has done an excellent job of creating a board culture that values positive relationships.

Clearly, the current board attempts to address issues in a responsible and respectful manner. They approach dialogue, for the most part, in a civic and respectful way. They strive to reach agreement and to not take disagreements personally. In the initial review, the team found that the board reported that they themselves cited the strength that each member brings to the board, and say they feel the board is doing a good job of working together. The words caring, respect for individual differences, and team are used by board members when describing the governance team.

The extent to which the board, as a board, treats everyone with dignity and respect is an important part of effective governance. It is not possible to avoid occasional "flare-ups" in behavior when operating in a highly charged atmosphere. It is to the credit of the board that when such problems occur they do not appear to damage personal and professional relationships, nor are they accepted as the norm for board conduct. The current challenge over budget cuts will strain that relationship. It is essential that board members place a commitment to effective governance for the long term over short term gains and losses. Emotional stress between board members over important, extremely difficult issues and decisions must not be allowed to become personal and threaten the operational effectiveness the board has achieved due to hard work and commitment to excellence.

Board members continue to state their support for the Superintendent. The district has a strong Superintendent who takes her role and relationship with the board very seriously. Through her leadership and the board's, a number of opportunities for the board to meet and discuss occur. Frequent study sessions, committee meetings and workshops and retreats provide the Superintendent and board opportunities to communicate and problem solve. Because of her strength and her preference, the board tends to work through her to the staff. Relations between the board and

staff seem to be positive, with the staff continuing to indicate a much better relationship than with past district boards.

In subsequent progress reports, although the district continues to go through serious challenges that could strain relations on the best boards, much of the positive board culture continues; a testimony to the effort undertaken by the board to maintain its relationships. Perhaps the strongest indication of the current perception of the board is that it is not mentioned by staff or others as a “problem” in the district. This is noteworthy since boards and board behavior as a team are lightning rods for controversy in any school district. When things are going well the board tends to fade into the background. When things are not going well, when they are “dysfunctional,” the board becomes a “hot topic” in the district. In the West Contra Costa District, the board is not an issue at this time, nor does it appear that any of the normal difficulties encountered in dealing with controversy will become a serious problem for the board.

Another characteristic of effective boards is how they treat the public and the staff at board meetings. This is an area in which past district boards have been criticized. The review found that the current board gets high marks for its attempt to make the board a welcome place for public and staff. The board is very respectful of the public and, notwithstanding controversial issues, the board attempts to operate with civility and decorum.

The board continues to conduct formal recognition of staff and accomplishments of the district at the opening of every board meeting. Awards recognition and encouragement are given to all members of the district community including: students, parents, families, employees, business partners, community and city leaders and council, and volunteers. This recognition creates a positive culture for the meeting. Each agenda is appropriately written to include public comment, and time for comment is explained by the Board President at each action item. To the extent possible, the board and the Superintendent operate as a team, have respectful question-and-answer sessions and allow input from staff and comments from the public. There is a cordial, welcoming attitude as the board enters the room, and a sense of openness and engagement are expressed by the Board President.

The board standard on confidentiality raised a number of concerns early on in the review process. The initial review identified a number of cases where confidential personnel information was “leaked” to the staff in recent years. Over the past two years, however, the board has clearly internalized the importance of confidentiality. The board has discussed the issue and is committed to honoring confidentiality in the future.

The issue of micromanaging is probably the most discussed concern raised about effective governance. The West Contra Costa board, as with most boards, is always confronted with the balance of administrative oversight and administrative meddling, between accountability and intervention, and between an individual’s right to pursue an agenda and the board’s responsibility to govern as a board. Previous boards were perceived to frequently intervene in administrative matters, creating a reputation of micromanagement by the board. The current board has done a good job of refraining from inappropriate involvement in the district. Board bylaws are quite extensive in clearly outlining the board’s areas of responsibility and limitations on administrative intrusion. As with other areas, the current budget crisis could strain relationships in this area as well. One of the casualties of too much board involvement in individual budget cuts is the ten-

dency for board members as individuals to be drawn into individual program battles; being asked to take one side or the other. This can inadvertently get individuals inappropriately involved in administrative decisions.

Board Meetings

The board has done an excellent job in meeting the standards related to the conduct of board meetings. As mentioned earlier, board meetings are, for the most part, well managed and effective. Board members are clearly committed, do their homework and participate in meetings.

Community Relations

Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
1.1	Decisions and other information are effectively communicated throughout the system in a timely manner.	4	6	7	7	NR
1.2	Staff input into school and district operations is encouraged.	4	6	7	NR	NR
1.3	The board and Superintendent have developed and effectively implemented a proactive communications and media relations plan.	2	4	6	7	NR
1.4	News releases are prepared and made available simultaneously to all appropriate news media.	9	NR	NR	NR	NR
1.5	Media contacts and spokespersons who have the authority to speak on behalf of the district have been identified.	5	6	NR	NR	8
1.6	Individuals not authorized to speak on behalf of the district refrain from making public comments on board decisions and district programs.	4	5	7	7	7
1.7	Board spokespersons are skilled at public speaking and communication and are knowledgeable about district programs and issues.	5	NR	8	8	NR
2.1	Annual parental notice of rights and responsibilities is provided at the beginning of the school year. This notice is provided in English and in languages other than English when 15 percent or more speak other languages (EC 48980).	9	NR	NR	NR	NR
2.2	A school accountability report card is issued annually for each school site (EC 35256).	5	NR	6	6	NR
2.3	The board has developed uniform complaint procedures (Title 5, Section 4621)	6	8	NR	NR	NR
2.4	Uniform complaint procedures are communicated throughout the system and implemented consistently.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR

Community Relations

Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
2.5	Charges or complaints against any employee are addressed in a timely manner.	3	7	NR	NR	NR
2.6	Board members refer informal public concerns to the appropriate staff for attention and response.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR
2.7	The board has identified the needs of the students, staff and educational community through a needs assessment process.	6	NR	NR	NR	8
2.8	Parents and community members are encouraged to be involved in the schools.	6	7	7	8	NR
2.9	The board and Superintendent provide access to schools for parents and community members while addressing safety issues related to visitors and volunteers.	6	NR	NR	NR	8
2.10	Board members are actively involved in building community relations.	4	5	NR	NR	NR
3.1	The board supports partnerships with community groups, local agencies and businesses.	5	NR	NR	NR	NR
3.2	Community collaboratives and advisory councils led by the district all have identified specific outcomes goals that are understood by all members.	4	6	NR	NR	7
3.3	The membership of community collaboratives and advisory councils led by the district reflects the full cultural, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic diversity of the student population.	4	6	NR	NR	7
3.4	The district encourages and provides the necessary training for collaborative and advisory council members to understand the basic administrative structure, program processes and goals of all district partners.	5	6	NR	NR	7

Community Relations

Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
3.5	The decision-making structure of community collaboratives and advisory councils led by the district ensures that decisions are made at the appropriate level (e.g., site-level team, district-wide interagency body).	7	NR	NR	NR	NR
3.6	Collaborative and advisory council processes are structured in such a way that there is a clear, meaningful role for all participants, with appropriate input from parents, members of the community and agency policy makers.	6	NR	NR	8	NR
3.7	Community collaboratives and district and school advisory councils led by the district effectively fulfill their responsibilities (e.g. research issues, develop recommendations, etc.).	6	NR	NR	8	NR
3.8	Policies exist for the establishment of school site councils (EC 52852.5).	10	NR	NR	NR	NR
3.9	School plans for the School-Based Coordinated Program exist at each school participating in the program (EC 52850).	10	NR	NR	NR	NR
3.10	School plans are comprehensive and have sufficient content to meet the statutory requirements (EC 52853).	7	NR	NR	NR	NR
3.11	The school site council annually reviews the school plan and the board annually approves or disapproves all site councils' plans (EC 52853, 52855).	5	NR	8	NR	NR
3.12	School plans are a vital part of school operations and school accountability.	6	NR	NR	8	NR
4.1	Policies are written, organized and readily available to all members of the staff and to the public.	6	NR	7	7	NR
4.2	Policies and administrative regulations are up to date and reflect current law and local needs.	5	7	NR	NR	NR
4.3	The board has adopted all policies mandated by state and federal law.	7	7	7	NR	NR

Community Relations						
Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
4.4	The board annually reviews its policies on intradistrict open enrollment and extracurricular/cocurricular activities (EC 35160.5).	1	7	NR	NR	NR
4.5	Existing board policies are regularly reviewed with the involvement of the staff.	5	NR	8	NR	NR
4.6	The district has established a system of securing citizen input in policy development and district operation.	5	NR	5	NR	NR
4.7	The board supports and follows its own policies once they are adopted.	6	NR	6	7	NR
5.1	Each board member meets the eligibility requirements of being a board member (EC 35107).	10	NR	NR	NR	NR
5.2	Board members participate in orientation sessions, workshops, conventions and special meetings sponsored by board associations.	6	NR	8	NR	NR
5.3	Pertinent literature, statutes, legal counsel and recognized authorities are available to and utilized by the board to understand duties, functions, authority and responsibilities of members.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR
5.4	The board has established a district-wide vision/mission and makes decisions that advance the district toward that vision.	6	NR	7	NR	NR
5.5	The board makes decisions based on the study of all available data, including the recommendation of the Superintendent.	7	NR	NR	8	NR
5.6	Functional working relations are maintained among board members.	7	NR	NR	9	NR
5.7	Individual board members respect the decisions of the board majority and support the board's actions in public.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR
5.8	Functional working relations are maintained between the board and administrative team.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR

Community Relations

Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
5.9	The board publicly demonstrates respect for and support for the district and school-site staff.	5	NR	8	NR	NR
5.10	The board demonstrates respect for public input at meetings and public hearings.	6	NR	8	NR	NR
5.11	Board members respect confidentiality of information by the administration.	5	8	NR	NR	NR
5.12	The board restricts itself to a policy-making role and does not attempt to administer policies.	7	NR	NR	NR	NR
5.13	No individual board member attempts to exercise any administrative responsibility.	6	NR	NR	NR	7
5.14	The board evaluates the performance of the Superintendent regularly on criteria that will encourage student achievement.	6	9	NR	NR	NR
5.15	The board acts for the community and in the interests of all students in the district.	4	6	NR	NR	8
5.16	The board receives and reviews reports from the Superintendent regarding district performance.	5	6	7	NR	NR
6.1	An adopted calendar of regular meetings exists and is published specifying the time, place and date of each meeting (EC 35140).	6	7	NR	NR	NR
6.2	Agendas, minutes and other pertinent data are available to the public during regular working hours.	9	NR	NR	NR	NR
6.3	Board members are prepared for board meetings by becoming familiar with the agenda and support materials prior to the meeting.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR
6.4	Board meetings are conducted according to a set of bylaws adopted by the board.	9	NR	NR	NR	NR
6.5	Open and closed sessions are conducted according to the Ralph M. Brown Act (GC 54950 et seq.).	8	NR	NR	NR	NR

Community Relations

Standard to be addressed		June 2001 Rating	Dec. 2001 Rating	June 2002 Rating	Dec. 2002 Rating	June 2003 Rating
6.6	The board president ensures that meetings proceed in a businesslike manner while allowing opportunity for full discussion.	8	NR	NR	NR	NR
6.7	The board has adopted bylaws for the placement of items on the board agenda by members of the public.	10	NR	NR	NR	NR
6.8	Members of the public have an opportunity to address the board before or during the board's consideration of each item of business to be discussed at regular or special meetings, and to bring before the board matters that are not on the agenda (EC 35145.5).	10	NR	NR	NR	NR