



West Contra Costa Unified School District

Executive Summary

Comprehensive Review
January 2002

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Introduction

This report provides the West Contra Costa Unified School District with the first 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 will provide the district with a measure of progress in achieving the professional and legal standards.

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 first six-month progress review provides current ratings on those standards identified by FCMAT to be the most 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 the audit process.

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 first 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 continued to provide their expertise as participants in this 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 have assisted FCMAT in conducting this first six-month progress review.

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 recovery 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:

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Roberta Mayor

For California School Boards Association: (Community Relations)

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For MGT of America: (Pupil Achievement)

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The West Contra Costa Unified School District board of trustees and administrators have worked to address the recommendations made in the West Contra Costa Unified School District Assessment and Improvement Plan (July 2, 2001). This report provides a six-month progress review of this effort, and provides new ratings on several standards that were targeted to be reviewed at this review period.

Principal Findings

The Assessment and Improvement Plan includes a complete list of the various findings and recommendations for district improvement. This report provides a six-month progress review of selected standards. The following is a summary of the progress made by the district during this first six-month period.

The six-month assessment represents data collection and analysis at a specific point in time. The assessment team visited the district in October and November 2001. The six-month progress report is scheduled for presentation to the district in January 2002.

Assembly Bill 2265 (Aroner), Chapter 578, Statutes of 2000 requires FCMAT to conduct assessments of the West Contra Costa Unified School District and complete improvement plans in the five district operational areas of instruction, finance, facilities, personnel management, and community relations. 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 various improvement plans.

Community Relations

The July 2001 Assessment and Improvement Plan in the operational area of Community Relations included recommendations related to internal and external communications; board policies, responsibilities and boardsmanship; and community collaboratives and advisory councils. Twenty standards were selected as priorities for the district to address in the first six months.

The district has made a number of improvements in the area of communications. Although it has not yet developed a comprehensive communications plan, it has begun the process by collecting communications plans from other districts and intends to form a broad-based Communications Advisory Team to provide input on the development of a long-range plan. In the meantime, the district's communications strategies are addressed in its strategic goals and the Superintendent's Communications Plan for 2001-01. The district is implementing the written, electronic and face-to-face communications strategies outlined in the Superintendent's plan. For instance, the district replaced its hard-copy staff newsletter with a more consistently produced weekly e-mail update. A Communications Subcommittee consisting of two board members, the Superintendent and the Public Information Officer has been established to monitor the progress of the district's communications efforts.

The district is also making progress in the area of parent/community relations. Six months ago, significant efforts were described to involve parents and the community, many of which were driven by individual schools and not coordinated or supported by the district. The district plans to increase its level of support by developing recommendations for parent/community involvement and continuing staff training on parent communications. In addition, the district has revised its uniform complaint procedures to be consistent with current law, and has revised its procedure for complaints against employees. It also has implemented a variety of efforts to clarify responsibilities of district and school-site advisory groups, particularly working to provide information to parents who serve on these committees, and is reviewing the minutes of all advisory committees to determine if committee members appear to understand their roles and responsibilities. For Title I schools, barriers to parent participation have been identified, and school plans for 2001-02 are required to include specific goals aimed at removing such barriers.

On standards assessing board roles and responsibilities, the board has further developed its use of the district's mission and strategic priorities to establish criteria for the superintendent's evaluation and to organize progress reports on district performance. Board members have maintained confidentiality of closed session issues, and district materials have been updated to reflect the current board calendar.

Board policies were relatively current in May, and the district's policy manual contained 90% of all policies mandated by state and federal law. Board minutes show little policy review or adoption by the board over the past six months. However, the board and Superintendent have participated in training on the policy-making responsibilities of the governance team, and CSBA's audit of mandated policies has been forwarded to district legal consultants for review.

The review of Community Relations included the assessment of 20 professional and legal standards during the first six-month review period. The average rating of the assessment standards for this operational area has increased from 6.27 to 6.92 on a scale of 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

Personnel Management

The Personnel Division has made improvements in several areas. The division has continued to improve its presentation of an organizational chart that includes each position's major functions and has developed a monthly calendar of activities for the year, allowing the Personnel Division to review upcoming responsibilities in the planning process. Scheduled Leadership Team, certificated and classified staff meetings with agendas have enhanced the division planning meetings. Although items were placed on agendas that would require ongoing monitoring, the minutes or notes of the meetings did not consistently identify responsible parties and time lines.

The Personnel Division has developed a draft of a policy and procedure that sets forth guidelines for the use of telephones, voicemail and backup telephone coverage. The new policy and procedures have not yet been finalized or implemented. It was reported that adoption and implementation will occur in the spring of 2002.

The Personnel Services Division staff has contacted other nearby school districts and requested and reviewed their employment application forms. A preliminary draft of a prepared application was presented as evidence of their progress. However, the draft did not include the recruitment source referral descriptors nor a revised copy of the “Voluntary Applicant Employee Ethnic Identification” sheet.

Personnel Services Bulletin P-7 has been revised and distributed to principals. The bulletin describes the necessity and instructions for this process. There has been dialogue between the Director, Certificated Personnel, and school principals relative to the importance of this process. The bulletin titled “Reference Checks for Certificated Candidates” only addresses new full-time teachers and does not specifically mention substitutes. The utilization of e-mail and faxes has added to a better reference check process. However, there was a significant omission of documents that evidence interview compliance form usage. Results of interviews and panel members were not documented or submitted. In addition, there was no evidence of a written substitute hiring policy that included reference checks and completed interview forms.

The Classified Personnel Office has made available to schools and offices some additional information regarding the status of personnel requisitions. Personnel has not yet developed a detailed procedural guideline that describes the time lines, responsibilities and documents required to hire or transfer a classified employee.

The district has developed and presented bargaining proposals to Local 1 to modify existing language that would allow consideration for factors other than seniority in making personnel decisions and allow the posting of vacancies during recess periods.

The Personnel Services Division has only just begun to address the issue of the use of short-term employees (temporaries) and substitutes. Meetings were scheduled in November 2001 with stakeholders to review the issues and work on solutions.

The district has developed New Teacher handbooks for elementary and secondary teachers. These handbooks are comprehensive and include excellent material for new teachers. The handbooks will be used and distributed as part of the induction/orientation for 2002-03. An orientation video is being developed that will be used as a part of the induction/orientation for 2002-03. Progress also is being made on the development of an Operations Procedural Manual. Existing operational procedures have been collected and organized into a common binder.

State and federal compliance issues are being studied; however, there has been little concrete progress made to date. The district’s legal counsel is working with the Personnel Services Division to develop policies and procedures for employee tuberculosis testing and nondiscrimination compliance. Management Information Services (MIS) is working with the division to develop computer-based programs for keeping records regarding employee tuberculosis compliance.

One compliance area that has progressed to the initial implementation stage is development of employee position descriptions. The Certificated Applicant Tracking System is currently operative. The Classified Applicant Tracking System was expected to be operational the week of November 26-30, 2001. The Personnel Services Division retained the services of a Personnel Consultant in October 2001 to rewrite, revise and update all job descriptions for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance. The Personnel Services Division has reported that it is the district's intent to require any agreements for salary range adjustment to contain a corresponding agreement that the district may update the classification job description to reflect current duties. There is no evidence thus far that this will occur.

The Personnel Services Division has made definite strides in the area of utilization of technology. Working collaboratively with Management Information Services, it has reached nearly all its goals set out in the area of communication under the Management Plan for Strategic Priorities. Information Services will be moving forward with the installation of the Novell System in January 2002, as well as the rewiring of the Personnel Services Division building. In addition, the Personnel Services computers will be upgraded with recently purchased equipment and will be compatible with BiTech software. Technology training recently occurred (October 2001) on the newly installed applicant tracking and credential monitoring modules of the BiTech system. Beginning November 20, 2001, there will be operational in-service training on how to move through various screens and the necessary procedures to operate the new BiTech components. However, there was no documentation of a Personnel Services Division initiated staff development plan to assist and maintain computer skills and knowledge.

With the addition of the Applicant Tracking and Credential Monitoring modules to the BiTech system, the Personnel Services Division is moving closer to a computerized employee database system. However, the Personnel Services Division still has not developed a written plan of its technology objectives and needs, and lacks a vision of where it wants to be in the future.

The district has not completed negotiations with its classified supervisors and its administrator group in the development of new evaluation instruments. Effective supervision and evaluation needs to be recognized as part of the administrator/supervisor evaluation. The Personnel Services Division needs to monitor all employee evaluations on a regularly scheduled basis and report the results to Cabinet. The district has done some evaluation training with its administrators and supervisors. There is still a need for both a classified and a certificated evaluation handbook to be utilized in training programs.

The district followed an extensive process of contract language review prior to the start of 2001-2002 contract negotiations, which resulted in the Governing Board supporting several changes to the United Teachers of Richmond (UTR) and Local 1 contracts. The most significant areas for proposed changes are in employee selection, assignment and transfer. This contract review and proposal process is now fully in place and is sustainable.

The review of Personnel Management included the assessment of 24 professional and legal standards during the first six-month review period. The average rating of the assessment standards for this operational area has increased from 5.30 to 5.83 on a scale of 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

Pupil Achievement

This first six-month progress report examines the progress that the district has made toward addressing recommendations for 20 of the 63 standards that were reviewed as part of the initial Assessment and Improvement Plan (July 2001). The standards that were selected for this first six-month review represent a cross section of the FCMAT standards for pupil achievement, with some emphasis placed on planning processes.

The district has articulated a clear vision for pupil achievement and is effectively planning and acting to achieve its goals. An important factor contributing to progress in the pupil achievement area has been the development and introduction of goals and objectives for student learning that are aligned to the district's seven strategic priorities. The district has worked with the Stupski Foundation to begin the process of translating these goals into school based action plans. The focus of the district's three-day 2001-02 leadership advance workshop, which was attended by around 160 administrators, was to build district-wide understanding and leadership capacity to support these goals.

Evidence of pupil achievement can be measured through a variety of methods including standardized test scores, graduation rates, attendance rates, and disciplinary actions. Since the introduction of the Academic Performance Index (API) and SAT-9 standardized test, the district has shown some growth, but the majority of schools are well below the state and national average. In reviewing the changes in API scores from 2000 to 2001, 27 schools, or 56 percent, met their 2001 API growth target. Of the remaining schools, eight experienced growth, but it was not sufficient to meet growth targets and 13 did not meet growth targets. These changes are displayed in a table in the Pupil Achievement section of this report.

Over the past six months the district has made significant progress in defining its strategic direction and creating priorities to address its goals. As the district moves forward in planning and implementation it should consider the following:

- The district should develop intermediate goals and evaluation criteria to assess progress toward achieving its long-term goals.
- As new staff join the district, the district needs an efficient and effective method for providing training to support the district's priorities, goals, objectives, and action plans. This is especially important for new school site administrators.
- The district has done a good job of planning and developing standards and assessment tools in the areas of language arts and mathematics. Prior to beginning the process for other subjects, a clear plan should be developed and reviewed by the central office and school site administrators.

The district's ability to fully address the recommendations and improvement steps related to professional development are linked to its ability to negotiate changes in its collective bargaining agreements. The district should continue to involve union representatives in its visioning and decision-making processes to gain support to address necessary contract changes.

The review of Pupil Achievement included the assessment of 20 professional and legal standards during the first six-month review period. The average rating of the assessment standards for this operational area has increased from 2.76 to 3.45 on a scale of 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

Financial Management

The district is to be commended on the manner in which it has responded to the West Contra Costa USD Assessment and Improvement Plan (July 2001). A staff report was submitted to the WCC Governing Board by district staff to assist in the completion of this first six-month progress review of the Financial Management portion of the study. There has been significant progress as shown by the ratings in several areas, and staff should be commended for the success in these areas:

- Progress has been made in the development, with board involvement, of a district Collective Bargaining Agreement proposal. (16.1).
- Plans for the implementation of GASB 34 (Governmental Accounting Standards Bulletin 34) have been completed satisfactorily (7.5).
- The implementation of the SASI/XP student attendance software at all elementary school sites, and the associated staff training, indicates that the district is well on its way toward meeting this standard (11.1).
- Testing and implementation of a maintenance work order system will serve the district well (18.2).

There are three areas in the Financial Management area that need additional attention.

1. The development of policies and procedures for establishment of an Audit Committee or alternative solution has not yet been accomplished (1.2).
2. Fuel distribution at the Maintenance and Operations yard is not properly controlled (18.6).
3. The district is still hampered by the lack of computerization for many of the tasks that could be performed by Data Processing, but are still being performed manually (17.3).

The district staff has been most cooperative in addressing the standards that were being reviewed. The evidence and documents needed for review of the various items in the study were furnished promptly. The district has made progress in planning the implementation of many of the issues identified for the first six-month review. The degree of success of this planning stage will be determined during the next six-month review period. If the district is able to maintain the level of commitment and effort evidenced in this first six-month review, it will be well on its way to meeting the FCMAT standards.

The review of Financial Management included the assessment of 22 professional and legal standards during the first six-month review period. The average rating of the assessment standards for this operational area has increased from 4.38 to 4.68 on a scale of 10, with 10 the highest score possible.

Facilities Management

The West Contra Costa Unified School District has made 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. These two items have allowed the district to begin the planning process and to make improvements to the school facilities. Without Measure M, the district could not afford to modernize the majority of its campuses. Without the acquisition of the Master Architect, existing district staff could not process the volumes of paperwork necessary to keep on track to perform all of the construction and modernization.

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

- Development of a district safety plan
- Updating of the MSDS binders at all school sites
- DSA certification for more than two-thirds of the portable classrooms
- Hiring a Master Architect to coordinate all of the facility needs of the district

Some of the areas where the district has made improvement but to a lesser degree are in the areas of:

- Planned program maintenance system
- Replacement of class-size reduction portables
- Graffiti abatement

Money is the primary reason these three areas not progressing as markedly as the others. Without state funding to pay for the class size reduction facilities, the district, even with Measure M funding, cannot be expected to replace all of the class size reduction portables.

The graffiti abatement problem is not a situation that can be solved overnight. The problem is being reduced steadily by improved lighting and police patrols. Another step the district has taken to reduce graffiti and vandalism is a pilot program using exterior surveillance cameras to record trespassers. If this pilot program proves successful, the district is considering expanding the program when financially reasonable.

Throughout the discussion of the district's progress are references to Measure M funding. While the measure does provide \$150 million for school construction and renovation, it does not provide sufficient funding to meet all of the overdue facility needs of the district. Additional funding, either from local or state bond measures, will be needed to bring the district back to the standards that the students deserve.

The review of facilities management included the assessment of 17 professional and legal standards during the first six-month review period. The average rating of the assessment standards for this operational area has increased from 5.26 to 5.53 on a scale of 10, with 10 the highest score possible.