

# **SANTA MARIA HIGH SCHOOL**

## **A School Community in Transition**

### **SUMMARY**

The 2016-17 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) received several complaints about the educational practices and the work environment at Santa Maria High School (SMHS). The Jury focused its investigation on allegations of mismanagement of about \$16 million from a Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) state grant; on communication conflicts between the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District (District), site administrators and teachers; on concerns regarding school safety and on the implementation of anti-bullying procedures required by Assembly Bill 9 (Seth's Law).

The Jury found most concerns to be the result of an educational program in transition. The QEIA grant recordkeeping followed state accounting procedures and the funds were used according to the grant requirements.

Without a doubt, poor communication and conflicting educational practices existed between site administrators and teachers. The Jury found the conflicts to be associated with the new direction that the SMHS Principal, with the support of the District administration, had taken to address the unique needs of the student population. The introduction of the Common Core curriculum, schedule changes, and union contract-related issues exacerbated the conflicts.

To enhance safety and security, the school is surrounded by security fences and has strategically placed cameras. Additionally, the District has adopted procedures required to address bullying issues. These policies are published on the District website, and the "bully button" link for reporting incidents is on the District and SMHS websites.

The Jury found that relations between administrators and teachers are improving and encourages them to continue working together respectfully for the benefit of the students.

### **BACKGROUND**

Santa Maria High School is one of three comprehensive public high schools in the city of Santa Maria and surrounding area. Located in the heart of the city, it is the oldest high school in the Santa Maria Valley and is part of the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District, the oldest high school district in California.

In 2007, SMHS became a closed campus, meaning students are not allowed to leave school grounds for lunch. The only exception to this rule is for seniors with passing grades and no outstanding school debts.

The high school has a student body of 2,515, including 290 special education students. There are six administrators, 136 certificated teachers and counselors, and 87 support staff. The student

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population is 97 percent Hispanic, of which 38 percent are classified as English language learners. The current principal, a Santa Maria native, joined the school in 2010.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Jury visited the school, and interviewed teachers, Faculty Association (union) staff, and administrators from both SMHS and the District. The Jury also reviewed the QEIA financial audit, results from a union-sponsored teacher climate survey, and documents provided by various complainants. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation reports from March 3-6, 2013 and February 22-23, 2016, the school's Parent Handbook and the District's Seth's Law anti-bullying procedures and report form all provided valuable information.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The Jury narrowed its investigation to three areas of concern. The first related to the management of funds that came from a State of California QEIA grant. As outlined in the Principal's Message in the Student/Parent Handbook of 2013-14, the focus of this seven-year, multi-million dollar grant, that started in 2009, was "to improve student achievement, reduce class sizes in Math, English, Science and Social Sciences, to increase attendance, to provide a 300:1 ratio of students to counselors and to increase graduation rates." To achieve these goals, additional teachers and counselors were hired and portable classrooms added. As a result, the majority of the funds were expended on teacher and counselor salaries and lease fees for the additional portable classrooms. All funds were spent by June 30, 2016. The Jury determined that the funds had been spent in accordance with the provisions of the state grant and generally accepted accounting practices.

The second area of investigation concerned poor communication and conflict between administrators and teaching staff. In 2015 a district-wide climate survey was conducted by the Faculty Association. Out of the 136 members at SMHS, only 70 responded. Of these, 78.79 percent did not feel that they had a meaningful role in decision-making at the school, 66.66 percent did not feel supported by the school's administration and 56.06 percent did not feel valued by administration. Also, 55.38 percent of respondents thought that morale at the school had deteriorated in the previous year.

As indicated in the WASC Report of February 22-23, 2016, the change in the schedule from a block schedule to a traditional seven-period day, like the other two high schools, created conflict. The decision came from the district office to operate all three comprehensive high schools on the same schedule. Disagreement over the process of making the decision to change the schedule heightened tensions between the SMHS faculty, the school and district administrations.

Since arriving at the school in 2010, the principal has been working to change the culture of the school from being "teacher-centric" to being "student-centric" and currently is becoming a "community-centric" school. As stated in an article on transformative leadership, "SMHS is in the early stages of moving to an organizational culture that embraces transformative leadership

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through our understanding of, and work toward, cultural proficiency.”<sup>1</sup> This refocus has required teachers and staff to attend training sessions to become more culturally proficient. As evidenced through interviews, this has been met by resistance or failure to recognize the need for change.

Finally, the Jury reviewed the school’s safety and anti-bullying procedures. The school is surrounded by a tall security fence and there are cameras strategically placed around the campus. Most students must stay on campus during the school day. Moreover, the District has adopted anti-bullying policies to be implemented in each high school in the district. Both the SMHS and District websites have “bully buttons” on their home pages linking to forms for reporting incidents of bullying. The District and High School administrators have procedures in place to follow up on each report. In addition, the District’s 2016-17 Parent-Student Handbook, in English and Spanish, includes bullying under its section on Discipline Policy outlining reasons for suspension or expulsion.

Additionally, the California National Guard (CNG) has been presenting a program, called “We All Rise Guardians – Declaring W.A.R. on Bullying One Student at a Time,” at SMHS for several years. The W.A.R. Guardians program is specially designed to deal with all aspects of bullying and targets the specifics of the four major types: verbal, physical, social and cyber. The CNG brochure states that, “by using their awareness program and rehabilitation program, the school can specifically target the four types of bullying by turning the offender into a defender.” The CNG provides this program during a school assembly each year, as well as a six-week program especially for students identified by the school as needing additional training. The Jury concluded that SMHS has adopted adequate procedures and practices in accordance with Assembly Bill 9, Seth’s Law.

### **CONCLUSION**

The 2016-2017 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury observed strained relations between the teachers and school leadership emanating from changes to the union contract, introduction of the Common Core curriculum and procedural and schedule changes made by the District and the school’s principal, but posits that poor communication was a two-way problem. However, the new school schedule and curriculum are now in place. A new union contract was negotiated in 2016 and there was also a change in Faculty Association leadership that year. Consequently, it appeared to the Jury that relations between school administrators and teachers are improving and encourages them to continue working together respectfully for the benefit of all students and the community.

Under *California Penal Code §933 and §933.05*, this activity report does not require a response.

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<sup>1</sup>Flores, Peter and Domingues, Joseph. “Leading from the Strawberry Fields: Transformative Leadership in Santa Maria.” *Association of California School Administrators Leadership*, January/February 2017, pp 18-19.