

San Joaquin County Grand Jury



TRACY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT Student Truancy Report 2008/2009 San Joaquin County Grand Jury Case No. 11-08C

SUMMARY

Contradictory reports on student truancy rates were submitted to state agencies by Tracy Unified School District for the fiscal year 2007-2008. The district reported a Truancy Rate of 22.73% to the California Department of Education (CDE), while reporting a Truancy Rate of 11% to the State Controller's Office (SCO).

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The 2008/2009 San Joaquin County Grand Jury became aware of inconsistent Truancy Rate reports that were submitted to two separate State agencies by Tracy Unified School District. The Grand Jury sent a letter to the district with a request for clarification of the differentials contained in the truancy reports, to which the district responded.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Review of report documentation
Contact with school district officials

BACKGROUND

Tracy Unified School District (TUSD) serves a large community in the heart of California's Central Valley, serving over 17,000 students at 17 schools.

State of California Truancy

California Education Code 48260 (a) defines a *truant* as any pupil who is absent from school without valid excuse more than three (3) days in one school year or is tardy or absent for more than any thirty (30) minute period during the school day without valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof. Education Code 48260.5 requires school districts, upon a pupil's initial classification as a truant, to notify parents or guardians by first-class mail or other reasonable means of their child's truancy.

Any school district (K-12) or county office of education that incurs increased costs as a result of this mandate is eligible to claim reimbursement of these costs. In accordance with Government Code Section 17561, eligible claimants may submit claims to the State Controller's Office (SCO) for reimbursement of state mandated cost programs.

Eligible districts will be reimbursed on a unit cost basis for an *initial* notice of truancy to the parents or guardian regarding their child. The unit cost rate set by the State for fiscal year 2007-2008 was \$17.28 per initial notification.

Claims for the cost of the initial notification to parents must be made to the SCO and they must be filed in a timely manner. The figures given in the following reports (see Findings) refer to the *initial* notifications.

Habitual Truancy

School districts are required to classify a pupil as a *habitual truant* upon the pupil's fourth truancy within the same school year. Section 48262 of the Education Code defines a habitual truant and states that no pupil shall be deemed a habitual truant, unless school districts make a conscientious effort to hold at least one conference with the pupil's parent or guardian and the pupil.

The cost of labor, supplies, and services incurred for *this* mandate is reimbursable when a review of the school records are made to verify that the pupil has been reported as a truant at least three times during the same school year, when the school district has made a conscientious effort to schedule a conference with the pupil's parent or guardian and, when the pupil has been classified as a habitual truant whether or not the effort resulted in a conference.

Only actual costs may be claimed. They must be traceable and supported by source documents that show the validity of such costs, when they were incurred and their relationship to the reimbursable activities. A source document is a document created at or near the same time the actual cost was incurred for the event or activity in question. Source documents may include, but are not limited to, employee time records or time logs, sign-in sheets, invoices and receipts.

After submission and review, the claim is subject to audit by the State Controller's Office (SCO). On-site audits will be conducted as deemed necessary and all documentation to support actual costs claimed shall be made available to the SCO on request. The SCO may audit to obtain reasonable assurance concerning the eligibility of expenditures claimed for reimbursement.

On July 17, 2007 the California State Controller's Office (SCO) submitted a letter to California school districts which referred to the recent passage of California Assembly Bill 1698 "Fixing the Truancy Mandate". In this letter, the Controller said, "AB 1698 will ensure that all schools who notify parents when three unexcused absences accrue are appropriately reimbursed for their efforts."

School districts are not required to report truancy records to the State Controller unless the district is filing a claim for reimbursement of costs.

CONCLUSION

Truancy Rates

Truancy reporting, as defined, is a moving target and schools vary widely in applying the law, especially as it relates to tardiness and period absences. The truancy rate, like the drop-out rate, compels schools and districts to make negative reports on themselves.

Truancy prevention starts with an effective school board policy on attendance supervision and a process for investigating school attendance problems. Vigilant supervision is vital to the learning and achievement of children on the margins of the educational system.

Inaccurate Reporting of Truancy

According to a California Department of Education (CDE) report, “Most school districts are now funded based on their attendance, excused or not. But truancy is poorly policed in many regions where schools fail to track it accurately. Districts report the data themselves and we do not audit the information.”

High truancy rates can be embarrassing to a school district. *Average Daily Attendance* money (the funds doled out by the SCO for each child who attends class) is generally 80% of a district’s revenue. Reporting a lower rate to the CDE than what is reported to the SCO could mean the district wants the money, but they don’t want to look bad when the community views the public information.

As the State School Attendance Review Board (SARB) Chair, David Kopperud has stated, “I think the issue of the truancy rate is crucial to the mission of the SARB. Until the truancy rate and dropout rate are accurate measures, we cannot expect policymakers to take the matter seriously.”

Truancy rates must be clearly and accurately defined. Truancy has been identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation or educational failure. Therefore, it is important for a school district to be forthcoming and accurate in the reporting of truancy.

FINDINGS

1. Tracy Unified School District (TUSD) submitted the following truancy report to the California Department of Education (CDE) for fiscal year 2007-2008:

Student enrollment	17,235
Truancy notifications	3,918
Truancy rate.....	22.73%

The district submitted a Truancy Rate of 22.73% to the California Department of Education. Those interested in truancy levels for school districts rely on this information, as it is posted on the CDE website.

2. Tracy Unified School District (TUSD) submitted the following truancy report to the State Controller’s Office (SCO) for the fiscal year 2007-2008:

Student enrollment.....	17,235
Truancy notifications.....	1,922
Truancy rate.....	11%

Initial notices of truancy reported to the State Controller’s Office are reimbursable under state mandated cost programs. TUSD reported a Truancy Rate of 11% to the SCO, which resulted in a potential claim of \$33,212 for State funds.

3. The truancy numbers that were submitted were compiled by attendance clerks from each school that reported. The numbers were given to Clear Vue, an outside consultant, for subsequent reporting to the state agencies.

Nine of the district’s schools submitted truancy numbers to the consultant and eight schools did not. Therefore, truancy information from the eight schools never reached state agencies. This confusion and lack of oversight led to under-reporting to both the CDE and the SCO.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Tracy Unified School District to correct the inaccurate truancy reports made for the 2007-2008 fiscal year.
2. Tracy Unified School District Department of Student Services reorganize the manner of reporting truancy information.
3. Tracy Unified School District accurately report truancy data to state agencies and to the public.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

Pursuant to Section 933.05 of the California Penal Code:

The Tracy Unified School District Board of Trustees shall report to the Presiding Judge of the San Joaquin County Superior Court, in writing and within 90 days of publication of this report, with a response as follows:

As to each finding in the report a response indicating one of the following:

- a. The respondent agrees with the finding.
- b. The respondent disagrees with the finding, with an explanation of the reasons therefore.

As to each recommendation, a response indicating one of the following:

- a. The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary of the action taken.
- b. The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be with a time frame for implementation.
- c. The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation of the scope of analysis and a time frame not to exceed six (6) months.
- d. The recommendation will not be implemented, with an explanation therefore.

