

VENTURA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



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SUPERINTENDENT

September 30, 1998

RECEIVED
VENTURA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

SEP 30 1998

OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDING JUDGE

Hon. Charles W. Campbell, Presiding Judge
VENTURA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT
800 South Victoria Ave.
Ventura, California 93009

Re: Response to 1997-1998 Grand Jury Report
"Vocational Training for Displaced Workers"

Dear Judge Campbell:

Pursuant to the July 15, 1998 direction of Richard Dean, County Clerk, the Ventura Unified School District (the "District"), Superintendent of Schools Joseph P. Spirito, Ed.D., the District's Ventura Adult and Continuing Education Center ("Adult Ed"), and Adult Ed's Technology Development Center ("TDC") jointly respond to the Grand Jury's July 1, 1998 report entitled "Vocational Training for Displaced Workers" ("the Report").

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Jury Report provided the District with no useful information about its TDC program. The Report is a mishmash of misinformation, misunderstandings about information, and outright misstatements of fact. The District is shocked that so little care went into making the Report.

Those who compiled the Report knew little about the field of vocational training to begin with and did very little to educate themselves. Instead, they listened to a few disgruntled students, most of whom left the program. Very little was done to determine the validity of the student complaints or ask for TDC responses to specific complaints these students had raised. The two grand jurors who compiled the Report spent no more than three hours at Adult Ed and TDC. When the Grand Jury provided its draft of the Report to TDC for comment, it failed to provide the five pages of conclusions in the final Report. As a result, TDC, Adult Ed, and the District had no opportunity to correct the Grand Jury mistakes and misstatements of fact in those conclusions prior to the Report being published.

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After the Report was published, the District duplicated the Grand Jury investigation and researched the same questions about TDC that the Grand Jury has now published its Report about. This letter presents accurate information concerning TDC which the Grand Jury could easily have obtained had it exercised more skill, diligence, and candor during its investigation. In looking into what the Grand Jury wrote about in its Report, the root of the problem in that Report becomes apparent. On one hand, the Grand Jury spent only three hours at TDC and Adult Ed. It spent no further time asking TDC or Adult Ed questions about what it was investigating. On the other hand, TDC and Adult Ed spent over 200 man hours of time researching the same issues raised in the Report.

FACTS

Adult Ed and TDC: Ventura Unified School District's Adult Ed serves 8,000 to 9,000 students per year. Technology Development Center (TDC) is one of the District's Adult Ed Programs. TDC students are people who have either lost their jobs, never had a job, or were injured at work and must retrain for other jobs. TDC programs last from 9 to 36 weeks. Students are not merely taught job skills. TDC builds self confidence, self esteem, and job readiness. 300 to 500 students per year graduate from TDC.

TDC prepares its students for entry level jobs in the fields of study they chose. These fields include secretarial positions, working with computers in web page design and administration, account clerking, computer repair, computer networking, multi-media animation, customer service training, personnel secretary or clerk, pharmacy technician, physical therapy aide, medical records clerk, medical insurance billing, receptionist, office assistant, desk top publishing, general billing technician, and more.

Some TDC graduates have not had jobs in several years. Yet, of the students who graduate and actually seek employment after graduation, approximately 95% are successful in landing jobs. This is an excellent rate of success. The County of Ventura's Workforce Development Division, which assists people seeking employment to obtain job training, considers a job training program successful if it is able to find employment for only 70% of its graduates. Ninety-five per cent of the people graduating from TDC are satisfied customers. The biggest complaint on student exit evaluations is that students wanted to stay in the program longer.

Government Monitoring of Adult Ed and TDC: Adult Ed and TDC have been screened and reviewed by trained experts in adult education to determine whether Adult Ed and TDC offer the public appropriate programs. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges spent over 120 man hours reviewing the program on site, plus additional work off site and concluded that the programs were eligible for the highest possible accreditation. President Bush and his U.S. Department of Education declared Adult Ed to be one of his model schools for his

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"America 2000." The Veteran's Administration yearly reviews TDC programs to determine whether they are of the quality required to qualify for G.I. benefits and handicap veteran's programs.

Federal authorities review the Adult Ed and TDC programs yearly to determine whether they qualify for Job Training Partnership Act funding and Workforce Development Division funding. Private insurance companies provide regular quality monitoring for their clients with their adjusters and counselors frequently coming to the campus, as do rehabilitation counselors for the California Department of Rehabilitation. Students themselves provide feedback to staff on a daily basis as well as through exit evaluations.

All of these means of quality monitoring constitute a considerable amount of time spent by individuals who possess special expertise, training, or experience in reviewing adult ed and technology training programs. Each of these organizations which has reviewed Adult Ed and TDC has given rave reviews for Adult Ed and TDC.

The Complainants: This Spring, five or so multi-media animation students complained to TDC that they did not want to follow TDC's animation curriculum. Instead, they wanted to use TDC's specialized animation computers to develop a project of their own so they could market it themselves to a production or animation company. TDC explained to these students that there were reasons for the structured scope and sequence of the multi-media animation curriculum. Students who complete that curriculum end up proficient in the essential skills necessary to be employed as animation technicians. What the students were asking to do would have been "hit or miss" for obtaining those essential skills. If the students were allowed to create their own curriculum, they might have finished their project, but they would have had gaps in their understanding of computer animation. Whether they would be employable would be questionable. Four of these students dropped out of the program when TDC remained steadfast with its curriculum.

Apparently some of these students complained to the Grand Jury because they did not get their way. It is believed that these were the people who complained to the grand jury because the investigation began shortly after they left the program; the investigators asked questions which could easily have come out of the mouths of these students.

Grand Jury Visit: A short time after the four students dropped the program, around early May, 1998, two members of the Ventura County Grand Jury visited Adult Ed and TDC. They made two visits, spending less than three hours at TDC visiting with people in charge of the program. They seemed amiable enough but would not share what their specific concerns were with TDC. They said there had been "complaints," but they would not tell TDC people what the complaints were about. Had the Grand Jurors informed TDC what the specific complaints were, TDC could easily have shared the depth of information presented in this letter and avoided

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being maligned by the Report.

Now after being presented with the published Grand Jury Report, it appears to the District that the basis of the complaints were class size, teaching methods, tuition prices, job placement, and whether TDC's programs were comparable to other job training programs.

Preliminary Two Page Report: A few weeks after the Grand Jury visit, on May 18th, the Grand Jury sent a two page report to Adult Ed and TDC for its review and comment. The information on the two pages seemed accurate enough. Nothing controversial or critical was raised in the two pages, so the Adult Ed principal informed the Grand Jury as much.

The Final Seven Page Report: On June 29th, the Grand Jury presented the District with its final Report. This Report was seven pages long. The additional five pages had a number of additional so called "facts" which were not a part of the May 18th draft Report. Prior to June 29th no one at the District, Adult Ed, or TDC had an opportunity to fairly present TDC's story to the Grand Jury before the final Report was printed and ready for distribution.

In reading the new five pages to the Report, it is apparent that the Grand Jury author of the Report fairly much ignored what TDC people had to say about TDC programs and went by the unverified word of a few disgruntled students. In doing so, the Report never mentions the small number of students who were complaining (four dropouts compared with the 300 to 500 who successfully complete the program each year).

The District Objects: Immediately after receiving the Report, on June 29th and June 30th, the District contacted County Counsel and the Grand Jury to ask that the Report be withdrawn. At the very least, TDC and the District asked that the Report be redone so that it could be accurate. The basis for these requests was that information in the Report was inaccurate, defamatory, and that TDC never had an opportunity to respond to the charges raised against it. This request fell on deaf ears. The Report was already in the 1997-98 Final Report book, and it was supposedly too late to pull it.

RESPONSES

Attached is a copy of the Report with sections numbered where the biggest problems with the Report exist. I shall address each of those items in the order they appear in the Report. While we address the numbered items as the most serious flaws in the Report, I also see flaws and mistakes in other areas of the Report which I will not discuss due to time limitations.

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(1) Class Staffing

Criticisms: The Report alleges that TDC has classes with one teacher and one paraeducator and later indicates that there are 28 to 30 students in each class. The Report then states that the approach has certain serious failings: (a) Students have problems learning basic concepts from workbooks; (b) Students sometimes have to wait a considerable time for staff assistance; and one student who asked for help was told to work out the problem himself, which he did, but it took three days to do so.

Response:

Staff-Student Ratio: The Report misrepresents that the TDC staffing ratio is one staff member for each fourteen or fifteen students. In fact the ratio is one staff member per seven or eight students. There are approximately 14 to 16 students in each TDC class, not 28 to 30 students.

Use of Workbooks: Structured, self-paced program workbooks are one of the tools that are used in the TDC program to teach basic concepts. They are not the only tool. Direct instruction is also used with both small and large groups. Staff members continually answer students' questions in group and individualized settings. Students engage in programmed learning in TDC because they begin the TDC classes at different starting dates. Self-directed, programmed workbooks are effective tools in situations where every student is at a different point in the curriculum.

According to mainstream and well established authorities in education, adults learn best on an individual basis and at their own pace. TDC adopts such an individual approach because of this, as well as to accommodate the differing start dates for students, and because TDC and Adult Ed have learned that students who are able to work independently are more likely to be successful on the job.

Student Wait for Assistance: Students rarely have to wait long for assistance. TDC has long established special techniques for making certain that students may obtain staff assistance when they need it. Some instructors have the student place a red cup on top of the computer monitor, or write their name on the white board, or write their name on a special clip board on the instructor's desk. The result is that with one staff member per seven or eight students, questions are normally answered very quickly. Had the Grand Jurors not believed this they could easily have spent time in a TDC classroom and verified as much through their own observation.

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Student Anecdote: TDC doubts the veracity of the anecdote about the student who allegedly was made to work for three days to solve a particular problem. Looking for grains of truth in the story, it would be consistent in training a person to repair computers to have them attempt to solve problems on their own after they had reached a certain level of proficiency. That would be what they would have to do on the job. However, TDC staff are available to assist students working through such problems, and while not giving the student the answer, the staff member would help the student figure out how to solve the problem on his own.

Conclusion: When the grand jurors met with TDC and Adult Ed staff, they did not explain what they were investigating or looking into. TDC and Adult Ed was never confronted with the allegations set forth in the Conclusions section of the Report and were therefore not able to correct the misimpressions that the grand jurors were receiving from the few students who were interviewed.

If a Grand Jury is after the truth, it should at least present its conclusions to the entity being investigated for a response before the report is published. In the present situation the Grand Jury merely shared the first two pages of the Report ahead of time and failed to share the remainder of the Report where the "Conclusions" are set forth.

(2) College Credit:

Criticism: TDC does not provide college credit for its courses.

Response: This is not surprising because TDC is not a college or university and therefore does not provide college credit. Nor does it advertise itself as providing college credit. No adult education facility provides such credit. Why not criticize colleges and universities for failing to provide the kind of job training that TDC provides?

Students come to TDC to obtain skills that will allow them to enter the job market quickly, not to earn college degrees. If a student wants college credit for TDC courses, a student may request that such credit be allowed at the college or university he or she later attends.

Conclusion: A more sophisticated investigation would have realized that colleges and adult ed technology training facilities are different kinds of schools and provide different kinds of benefits. Had the Grand Jurors asked about this, Adult Ed people could have educated them. Instead, the Grand Jury "hid the ball" from Adult Ed in its investigation and naively accepted what less than 3% of TDC students were saying.

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(3) Discussions Regarding Student Options:

Criticism: The Report alleges that Workforce Development Division (WDD) personnel did not properly counsel students and discuss their placement options.

Response: Although TDC and Adult Ed people are not involved in the WDD meetings with prospective students, we find that the allegation lacks credibility. The WDD staff are highly professional and want what is best for their clients. The handful of students who complained misrepresented other facts as demonstrated throughout this response. We believe they misrepresented their contacts with WDD.

The fact is that WDD requires programs which efficiently put their clients back to work in as short a period of time as possible. If WDD refers clients to programs which are unable to accomplish this, then WDD may lose government funding. The reason WDD has sent so many students to TDC in the past is that TDC has been reliable in turning out students who can obtain jobs in a short period of time.

Conclusion: TDC and WDD are professionals at what they do. When they are criticized, they should be given professional respect by being allowed to know what the specific nature of the criticisms are.

(4) Comparison of WEB Skills Classes:

Criticism: The Report attempted to discredit TDC courses by comparing those courses to supposedly similar courses elsewhere. The first comparison was between the TDC Computer Applications/Web Administrator class to Simi Adult Vocational School's Web Designer Class.

Response: Apples and orange juice. The TDC class trains web administrators, while the Simi class trains web designers. Comparing the work of the two would be like comparing the work CPAs and bookkeepers do. The two classes are not the same and cannot be validly compared. On the one hand, the Simi class develops student skills in various specific computer software programs such as Windows 95, Internet Explorer, PowerPoint 97, etc. The aim of the Simi class is to teach students how to design web pages for the internet. The Simi class is a very excellent class at what it aims to do, to design web pages. But all it does is prepare the student to be a web design technician. On the other hand, the TDC class prepares the student to be a web administrator and to be the boss of web technicians such as those who complete the Simi class.

Conclusion: Again, forthright discussion of the Grand Jurors' concerns with TDC would have resulted in an understanding of what TDC does.

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(5) Comparison of Legal Assistant and Paralegal Classes:

Criticism: TDC's course for legal secretaries does not provide as much training as college paralegal courses.

Response: Why should a secretarial program be compared to a paralegal program? Had the Grand Jurors raised this issue with Adult Ed and TDC, we could have explained that the legal assistant class trains people to be legal secretaries at an entry level position, while the college courses used for comparison are for more advanced training to become a paralegal.

Conclusion: Common courtesy and common sense would have allowed TDC to clear up misunderstandings prior to the final Report being published. Apparently the Grand Jurors mistakenly thought that legal assistants and paralegals are the same.

(6) TDC Tuition Rates:

Criticism: TDC classes cost more than community college courses.

Response: While both TDC and community colleges offer good programs to the public, TDC offers a program which provides employment for its students in an expedited manner, using the latest and best technology and software, and providing an extremely low staff to student ratio. TDC also has a better job placement process than community colleges. Such a program is worth the extra expense.

Ninety-five percent of TDC students are through with their program in 26 weeks, while community college students may have to attend school for up to two years before completing a program. TDC students can begin the program on any business day of the week, while community college students must wait for a semester to begin to enter a community college program. The equipment, technology, and software which TDC has is far in advance of what community colleges offer and costs more. TDC updates its technology constantly. All of this is necessary to provide a first class program for students. And all of this costs more than what a community college program would cost.

TDC students are job-ready much faster than students from community college programs. TDC students also have a higher earning potential. This is because TDC students spend more time under supervised training at their computers than community college students do. TDC students spend a minimum of 35 hours a week minimum using computer equipment and other resources mastering what they will need to know in the business world. Community college students only spend a few hours a week working with technology under the supervision of an instructor.

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(7) Teaching Methods:

Criticism: TDC uses a teaching method called "andragogy, a self-directed learning approach for adults that has been highly criticized." (Report at page 6, paragraph 3.)

Response: "Highly criticized" by whom, the four students who dropped out of the TDC program? In fact, andragogy is the standard, mainstream method for teaching adults and is the basic model for adult education programs nationwide. Andragogy relies on educational research concerning how adults learn best and has the following components. First, adult students learn at their own pace. With the learning pace controlled by the student, the student is allowed to master one skill before moving on to another. Students do not simply move on to another skill without mastering fundamental skills simply because a teacher's lesson plan for the entire class says it is time. With the andragogical approach, students are more likely to master the skills they are supposed to learn.

Second, learning occurs through a highly structured program in such a manner that the student learns basic skills at the beginning which become the foundation for future skills. Considerable thought goes into determining which skills need to be learned and in what order for the most efficient and long lasting learning. Students are not merely passively taught skills, they are required to use the skills they are learning all along the way in order to demonstrate mastery over what they are learning.

Third, staff-student ratio is low so that students may obtain assistance quickly when they need it. Individual students do not waste time listening to lectures or listening to an instructor answer other students' questions. When TDC students have a question, they receive the answer to that question quickly and are then able to move on.

Conclusion: In an exhaustive research on the internet regarding andragogy, we were unable to find one reference to andragogy being "highly criticized," as alleged in the Report, or even criticized at all. The internet research confirmed that TDC is using the best approach for adults.

The students who complained were not as interested in learning the skills TDC had to offer as they were interested in developing their own software package which they would market. They may have been slowed down in going after their goal by being required to adhere to the TDC approach. TDC makes no apology for this. Its facility exists to train students thoroughly in the skills necessary for meaningful employment. Students who do not agree with that goal should go elsewhere, as most of the complaining students ultimately did.

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(8) TDC Job Placement Success:

Criticism: According to a fair reading of the Report, Adult Ed and TDC lied to the Grand Jury about its job placement success.

Response: TDC told the Grand Jurors that 95% of its students who graduate and seek jobs actually find employment. TDC also informed the Grand Jurors that not all of its graduates actually seek employment, and some simply disappear. Some do not seek work for medical reasons, due to disability, due to moving out of the area, retirement, or to continue their education with additional course work elsewhere. TDC loses track of those who leave the area but believes that many of them leave to accept employment or additional education elsewhere.

After the Grand Jury Report was published, TDC double checked its job placement figures verified that the 95% figure it provided the Grand Jury with was accurate. Those double-checked job placement figures for recent TDC graduates are as follows: (1) For 1996-97 graduates: 96.2% of those seeking employment found employment; (2) For 1997-98 graduates: as of the September 23, 1998, 90.9% of those seeking employment have found work. Based on past experience, that figure will continue growing as the most recently graduated students find employment. It takes at least until November 1st for end of the fiscal year job placement figures to become final and solid. Adult Ed and TDC are confident that the 1997-98 figures will again be above 95% in another month.

Conclusion: Fundamental fairness and common decency would have had the Grand Jury inform TDC that it doubted the 95% employment figure so that TDC could respond.

(9) Software Used:

Criticism: TDC allegedly uses out-of-date software in its animation training.

Response: The opposite is true. Had the Grand Jurors done more than listen to a few disgruntled students, the Grand Jurors would have learned that TDC is one of the leaders in digital and animation technology for schools in Southern California. TDC obtains new software as fast as texts, manuals, and teaching materials become available for such software. TDC is two to three years ahead of business with its technology and software; two to three years ahead of public high schools; at least six months ahead of other adult schools; and is generally ahead of community colleges. In fact, teachers from institutions such as California Polytechnical University at Pomona have called Adult Ed for advice on what kinds of technology to obtain.

Conclusion: Why was Adult Ed and TDC never allowed to explain this to the Grand Jurors prior to publication of the Report? Why were a few disgruntled students, who lack the training and expertise to provide valid opinions on the matter, believed instead of TDC people?

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REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Report makes three recommendations for the District, which based on the foregoing says more about the inadequacy of the investigation than it does about anything the District should be concerned with regarding TDC. Those recommendations were:

(1) Closely scrutinize all statistics, including placement statistics submitted by TDC. The District has done this and in doing so verified that TDC was accurate regarding job placement figures.

(2) Re-evaluate TDC's teaching approach to be more responsive to students' individual needs. TDC's teaching approach is more responsive to students' individual needs than any other teaching approach available.

(3) Keep TDC's student ratio low as stated in the TDC catalog. TDC's teaching ratio is and has been low as stated in the catalog.

CONCLUSION

The information published by the Grand Jury has damaged TDC and Adult Ed with one of its most important clients, WDD. During July and August, 1997, WDD sent TDC 27 new students. After the Report was released on July 1st, that number of students has dried up. In July and August, 1998, WDD only sent one student.

If we deserved the criticism, we would have nothing to complain about. Nor could we complain if we were allowed to respond to the charges against us before they were published. But Adult Ed and TDC do not deserve the criticism or failure of the Grand Jury to allow the most basic principle of fundamental fairness and due process to take place--being able to answer specific charges or conclusions before damaging misrepresentations are published.

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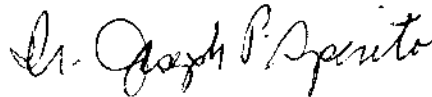
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County grand juries serve an important watch-dog function over governmental entities. The power placed in the Grand Jury can also do great harm to the innocent if not handled properly. In order for the Ventura County Grand Jury to serve the public in its watch dog function, more care must go into its investigations than went into this one. Grand jurors must receive better training and have better supervision in order to avoid damaging other fine programs such as TDC.

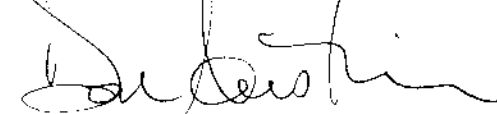
Yours Truly,

VENTURA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



Joseph P. Spirito, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

VENTURA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



Donald F. Austin
General Counsel

encl.

cc: Clerk of Board Ventura Unified School District
Richard Dean, County Clerk
Grand Jury, c/o Ventura County Jury Services
Work Development Division
Barry Tronstad, Principal Ventura Adult and Continuing Education
Board Members, Ventura Unified School District

Susan K. Lacey, County Supervisor
John Flynn, County Supervisor
Kathy Long, County Supervisor
Judy Mikels, County Supervisor
Frank Schillo, County Supervisor