

San Rafael Schools' Maintenance, Operations & Transportation Department April 27, 2001

Summary

In late 1999, the San Rafael Elementary and High School Districts (the district) 1 hired a Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) 2 to conduct a management review of the district's Maintenance, Operations and Transportation Department (MOT). The Grand Jury reviewed the recommendations published in the FCMAT report to determine if the recommendations had been implemented and whether they were effective.

With the exception of the recommendations for additional grounds positions and additional custodians, the Grand Jury determined that the district had implemented the FCMAT recommendations. MOT has been restructured, work-order tracking is operational, tools and equipment have been inventoried, vehicle maintenance is outsourced, and alarm systems have been upgraded. In general, school personnel said that MOT's performance has improved in the past year. The Grand Jury concludes that the FCMAT recommendations have been effectively implemented.

The Grand Jury believes, however, that the district should provide the funds necessary to hire additional custodians and grounds people. Preventative maintenance and general upkeep are limited because custodial and ground crews appear to be understaffed.

Meanwhile, the position of assistant director of MOT remains vacant. The person who formerly held that position hired, trained and managed the custodians. The assistant director also participated in disciplinary action involving the custodians. Currently, training has all but ceased and, in the elementary schools, the custodians are under the directions of school principals. Those administrators receive little guidance or help in directing the custodians. The Grand Jury believes that the assistant director position should be reinstated to restore the guidance once available for custodians.

Background

In the spring of 2000, the district disclosed that MOT had been the focus of a district-initiated investigation that was characterized by the news media as a probe of "widespread mismanagement and misconduct" within the department.

At the onset of the investigation, two employees resigned. As a result of the investigation, two other employees resigned after having been placed on administrative leave and three other employees received 30-day suspensions. While the investigation was underway, the district hired FCMAT to conduct a management review of MOT.

The Grand Jury decided to review FCMAT recommendations regarding MOT to determine whether they had been implemented and, if so, whether they were effective.

According to FCMAT (see *FCMAT Draft, Management Review, San Rafael City Schools, November 11, 1999* page 1) the district specifically requested that FCMAT "conduct a study of the Maintenance, Operations and Transportation Department to include a review of:

- The department's organization structure and staffing for maintenance and custodial functions to determine its adequacy and appropriateness;
- The department's operational policies and procedures to determine efficiencies and economics where appropriate;
- The communications between the department and sites concerning work order status;
- The cost effectiveness and efficiency of the district's security systems;
- The cost effectiveness of contracting out some maintenance services; and
- The effectiveness of the department's inventory control and vehicle purchase program."

Methodology

The Grand Jury analyzed FCMAT’s draft report on the San Rafael schools and interviewed a FCMAT official. Additionally, jury members interviewed district administrators, principals, assistant principals, teachers, custodians and MOT employees. Jurors made visits to the MOT yard, a high school, a middle school and five elementary schools.

Discussion

The FCMAT recommendations and the Grand Jury appraisal of the status of those recommendations are listed below:

FCMAT Organization and Staffing

Recommendations	G.J. Appraisal
1. Restructure MOT to reflect:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designation of three lead positions; one each for maintenance, operations and grounds; 	implemented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designation of journeyman-level trade positions within the maintenance staff; 	implemented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • addition of three grounds positions; 	see next section
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assignment of two custodians (one daytime, one to each elementary school); 	see next section
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reallocation of assistant director (MOT) and mechanic positions. 	see A below
2. Purchase packaged software program for work-order tracking.	see B below
3. Inventory tools and equipment.	implemented
4. Outsource vehicle maintenance and repair to city or county vendors.	implemented
5. Evaluate practice of obtaining vehicles from CalTrans.	see C below
6. Continue contracting for herbicide application and major tree trimming; consider contracting for play court and parking lot sweeping.	undetermined

[Back to the Top](#)

- A. The assistant director position is vacant; the mechanic position was reassigned within the department.
- B. Previously purchased software upgrade reported to be fully utilized; work-order tracking underway; however, all schools apparently cannot be linked with the new system.
- C. The district no longer purchases used vehicles from CalTrans. In 1999, the district purchased four new vehicles from private dealerships; each vehicle has a maintenance agreement for 75,000 miles

or 5 years. District plans provide for the purchase of two new vehicles a year.

FCMAT Operations Recommendations

G.J. Appraisal

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Develop and implement routine preventive maintenance programs | see D below |
| 2. Develop and request proposals for new and updated alarm system program. | see E below |
| 3. Review (with MOT) the process and procedure concerning after-school and weekend facility use by the community: | |
| ○ guarantee proper and adequate notice of facility use; | see F below |
| ○ guarantee appropriate custodial supervision; | see F below |
| ○ guarantee fees are consistent with costs; | see F below |
| ○ guarantee tracking and reporting of "usage" and "fee" payments; | see F below |
| ○ guarantee annual review and assessment of facilities' use and effect of facilities. | see F below |
| 4. Conduct routine department meetings. | implemented |
| 5. Develop teamwork, training and cross training. | work in progress |
| 6. Ensure evaluation of employees' performance. | implemented |

D. The district reported some preventative maintenance; however, the practice generally appears to be unchanged.

E. Fire alarm systems were reported to have been upgraded, or are on schedule for replacement; voter approval of a bond initiative should help finance an upgrade of the security alarm system.

- F. Policies regarding the use of facilities by outside groups are said to have been rewritten and will be proposed to the school board in the near future.

Grounds Positions in the San Rafael Schools

(see "[Organization and Staffing Recommendations](#)" above)

FCMAT recommended that the district add three additional grounds positions. The administration responded by declaring that there was no money in the budget for the additions and that no money had been requested. On the basis of the comments from the administration, it would appear that the district had not given serious attention to the recommendation. The Grand Jury believes the district should reevaluate its position.

Custodians in the San Rafael Elementary (K-5) Schools

(see "Organization and Staffing Recommendations" above)

In its report, FCMAT recommended that custodial staffing in the elementary schools be increased to provide the equivalent of both a "day" and "afternoon/evening" position at all school sites. FCMAT found that the "staffing level is not adequate to provide full coverage of the school day and a minimum level of custodial care in the classrooms and common areas."

There are seven schools in the San Rafael elementary school district. One school, Gallinas, also contains middle school classes. Because of the extra students, Gallinas has two custodians. The remaining six schools are K-5. Each of those schools is assigned one full-time custodian. One of the six K-5 sites, Laurel Dell School, has a custodian who is assigned to it for three hours in the morning every school day and who then works for five hours each afternoon at one of the other five schools. Laurel Dell effectively has three-eighths of a custodian and each of the other five schools has one and one-eighth custodians. 3

At the beginning of this inquiry, the Grand Jury was told there was no money in the budget for additional custodians and that none had been requested. Toward the end of the inquiry, the Grand Jury was told that the addition of custodians was "on the list" and that the administration would be asking for funds to finance the undertaking.

Custodial Needs In the San Rafael Elementary (K-5) Schools

San Rafael elementary schools have an average of 332 students per custodian. In other words, one custodian cleans up after 332 pupils every school day. That one custodian cleans classrooms and restrooms, libraries and multipurpose rooms. That one custodian picks up trash indoors and out. That one custodian sets up and takes down tables and benches for breakfasts and lunches. (And, of course, that one custodian must clean those tables and benches.) That one custodian also "sets up" and "takes down" for school assemblies and special events. That one custodian sweeps halls and corridors and parking lots. That one custodian tends to the needs of the faculty and staff. And, that one custodian raises and lowers the flags.

Additionally, community groups use all the San Rafael schools in the late afternoons, evenings and on weekends. There are classes and meetings in the buildings, neighborhood children use the playgrounds and league teams compete on the ball fields. Some schools and schoolyards are used more heavily than others, but they all are used and the cleanup is a problem. One school principal did boast that her school has no problems from after-school use, primarily because the users are from the neighborhood and regard the school facilities as theirs. This is not true at other schools where the custodians frequently start their day by cleaning up trash that was left on the playgrounds and fields by people who used the facilities after the end of the school day. It is apparent that this after-school use of the facilities was a good part of the reasoning behind the FCMAT recommendation for additional custodians.

School Cleanliness

It is obvious that the custodians, the staffs and the students at all the schools make an effort to keep the trash picked up. Even on a windy day, visitors observed no waste blowing about at one school. The custodial schedules, provided by two principals, call for each classroom floor to be cleaned once a week (except for the kindergarten classrooms, which are cleaned more often). Considering the number of students in each of the rooms, the weekly schedule clearly is not enough. Additionally, the preventive maintenance that should be done, and that could be done if the custodians had the time, is neglected. The schools are, it seems, not dirty, nor are they clean. The word, perhaps, is tidy.

San Rafael Custodial Force Compared to Other School Districts

It is assumed by the Grand Jury that the duties of all elementary custodians are similar. Restrooms must be tended to, trash must be picked up, floors must be vacuumed and desks must be cleaned in every school. Some districts are willing, and able, to provide more staffing. For example: the Ross Valley School District's four schools has an average of 150 students per custodian; the Novato School District has an average of 218 students per custodian in 8 elementary schools; San Rafael, by comparison, has an average of 332 students per custodian. ([Appendix A](#) details the above figures for the schools cited).

Management of Custodians

Prior to the changes in MOT, the department's assistant director was in charge of the custodians. He hired and trained them and was involved in any disciplinary action. When the recent MOT director left that position, the assistant director became interim director. His previous position, as assistant, was not filled. Under present practices, the district's personnel director interviews custodial applicants; follow-up interviews occur at school sites. In the elementary schools, the principals are totally in charge and are left to their own resources in the management of their custodians. Training has all but ceased.

Technically, the "custodial function" is the domain of a district administrator, but, factually, it would appear that no one runs the custodial system in San Rafael.

Findings

4. The staff personnel interviewed at the schools visited by the Grand Jury generally said that MOT's performance has improved since the FCMAT investigation. MOT employees were credited with responding in a timely manner to requests for needed maintenance and for completing work assignments. The principals also approve of the new "sign-in sign-out" procedures employed by MOT personnel when they service the schools. Additionally, the school staffs welcome the uniform shirts worn by MOT personnel for identification purposes.
5. A need exists for more thorough cleaning and preventive maintenance in the elementary schools. It is obvious that the custodial staffs need additional time to keep the schools more than just cosmetically clean.
6. The custodial positions are distributed without regard for the number of students at each site, or the size or the age of the buildings. For example, Bahia Vista with 442 students has the same custodial help as Coleman, which has 295 students.
7. FCMAT recommended that the district provide for three additional grounds positions. The Grand Jury was told that this had not been done for budgetary reasons. On the basis of parent complaints, as reported in the press, the Grand Jury believes the need for these additional positions, evident to FCMAT, has not disappeared.
8. Prior to the recent problems in MOT, there was a director in charge of the department and an assistant director in charge of the custodians. As of this writing, the position of assistant director is vacant, which leaves the custodians without someone in MOT to provide direction and training.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

9. The district's administration request the funds needed to hire additional custodians, as recommended by FCMAT. If the District were to hire five additional custodians, it would reduce the student-to-custodian ratio to 182. (That ratio remains high, but it is more comparable with other districts in Marin County.) Then, for example, Laurel Dell could have a full-time custodian and each of the other five schools could have two custodians.
10. The district reconsider its rejection of the FCMAT recommendation to add grounds positions. The district should provide the funds for these positions from the bonds approved by the voters last year.
11. The district fill the currently vacant assistant director position in MOT. This action should provide management-level direction and training for the custodians, which is currently lacking.

Request for Responses

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses to all Findings and Recommendations from both the San Rafael School Superintendent and the Board of Trustees of the San Rafael School District.

Appendix A

Comparison of Students to Custodians in Selected K-5 Schools

School	Students	Custodians	Student/Custodian
Ross Valley School District			
Brookside Lower	275	2	138
Brookside Upper	255	2	128
Manor	316	2	158
Wade Thomas	353	2	177
TOTAL	1,199	8	Average 150
Novato School District			
Hamilton	326	2	163
Loma Verde	467	2	234
Lu Sutton	409	2	205
Lynwood	412	2	206
Olive	408	2	204
Pleasant Valley	473	2	237
Rancho	490	2	245
San Ramon	496	2	248
TOTAL	3,481	16	Average 218
San Rafael School District			
Bahia Vista	442	1 1/8	393

Coleman	295	1 1/8	262
Glenwood	381	1 1/8	339
Laurel Dell	143	3/8	381
San Pedro	373	1 1/8	332
Sun Valley	373	1 1/8	332
TOTAL	2,007	6	Average 332

Gallinas School is not included here because it is K-8 and has two custodians due to the extra grades.