

EDC elected schools chief job subject of probe

By Kathryn Reed

Why El Dorado County has an elected superintendent of schools was the subject of a grand jury investigation this past year.

In the recently released report, the grand jury recommends: "The El Dorado County board of education should thoroughly examine the pros and cons of retaining an elected superintendent of schools and issue a report to the Board of Supervisors of their findings and recommendation."

Taking the issue to the voters would be the next step, according to the grand jury.

The investigation was initiated after then-Superintendent Jeremy Meyers was arrested on driving under the influence charges twice in 2015. He later resigned, though has **since been hired** to be a principal in a district in the county.

The California Constitution mandates each county have a superintendent of schools. Five districts have appointed leaders, while 53 – one being El Dorado County – elect the superintendent. This person is essentially a bridge between individual districts and the state. County offices of education also oversee federal programs like Head Start.

El Dorado County has a history of when a vacancy has been created, the board of education appoints a superintendent and then that person is elected in his or her own right. The grand jury could not find a contested election in the last 35 years.

"There has been a demonstrable lack of interest by anyone in this county to step forward and challenge an incumbent. We can only speculate as to the reasons," the report says. "A

candidate must reside in this county, possess at least a master's degree in an area of relevant study and have a valid California administrative credential. Further, this individual must be willing to finance a campaign and go through the rigors of an election challenging an incumbent."

Vicki Barber had the job from 1994-June 2013. She took over for Ken Lowry after he quit mid-term. Hers would be the only name on the ballot every four years.

Barber then quit one year before her last term was up.

Taking her place was Meyers, who previously had been the assistant superintendent of schools. He was elected in 2014 with no problem since he ran unopposed.

The grand jury pointed out how the board of education has little control over the superintendent because it is an elected position. The current board could not fire Meyers for his DUIs. Had he been an appointed superintendent, the board could have removed him. Options were a settlement agreement or recall. The former occurred because the later could have cost the district \$300,000 for a special election.

The jurors tried to ascertain the advantages of an elected superintendent over an appointed one.

"There is scant evidence and fewer studies to provide guidance on this issue," the report states.

Some of the findings include:

- Perceived benefits of having an elected superintendent:
 - o The public may feel it has more control over the schools.
 - o An elected superintendent may be more responsive to the citizen's needs.

- o Lower turnover.
- o Elected superintendents must reside within the county.
- o Generally, an elected official has considerably more independence and may not experience as much pressure from the unions, Legislature and hiring board.

Perceived disadvantages of having an elected superintendent:

- o There is no performance review, goal setting or direction from an elected executive board.
- o Limits candidate pool to only those residing in EDC.
- o Qualified candidates may be dissuaded to pursue this position because of the need to launch and fund an election campaign.
- o Anyone with the required credentials may run for office. They may not be the most knowledgeable or have the highest skills. A less qualified candidate may prevail on name recognition or popularity.
- o As witnessed in our county, outright removal from office can only be done via recall with substantial public cost.

Perceived benefits of having an appointed superintendent:

- o Board of Education would be allowed to recruit qualified candidates from all over the country.
- o Potential increase in administrative efficiency.
- o Having a professional rather than political superintendent.
- o The ability to discipline and/or remove a failing superintendent.

· Perceived disadvantages of having an appointed superintendent:

- o Higher turnover
- o Expense to COE for recruitment.

The Board of Supervisors has until Sept. 22 to respond to the grad jury report.