

EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: MONTEREY COUNTY'S EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

SUMMARY

The Monterey County Civil Grand Jury (MCCGJ) felt compelled to investigate Monterey County's educational response to Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) due to the persuasive concerns expressed by members of the public about the impacts of COVID-19 on students' mental health and students' academic learning loss. The eventual end of additional federal and state funding and the haste with which it must be used are also concerns.

The 2021/2022 MCCGJ conducted numerous interviews with staff members of the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) and other educators in Monterey County. Those interviews led to research into the many support services the MCOE provided to its 24 public school districts (135 schools) during the transition from in-person learning to distance learning in March 2020. School districts, teachers, and educational support personnel demonstrated initiative and flexibility in meeting the needs of students in the first years of the pandemic. The MCCGJ found that MCOE was proactive and instrumental in providing support and services to the school districts and other educational facilities in Monterey County.

MCOE played a leading role in the success of students and teachers by providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and professional development, ensuring technology was available to all, functioning as a central distribution center, increasing fiscal oversight of additional federal and state funding, creating a network to share information, and maintaining the operational capability of the MCOE during the pandemic.

GLOSSARY AND ACRONYMS

ADA	Average Daily Attendance
CDC	Centers for Disease Control

CDE	California Department of Education
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
ESSER	Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund
GEER	Governor’s Emergency Education Relief fund
LCAP	Local Control Accountability Plan
LEA	Local Education Agency (usually a school district)
LLMF	Learning Loss Mitigation Fund
MCCGJ	Monterey County Civil Grand Jury
MCHD	Monterey County Health Department
MCOE	Monterey County Office of Education
OES	California Office of Emergency Services
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
WhatsApp	Message application for group chats

BACKGROUND

The MCOE was established more than 160 years ago by California’s Constitution. All counties are required to provide educational resources to the citizens of their cities and towns. The mission of the MCOE is to “provide leadership, support, and service excellence needed to prepare the diverse students of Monterey County for success.” With an annual budget of \$179 million, the MCOE provides a wide range of resources to support the 75,600 students and 11,000 school staff members in the county public schools.

The MCOE started planning in December of 2019 for COVID-19 and by January of 2020 was actively preparing for COVID-19’s impacts.

Schools normally have in-person instruction, defined as, “instruction under the physical supervision and control of a certificated employee of the local educational agency (LEA).” With a national emergency declared on March 13, 2020, due to COVID-19, in-person instruction stopped. Given the uncertainty of the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic, in-person instruction was not immediately allowable under state and local health orders and the transition to various online distance learning platforms began. Some schools began instruction through distance learning or online in late March 2020. The 2020-2021 school year started online and continued until May 2021, when LEAs were given the option to return to in-person instruction.

METHODOLOGY

The MCCGJ employed four methods of research:

- We reviewed publicly available documents, including those from the California Department of Education (CDE), the MCOE, and County school districts
- We interviewed members of the Board of Supervisors, MCOE staff, and district superintendents
- We performed internet searches for documents and news articles about COVID-19 and education in Monterey County
- We obtained and studied documents from MCOE, received a briefing from the MCOE Superintendent, and then toured the MCOE



DISCUSSION

Buildings Closed, But Schools Remained Open

COVID-19 severely impacted education in Monterey County. It was not just the quantity of changes that occurred, but also the speed at which they happened. California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency on March 4, 2020; Monterey County Board of Supervisors declared a state of emergency on March 10, 2020; President Trump declared a national state of emergency on March 13, 2020; and Monterey County schools closed on March 16, 2020, with a planned reopening on March 31, 2020. However, Governor Newsom said on March 17, 2020, that schools might be closed to in-person learning until the end of the school year. Schools remained closed to in-person learning the rest of that school year and much of the next school year, until May 2021, when LEAs had the option to return to in-person instruction.

When schools transitioned from in-person education to distance learning, the MCOE, LEAs, teachers, staff, parents, and students all faced major challenges. The unexpected closure of schools impacted the physical, emotional, social, and educational environments of students, which resulted in behavioral health issues and learning loss. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that trauma in early life, like prolonged social isolation, unpredictable routines, economic hardship, housing insecurity, and grief over missed significant life events, can continue to impact some students' long-term psychological and physiological well-being throughout their lifetimes. Mental health professionals have identified increases in anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, suicidal ideation (thinking about or planning to take your own life), and substance abuse. Between March and October of 2020, the number of mental-health related visits to the emergency room increased by 24% for ages 5-11 and by 31% for ages 12-17 over 2019 numbers. The impacts of the switch to distance learning in March 2020 and throughout the 2020-2021 school year will be felt for some time, particularly by students.

To assist in the mental health recovery from the pandemic, the Little Hoover Commission recommends that "schools become hubs of mental well-being" and "centers of wellness." Schools have eyes on children and can identify mental and

behavioral issues and then coordinate and integrate data, services, and funding among mental health support providers. Using funding from the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, included in the Governor’s May revision to the 2021-2022 budget, schools can increase the number of school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers.

Response To The Transition

School districts, teachers, classified staff, educational support personnel, and the MCOE met these challenges with initiative and flexibility. Educators, at all levels, went beyond their job descriptions to provide support and services to students and their families. Schools were used as food distribution centers, and COVID-19 testing and vaccination clinics. Schools invested in behavioral health support systems. Schools created new professional development for teachers to learn how to change from in-person to distance learning in one to two weeks. Some bigger school districts even provided clothing and housing. School districts and their schools stepped up in a tough situation to provide holistic student support, which included food, healthcare, academics, and mental health services.

Teachers had to undertake extensive online training to learn new software, such as Google Classroom, Canvas, and Zoom. Some teachers had to learn how to use new electronic devices. Professional development also included learning new teaching techniques for online instruction and about social-emotional learning (SEL), so that teachers could identify signs of needed support. To further support their students, 5,000 teachers voluntarily signed up for extra SEL training, which was offered by MCOE.



While teachers worked from home, the classified staff worked from school, which exposed them to greater risk from COVID-19. Food service workers distributed hundreds of thousands of free meals to students, including home deliveries, when necessary. The daily free and reduced-cost lunch program continued during school closures. Bus drivers moved supplies and made deliveries of food and lessons to student homes. Buses served as wi-fi hot spots. Eighty percent of Monterey County's Early Childhood Education Centers remained open to provide services when schools were closed. Whether due to COVID-19, competition from industry, or the law of supply and demand, these services were provided despite school districts reporting shortages of teachers, substitutes, mental health workers, and bus drivers.

Monterey County Office Of Education Responds To The Pandemic

MCOE provided school districts with resources and support, mental health services, and increased collaboration among community agencies to provide support and services. Not all districts needed the same resources, and larger school districts with more infrastructure and resources required less support from MCOE and could provide more resources independently to students. MCOE maintained continuity of operation during these first two years of COVID-19 while undertaking new initiatives, and met the needs of districts, teachers, students, and families. It produced a catalog of services that they could provide to support school districts during the crisis. MCOE's website offered a variety of resources, including information on free school meals, distance learning supports, mental health supports, and much more.

MCOE served as a central distribution point for PPE and information. It became the regional hub for PPE and coordinated with the CDE and the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) to secure PPE. They distributed over 714,000 masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, and other PPE to schools. Within three days of school closure, a WhatsApp communication system was set up among district superintendents. MCOE gathered information from the CDC, CDE, and the Monterey County Health Department (MCHD) and shared it in weekly meetings with superintendents and instructional leaders and daily with small school districts.

MCOE created professional development to address issues of technology, social-emotional learning, English language development, and others. They produced 650 webinars, provided thousands of hours of virtual coaching, and had open “tech” hours. With the demand for behavioral health specialists increasing amidst a shortage of providers, MCOE followed its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan and priorities. Strategic Priority Three is, “All schools will promote the physical and mental health of their students...” The specific priorities are 3D, “Leverage and align community resources to meet student needs and social and emotional wellness,” and 3F, “Strengthen communication and collaboration between educators and outside organizations working on physical and mental health.”



One of MCOE’s biggest contributions to education during the pandemic was the creation of the Digital Equity Task Force. MCOE conducted a survey that showed in March 2020, 9,839 students did not have electronic devices and 11,291 students did not have internet access. That number was reduced by August 19, 2020, to 1,120 students without electronic devices and 1,082 with no internet. By the start of the 2020-2021 school year, both numbers were zero. This was accomplished by an extensive fundraising effort for technology, which raised \$2,659,960 from 26 donors with the goal of \$3,513,950. Federal funding made raising the rest of the funds a moot point. The first \$569,000 bought 1,300 devices. The six biggest donors were:

1. Monterey County \$1,000,000,

2. Bruce Taylor and Taylor Farms \$890,510,
3. Harden Foundation \$500,000,
4. Monterey Peninsula Foundation \$85,000,
5. Community Foundation for Monterey County \$30,000, and
6. Nancy Buck Ransom Foundation \$30,000.

Federal And State Funding

Substantial amounts of federal and state funding have been received by Monterey County schools to “prevent, prepare for, and respond” to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixteen categories of allowable uses for any COVID-19 funding were identified by the federal government. The Coronavirus Act, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which includes the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER I) fund and the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER I) fund all passed on March 27, 2020, and the funds must be spent by Sept. 30, 2022. California received \$1.6 billion in ESSER I and \$355 million in GEER 1. Most of the GEER 1 funds went to special education. Monterey County schools received \$13,519,507 from these acts. There was also a federal learning loss mitigation fund (LLMF) of \$5 billion to support pupil academic achievement and mitigate learning loss related to COVID-19 school closures.

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, including ESSER II and GEER II, was passed on Dec. 27, 2020, and the funds must be spent by Sept. 30, 2023. California received \$6.7 billion in ESSER II and \$341 million in GEER II. Monterey County schools received \$62,595,419. Sixteen categories of allowable uses for any COVID-19 funding were identified by the federal government.

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which included funding for ESSER III was passed on March 11, 2021; the funds must be spent by the end of the 2024/2025 school year. California received an additional \$98.7 million for homeless students, but most of California’s funding was for grants from the LLMF established by the State.

California received \$15 billion in ESSER III funding, and Monterey County received \$140,681,284.

At least twenty percent of a district's allocation of the GEER and ESSER funds must be reserved to address the academic impact of lost instructional time through implementation of evidence-based interventions. Allowable uses include summer learning, an extended school day, after-school programs, extended school year programs, mental health services and supports, and adoption or integration of SEL into the core curriculum and the school day. There is persuasive anecdotal evidence that learning loss took place, but no quantitative data because statewide California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress tests did not take place in 2020 or 2021.

Some school districts spent their funds on PPE, adding additional custodial staff, hiring learning acceleration specialists, securing mental health support staff, adding classroom aides, hiring more teachers to prevent mixed-grade classes, and creating extended learning opportunities. Some schools upgraded their heating and ventilation systems, installed contact-less water fountains, faucets, hand sanitizer dispensers, paper towel dispensers, and completed other physical plant improvements.

Monitoring all this spending has been MCOE. The MCOE has statutory oversight of school district budgets under Assembly Bill 1200, passed by the legislature in 1991. The MCOE Superintendent's major statutory responsibility is to provide fiscal oversight, and this encompasses reviewing and approving the financial status of district budgets, Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) and certifying reports. MCOE has made fiscal stability a strategic priority.

In its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan, Strategic Priority 5 states, "MCOE policies and systems will proactively and creatively align resources to support dynamic teaching and learning while remaining fiscally solvent." Priority 5A states that MCOE will "monitor financial information and provide direction to assist MCOE and all LEAs in maintaining fiscal stability." MCOE accomplishes this by monitoring the quarterly reports that go to the federal government, reviewing and approving Federal LCAPs that include the

federal funding which goes to the CDE before arriving at the federal government and holding regular discussions about allowable expenses.

Accountability is achieved with the use of State templates, accountability checklists, additional documentation to the federal government, and MCOE's constant oversight. MCOE provides an official review letter with each submission of an adopted budget, 1st interim budget, 2nd interim budget, and end-of-the-year unaudited actuals. An official review letter from the MCOE Business Services Department accompanies the return of a school district's financial report and provides guidance and identifies areas of concern. In addition, there is a yearly audit by an independent agency. Transparency is maintained through public stakeholder meetings on LCAP and its passage at an open board meeting. Audits and budgets are public documents and are accepted and approved in open board meetings.

Concern has been expressed about two financial issues: the end of the federal funding and the drop in Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Although attempts are being made to extend the deadline to the end of 2024-2025 school year for the expenditure of COVID-19 funding, that is not a certainty. MCOE has made it clear to districts that those temporary revenues should not be used for permanent expenses. However, after four years of extra funding, it will come to a stop at the same time as school districts are experiencing a drop in ADA. County-wide ADA has dropped 10% over last year, with some districts dropping as low as 5% or as high as 18%. Since ADA generates most of the revenue for school districts, the matter is of concern. The combination of the end of the federal emergency funding with the drop in ADA while students still need behavioral intervention services and learning loss mitigation is problematic.

MCOE Leadership

In December of 2019, MCOE started planning for the pandemic, and by late January or early February of 2020 it was actively preparing for it. The Monterey County Superintendent of Schools provided critical proactive educational leadership in the early days of the pandemic. By establishing the WhatsApp network within three days of school closure, the superintendent provided essential information from the CDC, the CDE, and the MCHD. The information was shared on a weekly basis with district

superintendents. Superintendents could now collaborate on shared issues and best practices with confidentiality.

The superintendent initiated a survey to identify needed technology and then created a Digital Equity Task Force on April 9, 2020, with over 40 representatives from education, industry, and information technology to meet those needs, primarily lack of technology and access to the internet across the County. The superintendent immediately started fundraising with a goal of \$3.5 million to provide almost 10,000 students with devices. The fundraising team raised \$2.6 million before federal funding arrived.

Under the superintendent's leadership, MCOE maintained continuity of operation while taking on additional tasks of increased financial monitoring, becoming a distribution hub, creating new professional development for teachers and staff, fundraising for technology, and serving as a communication center.

FINDINGS

- F1** Educators and classified staff in Monterey County are to be commended for their initiative and flexibility in meeting the challenges of COVID-19. From the MCOE Superintendent to the newest part-time classroom aide, county educational employees went beyond their job descriptions in meeting the needs of students and their families during the pandemic.
- F2** The Monterey County Superintendent of Schools is to be commended for proactive leadership in a time of crisis. Without such leadership, Monterey County's educational response to COVID-19 would have been inadequate.
- F3** MCOE is to be commended for maintaining continuity of operations while increasing support services for school districts under the most challenging of circumstances.
- F4** All the donors who contributed to the Digital Equity Fund are to be commended for their generosity.
- F5** Administrators, teachers, and information technology staff in Monterey County are to be commended for making great strides in providing remote learning devices and solving internet access problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- F6** MCOE is working with all school districts to assure fiscal accountability and stewardship of the public's education dollars.

- F7** MCOE's service departments continue working diligently to provide support, guidance, training, and resources for all members of Monterey County's educational community.
- F8** Despite a lack of preparedness at many levels of government, MCOE, school districts, and staff responded to the impact of the pandemic in a timely manner.
- F9** Monterey County successfully expanded internet connectivity due to the efforts of MCOE, industry partners, grant institutions, the Digital Task Force, and school district investment in technology.
- F10** There is increased collaboration and coordination among agencies that provide services and support, including the MCOE, Monterey County Behavioral Health, the Monterey County Health Department, internet partners, school districts, support providers, and community groups.
- F11** Administrators, teachers, parents, and students are all extremely concerned about students' social-emotional issues arising from COVID-19.
- F12** Administrators, teachers, parents, and students are concerned about the learning loss that took place during the 2020-2021 school year. There is an urgent need for mitigation of such a loss.
- F13** There is the potential for significant fiscal disruption with the continuing loss of ADA and the end of additional federal funding occurring at the same time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1** School districts maintain a minimum level of one behavioral support staff member at each school site until the end of the 2025-2026 school year.
- R2** School districts maintain learning loss mitigation programs and extended learning opportunities until the end of the 2025-2026 school year.
- R3** MCOE should continue to closely monitor district LCAPs and budgets for the impacts of ADA loss and the end of emergency federal funding.
- R4** MCOE be forward thinking about its emergency plans.
- R5** MCOE should establish partnerships and internships with CSU Monterey Bay, MCBH, and industry partners to increase the number of mental health workers, teachers, substitutes, and bus drivers

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05:

From the following governing bodies within 90 days:

- Monterey County Board of Education
Findings: F1, F3-F13
Recommendations: R1-R5

- County school district boards of trustees:
Findings: F1, F5, F8-F13
Recommendations: R1-R2
 - Alisal Union School District
 - Big Sur Unified School District
 - Bradley Union School District
 - Carmel Unified School District
 - Chualar Union School District
 - Gonzales Unified School District
 - Graves School District
 - Greenfield Union School District
 - King City Union School District
 - Lagunita School District
 - Mission Union School District
 - Monterey Peninsula Unified School District
 - North Monterey County Unified School District
 - Pacific Grove Unified School District
 - Salinas City Elementary School District
 - Salinas Union High School District
 - San Antonio Union School District
 - San Ardo Union School District
 - San Lucas Union School District
 - Santa Rita Union School District
 - Soledad Unified School District
 - South Monterey County Joint Union High School District
 - Spreckels Union School District
 - Washington Union School District

INVITED RESPONSES

- Monterey County Superintendent of Schools
Findings: F1-F2, F4

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