

Geck plans to answer grand jury report

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT — Lake County's superintendent of schools says he's willing to share whatever information he can with the grand jury in order to answer issues raised in its most recent report.

Dave Geck, who heads Lake County's Office of Education, returned from vacation last week. The grand jury report was released on July 9, the day before he left for a scheduled trip to Alaska.

During his first week back on the job the report was the "main thing on my desk," Geck said.

"I was really upset and mostly concerned about the issues surrounding fairness and accuracy," Geck said of the report, which he called "inflammatory."

The report offered two pages of findings but no final recommendations, noting that the investigation is ongoing and will continue with the newly seated grand jury.

Some of the report's findings raised issues with hiring practices, qualifications of an administrator awarded a new position that gave that person an additional \$25,000 a year in salary, a pattern of "exorbitant spending" by one administrator in charge of grant programs, hostile work conditions and fear of retaliation from the office's administration.

Because of the highly confidential nature of the grand jury's work, grand jury Foreman Brondell Locke can't comment on the investigation or elaborate on the findings in the report.

Geck said he was concerned that, by listing facts and findings without the investigation being completed, "the impression is, that this is all true."

He said he and his staff were asked to testify before the grand jury but given little information ahead of time in order to prepare. Had they known more about the grand jury's questions, Geck said they could have provided the necessary information about department policies and procedures.

Geck said he's planning to make a formal response to the report in order to "clear the air." The response is due 60 days from the July 9 report release date.

To what does he attribute the report?

"What I believe is there are probably employees who felt they weren't treated fairly," he said. "Whether they were treated fairly or not is a different question."

Geck who has been in education for 34 years, said he's not sure why those employees would have taken their complaints to the grand jury, when such matters usually are handled through a process that includes representation for the employee. "So I'm not sure exactly what the intent was."

He said he can't comment publicly about the personnel issues the report raises. But he said he's willing to share personnel files with the grand jury, and would have done so already if they had provided him with a list of files they wanted to see.

"We have information to share with the grand jury, and we will," he said. "We're taking it very seriously what they're saying."

Looking closer at report's findings

Geck said he and his staff are looking at the need for an internal investigation to look at the grand jury's findings. So far, there has been no meeting scheduled between him and the grand jury to discuss the matter, but he said he anticipates contacting Locke to set up a time to talk.

One of the grand jury's findings said one administrator spent more than \$9,000 in one year on meal and lodging reimbursement, including expenses for people not employed by the Lake County Office of Education.

Geck said to determine if that amount was appropriate, they have to look at the program involved and what expenditures — such as travel and conferences — that are tied to the program's goals. While it may look like an excessive amount to members of the public, it may not necessarily be out of line.

"We're going to look at all of that," he said.

Expenditures extending to people outside of the Office of Education may be either for people from other districts or members of the business community who sometimes are invited to participate in certain trips, he said.

Geck added that the state requires annual audits of the Office of Education's finances by an outside auditor.

Regarding allegations of a hostile work environment, Geck said his staff also is looking into that. He said he has never had a written complaint listing a hostile work environment or issues of mental abuse the grand jury report cited.

There are many different departments and programs in the Office of Education, he said. "It could be in a part of the organization, we don't know that."

Geck said he also can explain to the grand jury about the administrator who received a position that gave them a \$25,000 a year salary increase.

The report said the position that administrator received was a new one, created in 2007. "The position's existed in the county office for seven or eight years, so it wasn't a new position," said Geck.

It was, however, posted internally only, which Geck said is done frequently.

Office of Education Human Resources Director Ed Skeen confirmed that the position existed previously.

Another report finding raised issues of proper certifications for some administrative staff.

Skeen said there is a "strange phenomenon" when it comes to credentialing for teachers and administrators. He estimated 75 to 80 percent of local credential applications go through his office, and his staff reviews all qualifications for those.

However, some credential applications take other routes through colleges or universities, which then send letters to the state recommending certification upon completion of a program.

It's possible in those cases, said Skeen, that the person receiving the credential may not be qualified, but his office wouldn't have access to the qualifying criteria. "We do not see every single credential application or supporting documentation."

He was careful to add, "I'm not questioning anybody's credential status."

Skeen said the grand jury's report identified issues to look at that the Office of Education also had identified as needing attention, although he did not specify what those were.

The grand jury's approach, he added, appears to be fair-minded.

"I think there's some validity to their interest" in some areas, he said, adding that they might be misled on other areas.

If mistakes were made, they'll be fixed, said Geck.

While the grand jury report indicated an investigation is still under way, Geck added, "The other side of the story is, we're in process, too."

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