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Schools plan fraud hotline

By Maureen Magee

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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At a time when government is under intense scrutiny locally and nationally, the San Diego Unified School District is putting its own conduct under a microscope.

To promote efficiency and to reduce waste and mismanagement, California's second-largest school system is establishing a fraud hotline and a code of ethics for employees and elected officials.

The ethics initiative also would include a training program to educate some 15,000 district workers on issues ranging from appropriate use of procurement cards and cellular phones to reporting gifts and conducting personal business on the taxpayers' dime.

The school board discussed the pending protocol during a recent workshop and is expected to formally vote on a proposal this summer, in time to implement the policies by the start of the school year.

“The superintendent is very serious about this, and we are going to do it right,” said Jodi Smith, formerly of the Department of Labor's antitrust division, who was hired to direct the effort.

It is unclear how much money and staff the program will require, but Smith said it may pay for itself through stopping misappropriations of public money.

“This is not about catching people, but about preventing problems and making sure the dollars we allocate go to kids and education,” said Smith, whose six-month contract ends in June.

Other urban districts, including those in Los Angeles, Fresno, Chicago and New York, operate similar anti-fraud offices to prevent waste.

The Los Angeles Unified School District's inspector general's office operates a fraud hotline,

conducts audits and oversees a whistle-blower policy that protects employees who make allegations of improper governmental activity from retaliation or reprisal from the district or their supervisors.

San Diego's internal probe was recommended several years ago during a routine district audit. Since then, administrators and school board members have discussed how to implement the idea. Superintendent Carl Cohn put the matter on the front burner.

School board members are eager to launch a fraud hotline that will allow employees and even parents to report problems anonymously. Trustee Mitz Lee said there is a lot of interest in such a service. Lee urged the superintendent to widely publicize the hotline to maximize its potential.

“Four years' worth of calls are about to be made (to the hotline),” Cohn said during a board meeting last week, saying the service is “long overdue.”

The district hasn't decided who will monitor the calls and investigate them. An administrator and small staff may be hired to run the new ethics office, Smith said.

The matter comes just weeks after an unrelated audit of two district education funds raised questions about how the money was spent.

But the decision to proceed with a hotline, an ethics code and a training program is really just a sign of the times, Smith said.

“It's only recently been catching on with school districts,” Smith said. “There have been a lot of high-profile scandals, and we definitely don't want that to happen here.”

San Diego district officials have conferred with one emerging expert on the topic – former chief counsel for the district Jo Anne SawyerKnoll, who now heads the city of San Diego's office of ethics and integrity.

The district also has consulted with ethics offices in other school districts.

■Maureen Magee: (619) 293-1369; maureen.magee@uniontrib.com

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