

San Diego school district sets up ethics program

New system includes fraud report hotline

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Employees of the San Diego school district have a place to turn to if they have a tip about fraud or need advice to avoid ethical pitfalls.

The San Diego Unified School District, which employs 15,800 workers and has an annual budget of more than \$1 billion, has hired an ethics officer and activated a fraud hotline.

The district follows other major districts in the nation, such as Los Angeles Unified and the New York City Department of Education, in establishing an ethics program.

Auditors recommended an ethics program as a prevention tool, and Superintendent Carl Cohn has embraced it as part of his goal to make the district "America's best."

Joan L. McRobbie, former director of strategic communication initiatives at EdSource, a nonprofit education group in Mountain View, joined the district Nov. 6 as its ethics officer.

McRobbie's job is to familiarize employees with the district's ethics code, facilitate organization-wide dialogues on values and ethical behavior and counsel employees facing dilemmas. She earns \$96,364 a year.

She said she wants to create an organizational culture of high performance and high expectations.

"If everyone has a sensitivity in daily actions and decision making, there is an ethical dimension," she said. "Sometimes, people do things, and they don't think about that dimension."

McRobbie has never run an ethics office before, but she has extensive knowledge of urban education issues through her work with EdSource and WestEd, another nonprofit agency in San Francisco devoted to improving education.

She has known Cohn since he was superintendent of Long Beach schools. McRobbie's role at WestEd included convening leaders from California's largest urban school districts to discuss challenges.

McRobbie will not be involved in the enforcement of ethical violations nor will she be handling the fraud hotline.

The hotline, activated Oct. 9, is being run by an independent third party. The district signed a one-year, \$12,000 contract with Norcross, Ga.-based The Network Inc. to handle calls. The company also offers a way for tipsters to file reports online. Either way, callers can remain anonymous.

About 30 calls already have been placed to the hotline, and the district's Office of Audits & Investigations will follow up on each. The staff will make quarterly reports to the district's Audit Committee, which is composed

of district officials and community representatives.

When misconduct is uncovered, disciplinary action and referral to law enforcement agencies will be made.

A report is generated from each call and made available to the district within an average of two hours. Callers are given a report number so they can call back to provide further information.

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