

Dear Mario,

Thank you for forwarding the emails that you obtained from the district. The emails you sent, which I had not seen before, appear to relate to a SDUSD Board presentation scheduled for May 10, 2016. You sent me two emails from district CIO Andrew Sharp to Ronald Rode, at the time the Director of Research and Development at SDUSD. Mr. Rode is the chief liaison in the district with our SanDERA group at UCSD. You also sent me a reply from Mr. Rode to Mr. Sharp.

The following is my reaction.

It is important to understand that from the outset of our work regarding SDUSD in 2001, the independent nature of the university research enterprise has been fundamental. SanDERA (The San Diego Education Research Alliance at UCSD) has an MOA with the district which clearly establishes that the district has no right to block publication of any research underway. In return, we have a collaborative relationship in which district staff suggest research ideas and provide feedback on research.

Mr. Rode's reply is an accurate representation of a conversation he had with me. Mr. Sharp's comments, on the other hand, are quite surprising. The most charitable interpretation of Mr. Sharp's emails might be that he was relatively new to the district at the time and did not understand the independent arm's length nature of SanDERA's research on SDUSD. Nor, apparently, did he understand the long history of SanDERA's productive relationship with the district, which has produced a number of findings that have assisted the district as it works to improve the quality of education. Further, it seems that Mr. Sharp did not fully understand the difference between the district's official graduation rate, the estimates of student progress used to identify struggling students as the school year progresses, and our cohort study, which followed all students in the class of 2016 from grades 9 through 12.

Here is what happened on the day Mr. Rode and Mr. Sharp apparently exchanged emails. Mr. Rode contacted me on May 9, 2016 to let me know that the following day there would be a SDUSD Board presentation that projected a very high graduation rate for the class of 2016. He thought I should know because we had just published a peer-reviewed report through the Public Policy Institute of California that estimated that as of August 2015 only about 7 in 10 students in the class of 2016 were on track to complete SDUSD's new a-g graduation requirement. Mr. Rode stated that I might receive press inquiries. He neither asked me to speak to the press nor to avoid speaking to the press. Nor did he suggest I agree with or make any specific statement about graduation rates or the district's new graduation policy. I thanked him for calling, and volunteered to him that if press called I would feel uncomfortable talking about the district's projections for two reasons. The first was that until we finished our own analysis of what actually happened to the class of 2016 once graduation day came, using hard data and conducting careful analyses, I could not say with any authority how the class of 2016 had fared. The second reason was that I had a sense that many seniors had left district-managed schools, so that the graduation rate might overstate the percentage of students who ultimately met the district's new graduation requirement. We were beginning to work on this at the time. This was the sum of the conversation.

Mr. Rode is a person of the highest integrity, as you can see from my description of our phone conversation that day. Further, assuming that the two emails you sent me from Mr. Sharp are genuine, it is a further tribute to Mr. Rode's integrity that he did not in any way pressure me to speak on behalf of the district, that he never so much as hinted that he was facing any pressure, and that he never transmitted anything Mr. Sharp may or may not have said about future collaboration between UCSD and SDUSD being in any way contingent.

Mr. Rode has consistently supported our research efforts, and our right to publish. Indeed, he strongly supported our research in 2016 and 2017 culminating in the release in September 2017 of our SanDERA report which followed the entire cohort of students in the class of 2016, including those who left. While we calculated a graduation rate from district-managed schools that was very high (and close to the district's own estimate) and determined that about a third of the students who were off-track at the end of grade 11 had indeed graduated from district-managed schools, we also found that a large number of students left district managed schools between the end of grade 11 and the start of grade 12. Further we found that almost all of these students who left were off-track to complete the new graduation requirements. Overall about 8 out of every 10 grade 11 students remained in district managed schools and graduated in 2016, while meeting the new graduation requirement. Regarding the other 2 out of 10, one stayed in district-managed schools in grade 12 and failed to graduate, and one left district-managed schools.

This report, we believe, has greatly improved understanding of the progress the district has made, and the very real challenges that clearly remain.

In fact, the district has a new advisory committee on the graduation rate, and I about 10 others from academia and the education policy area are serving on the committee. At the committee's request, Ron Rode and his team are now conducting cohort analyses that show the academic fate of all who enroll in district high schools, including academic and other characteristics of the many students who left district-managed schools. This will be a true cohort study, and I and others on the committee believe that it will greatly increase transparency surrounding the new graduation policy and its effects.

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