

School bond programs are more transparent, study shows

By [Maureen Magee \(/staff/maureen-magee/\)](/staff/maureen-magee/) 3:31 p.m. July 14, 2014

San Diego County school districts are making strides when it comes to keeping the public informed on how they manage voter-approved bond measures, according to a [study \(http://www.sdcta.org/Media/Detail.asp\)](http://www.sdcta.org/Media/Detail.asp) released Monday.

The most transparent bond programs are run by large districts — San Diego Unified and Sweetwater Union High School. The tiny Julian Union High School District was rated the least transparent in the report from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association.

The information is intended to help districts and inform the public, said W. Mark Leslie, president of the taxpayers association.

“Voters have agreed to pay more taxes...,” he said. “They deserve to know if the promises are being kept.”

The report, “School Bond Transparency in San Diego County,” rates bond measures recently approved in 21 districts using its “School bond transparency score card” that covers everything from posting financial audits online to providing information about members of citizen oversight committees.

The organization found that school districts met 90 percent of the criteria, up from 80 percent in its last review conducted in 2011. San Diego Unified and Sweetwater were the only districts to earn perfect scores, having met all of the 23 criteria. The organization deemed Julian (met 7 of 23 criteria) and the Encinitas Union School District (met 10 of 23 criteria) as the least transparent. They are the only two districts to meet fewer than half of the criteria.

Katy Moretti, president of the Julian school board, was surprised and skeptical of the findings. She said the district has made a point to be open about all aspects of its Proposition L, a \$2.1 million bond passed in 2010 to finance high school renovations and a new science and technology center.

“We are trying to do a very good job with this bond — we discuss it openly at every meeting and we have a whole section on our website,” she said. “We were careful with this bond and with this money. Now we have a beautiful new building.”

The taxpayers association made four recommendations to districts to address ongoing bond transparency problems: Post basic information about bonds and oversight committees prominently on homepages; make oversight committee materials available on websites; use auditors with “demonstrated knowledge in project management and construction industry best practices” when conducting performance audits; and model new oversight committees from established, well-regarded committees in other districts.

Leslie acknowledged that larger districts with more resources have an easier time complying with transparency criteria than do smaller districts.

The taxpayers association will offer a certification program — that costs \$50 per person — to help train district officials in bond measure transparency.

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