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<b>Healthy Kids Survey Student Responses Continued</b>	<b>Ukiah Unified School District Pomolita and Eagle Peak Middle Schools<sup>6</sup></b>		<b>Baechtel Middle School (WUSD)<sup>7</sup></b>		<b>Fort Bragg Middle School (FBUSD)<sup>8</sup></b>	
<b>Question</b>	<b>7th</b>	<b>9th</b>	<b>7th</b>	<b>9th</b>	<b>7th</b>	<b>9th</b>
% who think daily /almost daily use of alcohol is “somewhat” to “extremely” harmful...	74%	78%	80%	84%	90%	92%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>92%</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>92%</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>92%</i>
% who think daily/almost daily use of marijuana is “somewhat” to “extremely” harmful...	72%	76%	76%	82%	83%	82%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	<i>96%</i>	<i>92%</i>	<i>96%</i>	<i>92%</i>	<i>96%</i>	<i>92%</i>
% who reported that they “consider themselves to be a gang member”...	8%	14%	8%	11%	11%	8%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>13%</i>
% who reported carrying a gun on school property in past 12 months...	8%	10%	9%	5%	5%	4%
<i>No comparable State data</i>						
% who carrying any other weapon on school property in past 12 months...	12%	17%	15%	18%	18%	22%
<i>No comparable State data</i>						
% who report high expectations	52%	40%	54%	49%	45%	39%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	<i>44%</i>	<i>34%</i>	<i>44%</i>	<i>34%</i>	<i>44%</i>	<i>34%</i>

<sup>6</sup> Based on Fall 2007 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

<sup>7</sup> Based on Spring 2008 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

<sup>8</sup> Based on Fall 2006 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

% who report caring relationships	36%	27%	43%	46%	33%	36%
State Average (%)	30%	24%	30%	24%	30%	24%
% who report meaningful participation in school...	18%	11%	24%	13%	9%	23%
State Average (%)	14%	12%	14%	12%	14%	12%

124. The Grand Jury examined responses to selected survey questions by seventh and ninth grade students in each of the three observed school districts and compared the responses to statewide averages by grade level. (See Table III)
- a. Students at all schools reported recent alcohol use and heavy binge drinking at significantly higher rates than the state average. At Baechtel Grove, rates were double to triple the state average.
  - b. Likewise, students at all schools reported recent marijuana use at significantly higher rates than the state average. At Baechtel Grove, these rates were nearly triple the state average.
  - c. A much smaller percentage of students reported that they had ever been drunk or high on school property.
  - d. Self-reported use of both alcohol and marijuana was significantly higher for ninth graders than for students in seventh grade.
  - e. Students at all schools were less likely than their peers, statewide, to report that “daily or almost daily use of alcohol is harmful.” They were even less likely to report that regular marijuana use is harmful. These findings were particularly pronounced in Ukiah and Willits and less so in Fort Bragg.
  - f. Much like their peers, statewide, between 8% and 14% of the students surveyed reported that they considered themselves to be connected to a gang.
  - g. While only a small percentage of students reported feeling “unsafe” at school, about a third said that they had been harassed at some time in the past twelve months on the basis of their religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical/mental disability, or race, ethnicity or national origin.
  - h. Between 4% and 10% of students reported having carried a gun to school and 12% to 22% reported carrying another type of weapon.
  - i. To the credit of educators at all sites, students rated their schools higher than state averages as places where they experienced caring adult relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation.

### ***Recommendations***

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. all schools include dates on printed and electronic communications to student families and provide them in both English and Spanish (and in other languages as needed). (Findings 50-52, 101)
2. school site emergency response plans include community ListSerts, phone and e-mail contacts for all radio and television stations (including Spanish language stations) that broadcast in the county. (Findings 43, 66, 72, 99)

3. emergency Response Plans clearly designate responsibility for ensuring that working fire extinguishers are in place in all classrooms and common areas at all times when students are present. (Finding 21)
4. all districts seek grants or categorical funds for counseling, alcohol and drug interventions, and for library staffing. (Findings 9, 28-29, 77-78, 101, 124)
5. Willits and Ukiah Unified School Districts prioritize maintenance spending to ensure that deteriorated school yard surfaces and other trip hazards are eliminated. (Findings 18, 59, 76)
6. all schools continue emphasis on professional development and on providing time for staff collaboration within grade and subject categories and across the K-12 continuum. (Findings 3, 25-26, 46-49, 103, 118)
7. all schools continue, and build on, successful after school programs. (Findings 10-11, 34, 65, 80-81)
8. MCOE continue its strong support of staff development through content specific programs and professional learning communities. (Findings 24-26)
9. MCOE explore ways to ensure that Districts provide adequate technical support and maintenance for educational technology in classrooms, libraries and technology labs. (Findings 15-16)
10. Eagle Peak, Pomolita and Baechtel Middle Schools increase outreach efforts to build community partnerships and that Fort Bragg Middle School approach the adjacent Redwood Coast Senior Center to discuss possible partnerships. (Findings 53-55, 89-90, 94)
11. the Board of Supervisors and Department of Health and Human Services fund and support to the fullest extent possible education and counseling interventions to reduce student use of alcohol and other drugs. (Findings 73, 123-124)

### ***Discussion***

Working in middle schools is not for everyone! They truly are a place for middling (or muddling) through, with as much persistence, patience and good humor as can be mustered by all concerned. Educators described middle school to the Jurors as a time of rapid growth and transition. It is a *last chance* to gain the academic and social skills required for independent learning and mature adulthood. One teacher summed it up as a time when *...Kids are pretty goofy...but you see them later and they've changed...most of them have.*

Jurors were impressed with the physical condition of the campuses and with the schools' largely successful efforts to provide welcoming, safe environments and to establish positive behavioral norms among members of the school community. These accomplishments and rigorous efforts to improve student achievement are at imminent risk due to the country's economic crisis and the state's fiscal meltdown.

As an economically depressed rural county with a robust illegal drug industry, Mendocino County has a disproportionate number of families where the parents' illegal work activities put them and their children at odds with the law and with school behavioral norms. A significant proportion of families are seriously dysfunctional. Early and persistent use of alcohol and other drugs far exceeds state averages. Even responsible and caring parents often struggle with linguistic and cultural obstacles and the need to work at multiple jobs.

As the study progressed, it became disturbingly evident that for many of the county's young teens, school is not only a place to learn, it is also their safe haven. Many youth are heavily dependent on school staff, who rise to the occasion...not only teaching, but also meeting their student's basic health and emotional needs.

A central theme that emerged from the interviews is that middle school students have not outgrown their need for caring, on-the-job parents. In the words of one teacher:

*You need to be there for your child every day.  
Take a class...learn to talk with your child.  
They're not your buddies...someone to smoke pot with.  
They need parents.*

### **Required Responses**

Superintendent, Ukiah Unified School District (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 32, 66; Recommendations 1-10)

Principal, Eagle Peak Middle School (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 32-55; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7, 10)

Principal, Pomolita Middle School (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 56-66; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7, 10)

Superintendent, Willits Unified School District (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 67-90; Recommendations 1-10).

Principal, Baechtel Grove Middle School (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 67-90; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7, 10)

Superintendent, Fort Bragg Unified School District (Findings 1-31, 106-124 91-105; Recommendations 1-4, 6-10)

Principal, Fort Bragg Middle School (Findings 11-31, 106-124, 91-105; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7, 10)

Mendocino County Superintendent of Education (Findings 15, 16, 24-26, 43, 66, 72, 85; Recommendations 8, 9)

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Findings 73, 123, 124; Recommendations 4, 11)

Director, Mendocino County Health and Human Services (Findings 13, 28, 29, 73, 123,124; Recommendations 4, 11)

## DISCIPLINARY BREAKDOWNS AND ABDICATION OF LEADERSHIP IN LEGGETT VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

May 21, 2009

### **Summary**

The 2008-09 Grand Jury investigated Leggett Valley Unified School District (LVUSD) after receiving multiple complaints alleging improper behavior by students, parents and staff and abdication of leadership by school board members and the incumbent administrator. Investigation of the formerly award-winning Leggett Valley campus verified reports of physical abuse and sexual harassment by students against other students, and verbal abuse by students of one another, their teachers and staff. Similar behavior was documented to have occurred on the school campus between parents and by parents against teachers, staff and board members.

LVUSD has had a strong academic reputation. It is the only district in Mendocino County that has avoided Program Improvement sanctions on the basis of its positive annual student test scores. In 2009 *U.S. News and World Report* included it among the top high schools in the nation. The 2005-06 Grand Jury visited LVUSD and several other rural schools and concluded that "...these rural districts boast caring, competent staff ... strict but not unreasonable regulations and a personal, nurturing educational environment that larger urban and suburban schools cannot duplicate."

Since 2007, these positive conditions in LUVSD have deteriorated under an administration that has failed to enforce either the Student Disciplinary Policy or the District Civility Policy that requires adults to comply with Education and Penal Code statutes governing behavior on public school campuses.

During this period, the roles of principal and superintendent have been held by a single administrator who has ceded much of his authority and responsibility to a cadre of increasingly aggressive parents who enter the campus at will, verbally accosting teachers and staff and disrupting classrooms and school board meetings with abusive language, threats and demands. Student behavioral referrals have steadily increased for infractions including foul language, disrespect toward teachers and peers, sexual harassment, possession of illegal substances, fighting and bullying.

The result is a campus atmosphere that was uniformly described to Jurors as "tense." Those interviewed expressed unanimous concern about the tense and stressful atmosphere and its impact on the school community. A few individuals feel physically threatened. Several expressed concerns for the impact on teaching and learning. Most worry about the future of the District.

Some parental complaints alleged that specific students were being unfairly singled out for behavioral referrals and discipline. This parental protectiveness contrasted sharply with concerns expressed by others about the impact of these students' behavior on the school community and the importance of curtailing their misbehavior, for their own good, rather than allowing it to escalate. The students who were the focus of these complaints were repeatedly described during interviews and in formal reports as disrespectful and disruptive in class and in other school settings. They have bullied and sexually harassed other students and verbally abused school employees. The administrator described them as "rambunctious."

A documented incident of sexually inappropriate text messaging between a student and a young coach is playing a major role in fueling dysfunction in the school community. Rumors based on accurate descriptions of the offending text messages have escalated into unproven allegations of inappropriate physical contact. Some parents also claim unfair treatment of the involved students by the coach's parent who has been a respected, long-term teacher in the District. These rumors have spread throughout the school community, fueling discord, damaging reputations and leading to the loss of valued employees through suspensions and resignations.

For more than half of the 2008-09 school year, the teacher accused of unfairly disciplining some students has been on administrative leave, replaced by substitutes with no knowledge of the subject matter. Students have been assigned the same grade they received during the first grading interval, despite having no opportunity to increase their knowledge of the subject and have their learning properly assessed. These grades were submitted, without consultation or consent, over the name of the teacher who was prevented from teaching and assessing the students' learning.

A few parents have put intense pressure on the administration to keep the accused teacher on administrative leave. In the presence of Jurors, they angrily repeated their threat that if the school board allows the teacher to return, a significant number of students will leave the District. This would have serious, if not disastrous, budget consequences.

In Spring of 2009, the Leggett Valley School Board determined that new site leadership will be sought by hiring one individual to serve as the Leggett site principal and another as the District superintendent. This is a crucial decision that requires immediate action, however, much more will be required. Training, and support from the Mendocino County Office of Education and the Mendocino County Sheriff, and a dramatic shift in parental attitudes and behavior will be essential if the new administrators and the LVUSD Board are to return the District's focus to educating and shaping the character development of its students and to reclaiming its formerly exemplary reputation.

## **Methods**

Members of the Grand Jury spent three full days on the Leggett Valley Pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade campus. They toured the facility and observed students in classes, halls, the library and the cafeteria. Jurors interviewed 26 individuals including parents, teachers, classified staff, the district administrator, all board members, law enforcement officers and the Superintendent of the Mendocino County Office of Education. Members of the school community lined up and passed notes to Jurors to request interviews and every effort was made to listen to all viewpoints. Among the numerous documents reviewed were board minutes, school incident and law enforcement reports, student behavioral referrals and School Accountability Report Cards.

## **Background**

A previous report by the 2005-06 Grand Jury described LVUSD as a school with a high percentage of graduates who attend two and four year colleges, many on well deserved scholarships. After reviewing Leggett Valley and several other rural schools, the 2005-06 Grand Jury concluded that "...these rural districts boast caring, competent staff (several of them former students), strict but not unreasonable regulations and a personal, nurturing educational environment that larger urban and suburban schools cannot duplicate."

## **Findings**

1. LVUSD (the District) is a small, isolated school district located near the northern boundary of Mendocino County. Adjacent school districts are Laytonville to the south and Southern Humboldt to the north.
2. The District includes the pre-school-12<sup>th</sup> grade facility in Leggett and the 40-student K-12 Whale Gulch site that is located "off the grid" in a remote location about 1 ½ hours from Leggett.
3. Until recently, the Leggett Valley campus has attracted transfer students from Southern Humboldt.
4. Between 2007-08 and April 2009, the student census of the Leggett campus has declined from 124 to 100.
5. LVUSD is governed by an elected board whose five members serve four-year staggered terms. Two board members are from the Whale Gulch site and three are from Leggett.
6. The current board president has served since the District separated from Fort Bragg Unified School District in 1989-91. Other members have also served multiple terms.
7. One board member has completed the Masters in Governance program through the California School Board Association (CSBA). In the past, some board members have attended the Small School Districts (SSD) Conference. Members have not attended the SSD Conference in the past two years. They have not had ethics training or sexual harassment training.

8. The former superintendent retired at the end of the 2005-06 school year after serving for seven years.
9. The board chose to manage its own search for his replacement using CSBA guidelines and with the support of Mendocino County Office of Education.
10. The new superintendent assumed his position in 2006-07. He had formerly retired from a central California district and was unfamiliar with the Leggett community.
11. In 2007-08, the experienced Leggett principal left the District and the superintendent assumed the combined responsibilities of principal and superintendent and became the sole administrator.
12. The superintendent's contract will expire at the end of the 2008-09 school year. An acting principal has been appointed at the Leggett site. The board has determined that Leggett requires a full-time principal, but has not yet determined whether to hire a full-time or part-time superintendent.
13. A school principal is responsible for day-to-day operations including curriculum implementation and has primary responsibility for student and adult discipline. A district superintendent has overall responsibility for financial and facilities management, implementing the district vision, and for managing relationships with the state and community.
14. There is considerable disparity in the principal and superintendent roles and different skill sets are required. Combining the two positions means that there is no second authority to help resolve conflicts or handle the most extreme disciplinary issues.
15. Testimony and school documents indicate that the number, frequency and severity of student behavior referrals have increased since the departure of the full-time principal. Documents show 209 reported student behavior incidents by 62 students in all of 2007-08. Through February of the current school year, 42 students had been referred for 305 incidents.
16. Written behavioral referrals include incidents described as *fighting, harassment, chronic tardiness, truancy, unacceptable language, disrespect, disrespect to a faculty member, prohibited cell phone use, defiance, assault, property damage, bullying, sexual harassment, cheating, possession of a controlled substance, disruptive behavior, dress code violations and profanity.*
17. Since October 2007 serious incidents of student bullying and harassment have been documented in a series of school incident reports and, in some cases, law enforcement reports. In several incidents parents have become involved in defense of both the student victims and the aggressors, who have been characterized by their parents as innocent and wrongly accused.
18. Student disciplinary actions have been ineffective to correct behavior. Deterrents include lunch detention, in-house suspension under the supervision of the school secretary, and, on rare occasions, home-suspension of up to 5 days. Disciplinary actions have not been consistently enforced by the administrator. There have been no expulsions under the current administration despite incidents of student possession of illegal drugs.

There have also been no Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) referrals to address chronic truancy.<sup>1</sup>

19. Law enforcement is provided by deputies from the Sheriff's Sub-Station in Willits which is 45-60 minutes to the south. Deputies who were interviewed stated that they were unfamiliar with the District Civility Policy.
20. In several interviews, respondents openly discussed the robust local marijuana industry. Some observed that it creates a general disrespect for authority on the part of students and adults. Jurors were told that students are sometimes used by their families as "sentries and informants." Involvement in production of illegal drugs was also cited as undermining academic motivation and working at cross-purposes with the public school mandate to maintain a drug-free environment.
21. The strong drug sub-culture in the Leggett community makes it difficult for the school administrator or residents to invite the presence of law enforcement on campus without opening the door to drug-related investigations.
22. Family loyalties were cited by some as contributing to the current unrest. Some of those interviewed alluded to a strong social norm against ever involving law enforcement.
23. Families of some of the victims of bullying and/or sexual harassment have left the district.
24. Other adults related to both the victims and the accused aggressors have remained in the District. Several of these have disrupted the school campus in violation of the district's Civility Code and relevant sections of the California State Education and Penal Codes which prohibit any person from willfully disturbing any public school or any public school meeting.<sup>2</sup> Adult incident reports include:

- February 26, 2008: a school coach was confronted on the steps of the LVUSD gym and his life was threatened in retaliation for sexually inappropriate text messages that he and a student had exchanged. The coach was subsequently physically attacked on his way home.
- February 27, 2008: one parent approached and verbally attacked another parent near the school cafeteria. The administrator asked both parents to leave campus. The Sheriff was called by the parent who was attacked.
- March 3, 2008: four parents verbally attacked a teacher and were involved in a shouting match in the school parking lot. Only one parent was asked to leave and she returned to campus the same afternoon. The teacher reported this incident to law enforcement the following day.
- October 17, 2008: a parent addressed the school secretary, using rude and profane language claiming that her son was being unfairly "singled out" for disciplinary action after he had taken part in an incident on a school van the

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<sup>1</sup> LVUSD and other North County Districts refer truant students to the Willits SARB.

<sup>2</sup> The Leggett Valley Unified School District Civility Code and relevant Penal Code and Education Code are available by accessing this 2008-09 report on the Grand Jury website at [www.co.mendocino/grandjury](http://www.co.mendocino/grandjury)

day before. He and two other male students had pulled down their pants and underwear and rubbed their bare buttocks in the faces of two classmates while returning from an athletic event. The three aggressors were given 5-day suspensions by the investigating staff member but this was reduced to three-days by the administrator.

- October 31, 2008: a parent entered a classroom and, in front of the students, verbally threatened a teacher. The administrator reported the incident to law enforcement by phone but no disciplinary action was taken.
  - November 21, 2008: a parent demanded entry to a classroom and verbally accosted the teacher in a threatening manner for taking away a student cell phone that was being used improperly in class. No disciplinary action was taken.
  - February 27, 2009: seeking to confront a student who had been in an argument with his son, the same parent (as above incident) chased the student across campus and attempted to gain entrance to a locked room in which the student had taken refuge. Neither the administrator nor his designee was on campus. Law enforcement was not called. The administrator stated that he had “admonished the parent.” No further disciplinary action was taken.
  - March 11, 2009: at a school board meeting attended by the Grand Jury, there was a disruptive outburst during the public comment session. One parent was pushing and swearing at another at the school entry and in the parking lot. Neither the administrator nor the board acted to stop the altercation. Law enforcement records indicate that the administrator reported the event the following morning. No disciplinary action was taken.
25. Parents of several of the student aggressors have disrupted board meetings with angry demands that the board remove a teacher who they claim has treated their children unfairly. They have publicly berated the teacher in question and threatened the board that they will take their children out of the District unless this demand is met. This action would seriously impact the District’s budget.
26. The board has been unable to control these repeated parental disruptions that have occurred during its meetings and the incumbent administrator has failed to act in accordance with the Civility Policy and with Education Code § 32210 which states that “Any person who willfully disturbs any public school or any public school meeting is guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be punished by a fine of not more than five-hundred dollars (\$500).”
27. During the 2008-09 basketball season, the school board relaxed the academic standards required in order for students to participate in sports. This action effectively lowered the academic bar and undermined an important source of student motivation.
28. At least three staff members have resigned as a direct result of inappropriate behavior by students and/or parents and the administration’s failure to resolve these disciplinary issues. Some other long-term teachers and staff reported feeling personally threatened and fearful of becoming targets of unsubstantiated parental charges and losing their jobs.