



***COUNTRY SCHOOLS ARE ALIVE AND WELL
THREE RURAL DISTRICTS IN MENDOCINO COUNTY***

February 21, 2006

SUMMARY

As part of an ongoing survey of Mendocino County school districts, the Grand Jury undertook an assessment of the facilities, staffing, student populations and school/community relations in three rural districts.

BACKGROUND

Several years have passed since the Grand Jury visited various rural school districts in the outlying areas of the County. The 2005-2006 Grand Jury performed oversights on Arena Union Elementary School District and Pt. Arena Joint Union High School District in the south, Leggett Valley Unified School District in the north, and Anderson Valley Unified School District, located between the coast and the inland valleys.

METHODS

In the course of these oversights, the Grand Jury visited the school sites repeatedly, touring campuses and facilities while classes and/or outdoor activities were in session. Jurors interviewed administrators, teachers, classroom aides, classified employees and students at all sites, and reviewed district budgets, class schedules, student evaluation materials, and some teaching texts and materials.

COMMON FINDINGS

1. The three surveyed rural districts have a total enrollment of approximately 1,270 students; all offer pre-school programs.
2. The relatively small school populations enable school personnel to recognize and know virtually all their students.
3. Meeting State proficiency standards is the first concern of principals and, therefore, teachers.
4. The Average Daily Attendance (ADA) figures seem relatively stable and are perhaps increasing.
5. The vast majority of students are bused to and from these rural schools.
6. Gang activity, graffiti and vandalism are not major problems in the surveyed schools.

7. An enforced dress code for students seems to have solved several problems; it has eliminated gang attire worn by “wannabes” and appears to promote positive student behavior.
8. Negative incidents between ethnic groups are minimal, as is fighting on campus.
9. Drug-related incidents are minimal.
10. There is no known student use of meth on these campuses.
11. Competitive sports are universally popular; a high percentage of students in grades seven through twelve are involved in at least one school sport.
12. Transiency within the student population during the school year adversely affects the learning process.
13. Cases of autism are rising, especially in preschool and primary grades.
14. Important news and announcements are sent home to parents in both English and Spanish.
15. All schools have computer labs available to both elementary and secondary students; all classrooms contain at least one computer, usually more.
16. All schools offer cafeteria and food service, although staffing and student participation in preparation and service vary from school to school.
17. All schools have stocked and staffed libraries, although hours, materials and levels of staff certification differ from school to school.
18. Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE) provides legal and consulting services to the districts, financial services including planning, scholarship and college testing information, as well as opportunities for site administrators to meet and confer on a regular basis.

SCHOOL FINDINGS

Anderson Valley Unified School District

1. Anderson Valley Unified School District (AVUSD) has been a stable, flourishing educational system for many years at both the elementary and secondary levels; enrollment is presently approximately 590 students.
2. Every AVUSD senior high school student has a Personal Learning Plan which is reviewed at least twice yearly; each student has a faculty mentor who guides him/her through the four-year experience.
3. AVUSD offers the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program for all eligible students; participants seek to be the first members of their families to attend college.
4. The AVUSD Junior-Senior High School offers several Advanced Placement (AP) classes on site; these include Spanish Literature and Spanish for Native Speakers.

5. AVUSD offers an elective American Sign Language class which fulfills the foreign language graduation requirement.
6. AVUSD offers a Culinary Arts elective; students from the five classes assist in menu planning, food preparation, setting up, serving and actually cooking for the breakfasts, lunches and nutrition breaks for the entire school population.
7. The libraries in the AVUSD schools are staffed on a full-time basis and are open before and after school.
8. Thirty of the thirty-eight graduating AVUSD seniors in June 2005 entered two or four year colleges the following September.
9. The AVUSD works in conjunction with the Community Safety Committee; the district has instituted a Safety Plan and has distributed preparedness kits to the staff.
10. At least 70% of the Junior-Senior HS students are involved in at least one sport; the district traditionally produces championship soccer and volleyball teams.

Leggett Valley Unified School District

(The Grand Jury did not include the Whale Gulch K-12 school on the Lost Coast in their oversight visits.)

11. The Leggett Valley Unified School District maintains a campus on which are located the Leggett Valley High School (LVHS), the elementary school and the pre-school.
12. LVHS has 56 students, six teachers; not all teachers are full time. At present district enrollment is approximately 190 students.
13. Leggett Elementary School classes are combined 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 but differ in size each year, with usually under 20 students.
14. LVHS offers students the opportunity, during regularly scheduled class time, to take AP classes online.
15. Much of the LVHS plant has been renovated: the boiler room has given way to central heating, windows have been replaced with double-panes, and all bathrooms have been brought up to code.
16. The campus has a well designed library with wall stacks and several tables and chairs; it is open daily and before school, after school twice weekly, and by appointment. The classified staff in charge of the library has acted in this capacity for many years.
17. LV offers high school students who have difficulty learning in a regular classroom alternative education in a self-contained classroom; this program is housed in an aged, cramped trailer in a corner of the campus.
18. Ten of the thirteen LV 2004 graduating seniors have continued their education at two and four year colleges.

19. The Leggett community thinks of LV as a “basketball” school; two thirds of the high school students play basketball, offered as a team sport from third through twelfth grades.

Pt. Arena Joint Union High School District and Arena Union Elementary School District

19. After several turbulent years of high level administrative turnover, controversies and disruption within the district, the elementary and secondary schools of Pt. Arena have enjoyed over three years of stability and order . Enrollment is at present approximately 480 students.
20. Building on the Anderson Valley Personal Learning Plan model, Pt. Arena has compiled literacy standards and benchmarks for their K through 12 students in the READING WRITING SPEAKING plan, tailored specifically to the district’s population.
21. Pt. Arena High School offers the AVID program for all eligible students.
22. Pt. Arena High School offers students the opportunity, during regularly scheduled class time, to take AP classes online.
23. Through a combination of construction bonds and state funding, the dilapidated secondary school plant will soon be totally replaced; many new buildings are already in use.
24. Pacific Community High School, a charter school, shares the campus and facilities of Pt. Arena High School; Pacific Community co-enrolls in sports activities with Pt. Arena.
25. The two Pt. Arena districts have adapted the “Blended Model” program to meet the educational needs of all students. Using individualized materials within math and language arts Learning Centers, the Blended Program’s goal is to raise all student achievement to grade level and beyond.
26. Pt. Arena HS has a spacious, well-stocked library; certified staff is available three days a week. However, the band practices regularly in the center of the room; music stands and chairs, several instruments, amplifiers and other equipment are located between the stacks and the reading area.
27. Roughly 80% of the Pt. Arena High School graduates attend a two or four year college.
28. The two Pt. Arena districts have an official Community Safety Committee which includes a local EMT, a transportation representative, a cafeteria representative, a Board trustee, the school principals and a charter school representative.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. Anderson Valley USD be used as a model for its accepting bicultural environment and its program in which virtually all students of various

- ethnic backgrounds become bilingual before graduation. (Common findings 3,13, School findings 3,4,5)
2. the AVUSD, proud of success achieved in attracting and retaining Spanish-speaking students, be afforded the additional resources needed to assist and support this population. (Common findings 3,12, School findings 2,3,4,)
 3. the Leggett Valley USD continue to foster its supportive environment and knowledgeable attention to each individual. (Common finding 2)
 4. those high school students in Leggett Valley who attend the alternative education program be housed in a classroom that is as inviting as those of their fellow students. (School finding 17)
 5. MCOE and the Pt. Arena community do everything possible to support and continue the improvement within the Pt. Arena Joint Union High School District and Arena Unified Elementary School District; the dramatic decrease in turnover of trustees, administrators, teachers and students is clearly a positive turnaround in the health of these districts. (Common finding 4, School findings 19, 23)
 6. the Pt. Arena JUHSD, justifiably proud of its new buildings, not overlook the obvious: a library should be reserved for reading and research, not set up for regular band practice. (School finding 26)

Comments

“Schools should be the most beautiful structures in town”. This statement by a Mendocino County school administrator was meant literally, but its deeper meaning is surely felt by students, parents and staff of the three districts surveyed by the 2005-2006 Grand Jury.

In a County notorious for its drug tolerance and availability, there seems small evidence that hard drug use or genuine gang activity has gained a foothold in the elementary and secondary schools of Anderson Valley, Leggett and Pt. Arena. Alcohol and marijuana use on school sites is not unknown but uncommon.

Instead, the primary problem seems to be poverty: 75 to 80% of the students in the districts surveyed are on the free or reduced fee breakfast and lunch program. Tied to low income and high Hispanic and Native American populations in two of the schools is a second problem: high transiency rates. Affordable housing and long term, adequately compensated employment are hard to find in rural Mendocino. When circumstances become difficult, families move on, disrupting the education of their children.

Compounding this problem, a growing school population speaking English as a second language and increasing evidence of severe language impairment in pre-K and primary children make meeting the State Literacy Requirements a formidable task.

In spite of this, the three rural districts are in so many ways a success story. An inordinate percentage of graduates attend two and four year colleges, many on

well-earned scholarships. A huge percentage of the population is bussed to their schools: they arrive, eat breakfast, and attend classes, most with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. A small but dedicated group of parents work for and within each school district for the benefit of all students. Most importantly, 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 simply cannot duplicate.

The country schoolhouse may be wired for the Internet, but the educational family still exists for youth in the far corners of Mendocino.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

Superintendent, Mendocino County Office of Education (Common Findings 1 through 18, School Findings 1 through 28, Recommendations 1 through 6)

RESPONSES REQUESTED

Superintendent, Anderson Valley Unified School District (Common Findings 1 through 18, School Findings 1 through 10, Recommendations 1 and 2.)

Superintendent, Leggett Valley Unified School District (Common Findings 1 through 18, School Findings 11 through 18, Recommendations 3 and 4)

Superintendent, Pt. Arena Union High School District, Arena Union Elementary School District (Common Findings 1 through 18, School Findings 19 through 28, Recommendations 5 and 6)