

MIDLING THROUGH: A Report on Four Mendocino County Middle Schools

May 12, 2009

Summary

The 2008-09 Grand Jury conducted an oversight review of the four middle schools of the Ukiah, Willits and Fort Bragg Unified School Districts. Jurors explored perceptions about the county's sixth to eighth graders, the pressures they face, and the extent to which middle schools are addressing common concerns.

Confirmed concerns include widespread poverty and the number of youth who lack parental support for regular school attendance, positive health habits, and respectful, responsible behavior. Family involvement is low despite outreach efforts. School/Community relationships vary from strong in Fort Bragg to almost non-existent in Willits. While students report use of alcohol and illegal drugs that exceeds state averages, incidents of substance abuse on school campuses are rare. Reported use of alcohol and marijuana by Willits 7th graders is triple the statewide average. Substance use reported by students at all four schools increases dramatically between 7th and 9th grades, underscoring the importance of timely interventions.

Despite external pressures and increasingly severe budget constraints, Jurors observed focused, student-centered teaching and lively informal interactions among students and staff. Campuses are welcoming, attractive, supportive and safe for students with a wide range of needs and abilities.

Positive findings include the professionalism of personnel at all four sites and the support they receive from their districts and Mendocino County Office of Education. The state-mandated focus on math and English language arts (ELA) is supported by a companion emphasis on behavior that is consistently *safe, respectful and responsible*. Dress codes prohibit clothing that is provocative or that signals gang affiliation or drug use. Preventing physical or verbal harassment is a high priority. At-Risk students receive healthy meals and snacks free or at reduced cost and attend after school tutoring and enrichment programs.

Annual test scores place all four schools near the mid-point relative to other California middle schools; all are subject to interventions to boost math and ELA proficiency. District and county initiatives help staff track individual student performance and focus academic support. Jurors repeatedly heard middle school described with some urgency as a time of "transition" and as a "last chance" to gain basic skills required for independent learning and responsible adulthood.

Methods

Members of the 2008-09 Grand Jury conducted site visits, interviewed district superintendents, site administrators, teachers and classified personnel, and observed students interacting in formal and informal settings on the campuses of:

- Fort Bragg Middle School in Fort Bragg Unified School District (FBUSD)
- Pomolita Middle School in Ukiah Unified School District (UUSD)
- Eagle Peak Middle School in UUSD
- Baechtel Grove Middle School in Willits Unified School District (WUSD)

Jurors reviewed websites and numerous documents including: academic assessment data, *California Healthy Kids Surveys*, student/parent handbooks, school budgets, collective bargaining agreements and emergency response plans. School data included in this report are published electronically by the California Department of Education.¹

Background

Each year the Mendocino County Grand Jury conducts oversight reviews of one or more of the county's public schools. The 2008-09 Grand Jury chose to visit four Mendocino County middle schools to better understand the experience and pressures faced by the county's sixth to eighth graders. Jurors also explored the extent to which schools, families and communities are meeting the students' developmental needs.

While the primary purpose of this inquiry was to gain a broad perspective, as opposed to comparing the four school sites, many commonalities and a few significant differences emerged. These are discussed in the following findings.

Findings

Findings Common to the Four School Sites

1. The three district superintendents and three of the four principals have held their current positions for less than two full years, though all are experienced educators. All teachers hold required certifications.
2. Academic testing places all four schools near the mid-point relative to other California middle schools. Based on their test scores, all four schools are subject to Program Improvement (PI) interventions, including a recommendation that every student receive 1-2 hours of instruction in English language arts (ELA) and 60 minutes of mathematics each school day. English Language Learners (ELL) and those with low individual scores receive additional academic support.

¹ Standardized reports of California school performance data are available electronically at www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

3. Scheduling is a complex issue at all sites to meet PI requirements for instructional time and to provide time for professional development and collaboration among teachers to improve student learning.
4. The focus on math and ELA makes it extremely difficult to schedule classes in the arts, music, science, foreign languages and vocational skills.
5. In the course of this inquiry, jurors heard mounting concerns from administrators and teachers about the state budget crisis. Non-essential expenditures were cancelled early in the school year.
6. As of mid-January regularly scheduled state budget apportionments for public schools had been cancelled or delayed. Funding for most construction projects was frozen and non-credentialed staff members were anticipating the likelihood of mid-year layoffs.
7. In early March, districts were preparing layoff notices to meet the March 15 deadline specified by State Education Code. Administrators were hoping to rescind the notices when definitive state and federal budget impacts are known in August. Uncertainty and anxiety were evident at all sites.
8. Site visits revealed facilities that varied in age but were clean and regularly maintained despite cutbacks that have left schools with minimal janitorial services. Jurors were impressed by the absence of litter, graffiti or other signs of vandalism or gang activity.
9. All schools had inviting, well stocked libraries staffed by experienced librarians or trained library technicians. As classified staff, these highly valued individuals are at imminent risk of being laid off.
10. All sites depend on extensive transportation programs to serve their predominantly rural student populations. Fuel costs and budget cuts pose major obstacles to meeting student transportation needs for sports and other extracurricular activities. Some needs have been funded by booster clubs, but significant gaps remain and are expected to widen.
11. Transportation cutbacks are anticipated, though few had occurred at the time of this study. State law permits districts to charge for transportation. Shifting transportation costs to low-income families or to parent volunteers is difficult and raises serious safety and liability issues.
12. Wholesome meals are offered at all sites and are served with milk. Juice and bottled water are also offered in the cafeterias and in vending machines that carry a variety of healthy snacks. Consistent with state law, sugared snacks and soft drinks are not available on school campuses and may not be provided as rewards or performance incentives.
13. More than half of the students at each site receive free or reduced price meals. Students pay for meals with an assigned key code and the source of payment is not revealed.
14. Due to escalating food prices, meal programs have become more costly. Raising the price of meals makes them less accessible to students.
15. All sites are equipped with attendance and academic assessment software and employ electronic technology to track individual student performance and to communicate with parents about student progress. Some teachers establish websites for parent outreach.

16. All sites provide high speed connectivity, student computer labs and varying numbers of classroom computers, but insufficient tech support was reported as preventing full use of these resources.
17. All sites include ample playing fields and physical fitness facilities. Maintenance of these areas is targeted for budget cuts at some sites.
18. Large expanses of asphalt were observed at all sites. Potentially hazardous deterioration was evident on the Pomolita and Baechtel Grove campuses. This lack of maintenance was attributed to budget limitations.
19. All sites reported holding state mandated fire and "Safe and Secure" (lock down) drills but not all classrooms are equipped with opaque window coverings and interior locks for use in the event of a lock down situation. The high cost of these locks was mentioned repeatedly.
20. Teachers are provided with a combination of hard-wired and cell phones, hand-held radios and internet access to summon help in an emergency.
21. Jurors observed a few classrooms with missing fire extinguishers. When noted, response to this situation was prompt.
22. Both Willits and Ukiah have experienced recent lock down situations due to armed individuals near school campuses. Handling of these incidents was described as effective and highly professional.
23. Emergency Response Plans are of varying quality.
24. Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE) provides the districts with financial services, personnel audits, emergency response planning and coordination, electronic networking, and a wide variety of professional development opportunities. These services are appreciated and were uniformly described as supportive and of high quality.
25. MCOE also assists districts in writing some grants and in establishing some pilot programs in support of student learning. One current initiative is to establish optional summer "Algebra Academies" between seventh and eighth grades and "Science Academies" between eighth and ninth grades.
26. Apart from MCOE programs and limited sports events, staff and students have little contact with their peers in other rural communities around the county. Occasionally schools partner with other sites on special events that foster contact between students and staff.
27. All sites have access to full or part-time nurses and/or health technicians. Appropriate procedures are in place to secure and dispense student medications that are physician-prescribed and parent-approved.
28. Personnel at all sites reported a shortage of academic and mental health counseling services. This serious shortfall in student and family services is attributed both to a lack of funding and to a statewide shortage of certificated counselors.
29. All districts work with County Alcohol and Other Drugs Prevention (AODP) counselors to provide education and early substance intervention. School Resource Officers from local law enforcement agencies provide a presence on school campuses and teach GRIP (Gang Resistance is Paramount) classes. These programs are grant funded and the level of support varies widely.

30. Truancy is a chronic problem at all schools. Unexcused absences interfere with learning and impact school budgets by reducing Average Daily Attendance.
31. Credit was given to the Mendocino County District Attorney by all of the administrators for supporting the districts' School Attendance Review Boards (SARB) and enforcing truancy laws.

Findings Specific to Eagle Peak Middle School (UUSD)

32. Eagle Peak is an attractive, modern campus. It is the only one of the four sites to have been designed specifically as a middle school. Colorful, two-story buildings include open-air corridors and stairways with views of a central courtyard.
33. The gymnasium, playing fields and outdoor sports courts are well-maintained.
34. Funding for sports has been cut, but fundraising by committed parents and booster clubs still support some. Teachers and parents coach. UUSD holds a district track meet.
35. The attractive, small cafeteria is augmented by a large covered outdoor eating area. Meals are prepared offsite in the UUSD central kitchen according to a five-day repeating menu. They are reheated at each school.
36. The Principal is in his first year in this position after previously serving as an Assistant Principal at Ukiah High School.
37. Eagle Peak is perceived by some as the safer of UUSD's two middle schools. The Principal described safe and respectful behavior as a top priority.
38. To support a "zero tolerance" policy on bullying and develop positive social interactions, the "*Take Care of Two*" program requires each student to take responsibility for supporting one person on campus and one person off campus and to write to the Principal about their experiences at the end of the first quarter.
39. Even minimal evidence of gang affiliation is rare and is dealt with promptly. Belts and shoe laces in gang colors are prohibited by the dress code. Campus incidents involving drugs, alcohol or tobacco are also rare.
40. The Assistant Principal works half-time as an administrator and half-time as a counselor.
41. The teaching staff is fully credentialed, with an average of 17 years teaching experience. Only 10% are in their first or second year of teaching.
42. Despite declining enrollment, to date retirements have allowed Eagle Peak to downsize by staff attrition rather than through layoffs.
43. The school Emergency Response Plan is not consistent with MCOE guidelines and does not include clearly stated individual assignments and responsibilities. The plan lacks a media directory to facilitate community contact through radio and television stations during an emergency. Upgrading the plan is an identified priority.
44. Some of the relatively small classrooms were crowded and lacked designated space for student backpacks. These were left in the outside walkway, creating potential obstacles in the event of an emergency evacuation.

45. In response to its status as a Program Improvement school, Eagle Peak has introduced block scheduling in an attempt to ensure that every student receives the recommended amount of daily instruction in mathematics and ELA instruction. At present not all students are receiving the full 60 minutes of math and 1-2 hours of ELA.
46. The schedule is structured to permit regular meetings of teachers by grade level and by subject. These meetings allow teachers to discuss progress and individualize teaching for each student. Regular meetings also support interdisciplinary projects.
47. The schedule is arranged to allow students to take Spanish and to choose between choir, art and/or band. No classes are offered in traditional vocational skills such as cooking, woodworking or agriculture.
48. Most classes provide some kind of hands-on learning at least monthly and teachers reported collaborating on interdisciplinary projects.
49. The teachers' contract includes grade level team meetings and collaborative Wednesday meetings that are used for professional development.
50. School policies and behavioral expectations are communicated through assemblies, a student handbook, summer mailers and back-to-school nights. Teachers send home grading policies and collect parent signatures.
51. Comprehensive information on school policies and programs is provided in a series of loose handouts. These documents are not dated.
52. Most student and parent information is offered only in English, despite the fact that approximately one-third of the students are of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity.
53. A small core group of families participate in Athletic Booster Clubs, PTA (Parent Teacher Association), the Site Council and Back-to-School nights. There are no classroom volunteers.
54. Parent meetings are scheduled for in-coming students and eighth grade parent nights are held to prepare students for the transition to high school. English and math teachers provide recommendations to the high school counselors who review records, test students and develop academic plans for each student. Parents review and sign their student's academic schedule.
55. The principal reported being "in touch" with Tribal leaders about their counseling services and after school tutoring. The District monitors to ensure that required family outreach nights for students who qualify under Title VII (American Indian) and Title I (academically challenged).

Findings Specific to Pomolita Middle School (UUSD)

56. Pomolita was originally constructed as Ukiah's high school and still provides science labs, a woodworking shop, track and the former football field that is now used for soccer. Approximately 600 students occupy a facility that was built for twice as many.
57. During a recent renovation, some former classrooms were re-purposed as technology labs, a well-equipped weight and exercise room and a wrestling room with a climbing wall.

58. The cafeteria is clean, in good repair, and large enough to allow all students to eat during a common lunch period. Centrally prepared meals are delivered daily and reheated on site.
59. The gymnasium and other sports facilities are ample, but Jurors observed extensive areas of cracked and deteriorating asphalt. They were told that while replacement is a high priority, replacement funds are unavailable. The cost of resurfacing was estimated to be at least \$180,000.
60. The school has a large, well-maintained library with a Library Tech on duty six hours a day.
61. The Principal is in her second year at Pomolita, having held this position previously in Redwood Valley. Morale and collaboration among staff members is reportedly much improved under the current leadership.
62. Pomolita had to reduce staff by two teachers for the 2008-09 school year but was able to keep all tenured teachers and one experienced 6th grade teacher who transferred from Eagle Peak.
63. The new Principal has activated a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). She is stressing interaction between the school and community and regularly accepts speaking engagements with community groups.
64. Art classes and two sections of band are offered. There is currently no choir. A "Teen Life" elective class includes some cooking and sewing, keyboarding, gardening and health education. A leadership class is offered as an after-school program. Students from other schools attend a Career Day held at Pomolita.
65. Sports include cross country running, wrestling, track and field, soccer, softball and basketball. Some teams compete with Eagle Peak and Fort Bragg. Intramural sports are offered at lunch time.
66. The site's emergency response plan is well organized along the guidelines set by MCOE, but the media contact list is incomplete and no community Listservs are shown.

Findings Specific to Baechtel Grove (WUSD)

67. Baechtel Grove Middle School was built in the 1950s as a K-8 campus located adjacent to a historic woodlands. The campus currently serves approximately 350 sixth-to-eighth graders, about half of its original capacity.
68. Permanent structures are augmented by rows of portables separated by long uncovered walkways. Many of the portables are in sub-standard condition.
69. Recent upgrades include attractively renovated bathrooms and locker rooms and installation of landscaping and perimeter sidewalks that direct pedestrian traffic and have improved safety.
70. The school's location makes the campus attractive to the public as a short-cut across town. Signs are posted excluding unauthorized individuals and trespassers are promptly escorted off campus.
71. Fire and lock down drills are held as required by state law. The school responded with a prompt and efficient lock-down during a shooting incident several blocks from campus in 2007-08.

72. The site Emergency Response Plan is comprehensive and follows the format provided by MCOE. It includes a useful list of acronyms. The plan lacks a media directory to facilitate community contact through radio and television stations during an emergency.
73. Sixty-nine percent of Baechtel Grove students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. A variety of meals are prepared in a small kitchen adjacent to the cafeteria and are served in shifts, by grade level. Outside dining is permitted in designated locations.
74. Sports facilities include playing fields, a ball wall, exercise room and mat rooms housed in adapted portables, and a spacious gymnasium that was built with community support in the 1980s.
75. A small Community Day School, housed in portables on the perimeter of the campus, serves students whose behavior is inconsistent with attendance in the regular classrooms.
76. Despite cutbacks in janitorial and landscape funding, the school was clean and grass areas well-maintained. Deteriorating asphalt poses some trip hazards.
77. At the time of the site visit, the inviting library was open and supervised four days a week by an experienced library technician who had been with WUSD for many years.
78. The library position was identified as vulnerable to likely mid-year budget cuts. Baechtel has already lost one teacher and some counseling, administrative and janitorial services.
79. WUSD has endured seven years of budget cuts including \$500,000 in 2007-08 and an anticipated cut of at least \$500,000 in the current year. It is still stinging from the loss of a \$39 parcel tax by fewer than 100 votes.
80. A strong booster club raised about \$30,000 in 2007-08 for sports and other programs and to compensate for early cuts in transportation for athletics.
81. A federal 21st Century Grant keeps the campus open until 6:00 p.m. for tutoring, enrichment programs and athletics.
82. Baechtel Grove has a Violence Prevention Grant to fund a School Resource Officer and is preparing applications for additional state grant funding.
83. The Baechtel Grove Principal has held this position for six years and has initiated significant facilities projects and overseen increasing emphasis on curriculum improvements and coordination with elementary and high school faculty.
84. Students receive two periods each of ELA and Math and teachers meet regularly in departmental teams.
85. WUSD and MCOE support a strong math program because of the extremely low number of students who test proficient in this subject.
86. Enrollment in the music and arts classes is increasing. A required arts program is in its second year.
87. Fifth graders visit the school prior to enrolling in sixth grade and are welcomed by eighth graders through the WEB (Welcome Everybody!) program. A similar program has been developed at the high school to ease the transition of entering freshmen.

88. Entering at-risk students attend a three-week summer program. Those who test two or more years below grade level in reading are placed in a corrective reading core classroom where they study history and literature with on-going assistance to develop reading skills.
89. The Principal and teachers expressed frustration at the lack of parent involvement despite offering coffee chats and parent tours. Turnout at school functions is extremely low. There is an active site council, but efforts to establish a PTO have been largely unsuccessful.
90. Baechtel Grove partners with Kids' Club and Alienza and has relationships with Ukiah Fire and Police Departments, Rotary, and the local hospital.

Findings Specific to Fort Bragg Middle School (FBUSD)

91. Fort Bragg Middle School occupies one wing of the City's historic high school campus which also includes Cotton Auditorium and the Redwood Coast Senior Center. Built in the late 1930s, the school and Cotton Auditorium have recently undergone a major rehabilitation to bring them up to code while preserving their historic integrity. The result is a campus that is a source of pride to students, faculty and the broader community.
92. Solar panels will be installed on the middle school roof during the summer of 2009 as part of a project that will ultimately include panels at all sites and will provide 90% of the District's electricity.
93. Students have access to the professional quality performing arts facility, playing fields and a spacious gymnasium.
94. Infrastructure for a new school garden has recently been installed with funding and labor provided by the Campbell Timber Group. A collaboration is being explored with the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens Master Gardeners Program to help develop the garden.
95. Nutritious meals are prepared on site and served in an attractive, but noisy cafeteria. Students can gather around adjacent outdoor tables, but food is no longer permitted outside due to concerns about contamination by the ever-present gulls.
96. The large, well-stocked library features natural light from windows that overlook a tree-filled canyon. Mosaic murals depict historic scenes of Mendocino County. The librarian maintains a glass case with a rotating display honoring students and staff with birthdays in the current month.
97. Halls and classrooms are unusually spacious and banks of lockers are provided for student use.
98. Sports facilities include playing fields and a recently renovated gymnasium that was noteworthy for the absence of insulation.
99. The Emergency Response Plan is the most comprehensive of the four plans reviewed. It includes detailed assignments for all staff, with alternates appointed for key tasks. A media directory is included to facilitate county-wide emergency outreach. The Administrative Council meets regularly to work on the plan. Principals communicate details to teachers at their sites.
100. Emergency fire blankets are provided in science labs.

101. School policies are provided in a comprehensive student handbook with an index and table of contents. Review of this document by both students and parents is required. School communications are provided in both English and Spanish and staff work with Migrant Education to communicate with non-English speaking families.
102. The District is in the second of a three year consulting contract to implement the *Positive Behavior Support Program* as a way to support consistent behavior standards that are understood and positively reinforced by teachers and student leaders. Family nights are offered to encourage parents to learn to reinforce desired behaviors. Child care and desserts are provided during the sessions and parent participation has increased steadily.
103. Block scheduling has been introduced to give more instructional time to math and ELA. A collegial coaching program is in place to help small groups of teachers become more reflective about their teaching and learn to engage students actively in the learning process.
104. The Principal has an extensive counseling background and is in her second year in her current role. Staff morale appeared to be high.
105. Jurors heard reports of generally strong relationships between the school and local non-profits and businesses. A School Resource Officer assists in campus oversight and gang prevention programs. There are currently no programs with the Redwood Coast Senior Center which is contiguous to the Middle School facility.

General Findings re: Demographics and External Factors

Table I (below) summarizes demographic statistics for the four observed schools.

Middle School Populations—Fall 2008 (Self-reported CBEDS)	Eagle Peak (UUSD)	Pomolita (UUSD)	Baechtel Grove (WUSD)	Fort Bragg (FBUSD)
Number of Students	348	629	356	414
% of Students who are:				
American Indian ²	4.9%	6%	8.7%	1%
Hispanic/Latino	34.1%	38%	23.4%	38%
Non-Hispanic White	55.1%	50%	64.9%	57%
Other	5.9%	6%	2.8%	4%
% Free/Reduced Price meals	65.2%	68%	69%	75%
Average Class Size	20	28	27	22

² For purposes of establishing a school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating each demographic subgroup of significant size must meet its established growth target.

General Findings re: School Accountability Progress Reporting

106. Jurors repeatedly heard middle school described with some urgency as a period of “transition” and as a “last chance” to gain basic academic and social skills required for independent learning and responsible adulthood.
107. The State of California has established content and testing standards for ELA and mathematics that all students are expected to achieve. Particular emphasis is currently being placed on teaching algebra to all eighth graders because early success in this subject has been shown to predict future academic achievement.
108. Algebra and Science Academies will be offered in summer 2009.
109. California Accountability Progress Reporting (APR) measures and reports whether schools meet state and federal requirements. All data are collected and posted annually on the California Department of Education website.
110. The California Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999 requires statewide evaluation based on standardized testing. Test results are expressed as each school’s Academic Performance Index (API). The API is used to determine the next year’s target for growth toward the statewide goal for all schools to achieve a minimum of 800 out of a possible 1000 test points.
111. Schools that fail to meet their growth targets and those with API scores in the lower half of the statewide distribution are eligible to participate in local and state intervention programs designed to increase student proficiency in ELA and mathematics.
112. All schools that receive federal funding also receive an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).
113. A school’s AYP is based on a) the percentage of students tested; b) the overall percentage of students who score proficient or above in ELA and mathematics; c) percent participation and percent proficient or above in each designated ethnic, economic, or ability-related sub-group. A satisfactory AYP requires that all sub-groups meet participation and proficiency targets.
114. NCLB requires that targets increase yearly until 2013-14 when all schools are required to have 100% of their students performing at or above grade level on statewide tests.
115. Whereas Jurors heard generally positive responses to the challenging California standards and assessments, NCLB was widely criticized by educators as establishing expectations that are virtually impossible to achieve. NCLB is also criticized because adequate funding is not provided to cover the cost of required testing and reporting.
116. Schools that fail to meet growth targets after one year of program improvement funding, are subject to local intervention through the county office of education. After two years, they are subject to state sanctions and are required to participate in formalized interventions. These schools are said to be in “Program Improvement (PI).”

117. Schools that are in PI are required to provide each student with one to two hours of daily instruction in ELA and one hour in mathematics. English language learners and students who test below proficient levels are required to have additional remedial instruction.
118. The block scheduling necessary to meet these requirements also allows grade level meetings so that teachers can review student progress and shape instruction to individual needs.
119. Block scheduling makes it difficult to also offer science and electives, including art, music and life skills. It also requires a level of staffing that may not be sustainable given budget cutbacks.
120. Some ELA and history teachers described the longer instructional periods as useful. At least one math teacher thought the blocked time exceeded the attention span of her students and was a poor fit with the pacing of the math curriculum.
121. All four of the middle schools described in this report have been in PI for at least four years. They will remain in PI status until they meet their API growth targets in two consecutive years
122. Table II (below) describes the Program Improvement Status of the four sites.

Table II

	Eagle Peak	Pomolita	Baechtel Grove	Fort Bragg Middle Sch.
Program Improvement Status	Year 5	Year 5	Year 5	Year 4
California Academic Performance Index 2008 API Base/Growth (Statewide target API is 800 of 1,000 possible)	681/669 (-12) Goal not achieved	681/717 (+36) Goal achieved	695/706 (+11) Goal achieved	708/726 (+18) Goal achieved
No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Status	AYP not achieved. Targets for % proficient not achieved by several sub-groups in either English Language Arts or Math	AYP not achieved. English Language Learners did not achieve growth targets	AYP not achieved. Most sub-groups did not achieve growth targets in math	AYP achieved

Findings re Healthy Kids Surveys and Counseling Resources

123. The *California Healthy Kids Survey* is designed to help schools assess the physical and emotional well-being of their students and design appropriate interventions to ensure healthy development. Data are based on anonymous self-reports of student behavior and can be influenced by many factors. Table III (below) presents responses to selected Healthy Kids Survey items from students at the four schools.

Table III

Healthy Kids Survey Student Responses	Ukiah Unified School District Pomolita and Eagle Peak Middle Schools³		Baechtel Grove Middle School (WUSD)⁴		Fort Bragg Middle School (FBUSD)⁵	
	7th	9th	7th	9th	7th	9th
% who drank alcohol in past thirty days...	16%	40%	33%	53%	26%	38%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	12%	24%	12%	24%	10%	25%
% engaged in heavy “binge” drinking in past thirty days	9%	22%	17%	38%	6%	25%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	5%	12%	5%	12%	5%	12%
% who used marijuana in past thirty days...	8%	23%	14%	35%	5%	20%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	5%	13%	5%	13%	4%	12%
% <u>ever</u> drunk or high on school property...	5%	18%	14%	39%	8%	13%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	3%	12%	5%	13%	3%	12%
% who think daily or almost daily use of alcohol is “somewhat” to “extremely” harmful...	74%	78%	80%	84%	90%	92%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	94%	92%	94%	92%	94%	92%
% who think daily or almost daily use of marijuana is “somewhat” to “extremely” harmful...	72%	76%	76%	82%	83%	82%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	96%	92%	96%	92%	96%	92%

³ Based on Fall 2007 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

⁴ Based on Spring 2008 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

⁵ Based on Fall 2006 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

Healthy Kids Survey Student Responses Continued	Ukiah Unified School District Pomolita and Eagle Peak Middle Schools⁶		Baechtel Middle School (WUSD)⁷		Fort Bragg Middle School (FBUSD)⁸	
	7th	9th	7th	9th	7th	9th
% who reported being harassed on school property for any of five "hate-crime" reasons ⁹ ...	32%	34%	39%	34%	36%	36%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	28%	25%	28%	25%	27%	24%
% who reported that they "consider themselves to be a gang member"...	8%	14%	8%	11%	11%	8%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	10%	13%	10%	10%	10%	13%
% 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 caring relationships	36%	27%	43%	46%	33%	36%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	30%	24%	30%	24%	30%	24%
% who report high expectations	52%	40%	54%	49%	45%	39%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	44%	34%	44%	34%	44%	34%
% who report meaningful participation in school...	18%	11%	24%	13%	9%	23%
<i>State Average (%)</i>	14%	12%	14%	12%	14%	12%

⁶ Based on Fall 2007 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

⁷ Based on Spring 2008 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

⁸ Based on Fall 2006 Administration of *Healthy Kids Survey*

⁹ Harassment is designated as a "hate-crime" reason if it is because of another's religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical/mental disability, or race, ethnicity or national origin.

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. All school site emergency response plans include community ListServes and telephone 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.

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

1. Ukiah Unified School District Superintendent (Findings 1-31, 106-124, 32-66; Recommendations 1-10)
2. Eagle Peak Middle School Principal (Findings 1-31, 106-124 and 32-55; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7 and 10)
3. Pomolita Middle School Principal (Findings 1-31, 106-124 and 56-66; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7 and 10)
4. Willits Unified School District Superintendent (Findings 1-31, 106-124 and 67-90; Recommendations 1-10).
5. Baechtel Grove Middle School Principal (Findings 1-31, 106-124 and 67-90; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7 and 10)
6. Fort Bragg Unified School District Superintendent (Findings 1-31, 106-124 and 91-105; Recommendations 1-4 and 6-10)
7. Fort Bragg Middle School Principal (Findings 11-31, 106-124 and 91-105; Recommendations 1-3, 6-7 and 10)
8. Mendocino County Superintendent of Education (Findings 15, 16, 24-26, 43, 66, 72, 85; Recommendations 8 and 9)
9. Board of Supervisors (Findings 28, 29, 73, 123, 124; Recommendations 4 and 11)

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