

Abdication of Leadership and Disciplinary Breakdowns in Leggett Valley Unified School District

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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 LVUSD 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.

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."

Methods

Members of the Grand Jury spent three full days on the Leggett Valley Pre-K to 12th 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.

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-12th 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.¹

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.² 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 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

¹ LVUSD and other North County Districts refer truant students to the Willits SARB.

² 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

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.
29. LVUSD has enacted a Civility Policy which specifies how individuals are expected to behave on campus. This policy references relevant Education

and Penal Code Sections that require fines and/or jail sentences for offenders.

30. Education Code § 32211 (a) authorizes the school principal or the designee of the principal to request any person whose presence the principal believes will be disruptive or interfere with classes of the public school program to leave the grounds. The person who is requested to leave has the right to appeal that determination to the superintendent. That appeal shall be made no later than the second succeeding school day and a reply shall be given within 24 hours.
31. Education Code § 44810 (a) states that "...Every minor over 16 years of age or adult who is not a pupil of the school, including but not limited to any such minor or adult who is the parent or guardian of a pupil of the school, who comes upon any school ground or into any schoolhouse and there willfully interferes with the discipline, good order, lawful conduct, or administration of any school class or activity of the school, with the intent to disrupt, obstruct, or to inflict damage to property or bodily injury upon any person, is guilty of a misdemeanor." This section further sets forth penalties including fines of up to \$1,000 and imprisonment for up to 90 days in a county jail.
32. Education Code § 44811 states that "Any parent, guardian, or other person whose conduct in a place where a school employee is required to be in the course of his or her duties materially disrupts class work or extracurricular activities or involves substantial disorder is guilty of a misdemeanor."
33. The LVUSD Civility Policy specifies that "When violence is directed against an employee or theft against property, employees *shall* promptly report the occurrence to their principal or supervisor and complete an Incident Report. Employees and supervisors *should* complete an Incident Report *and* report to law enforcement, any attack, assault or threat made against them on School/District premises."
34. When questioned about missing and incomplete Incident Reports and his repeated failure to promptly contact law enforcement, the incumbent administrator responded, "Talk to my attorney about that. The Civility Policy is interpretive." In response to several other questions, the incumbent administrator also repeatedly advised the Grand Jury to "...talk to my attorney."
35. Education Code § 32211 (e) requires that all entrances to a public school campus be posted with the school hours, defined as the period commencing one hour before classes begin and one hour after classes end. Typically, all visitors are required to check in at school offices and secure a pass before proceeding onto campus.
36. Unlike other public school campuses, the Grand Jury saw no posting of school hours and no signs directing visitors to check in at the school office.
37. Despite repeated adult disruptions, the District does not regularly hold lock down drills.
38. The Grand Jury heard further complaints that the school site administrator has not fulfilled his responsibility to implement the curriculum. Among these complaints are the following:

- In November 2008, mathematics instructional materials were not yet available.
- In February 2009, elementary science and social studies materials had not yet been ordered.
- For more than half of the 2008-09 school year, Spanish students have been taught by substitutes who are unfamiliar with the language.
- On April 1, the administrator stated that students were using a computerized language program called *Rosetta Stone*, but Jurors heard conflicting testimony that the language program was not yet installed.
- Parents and teachers reported that no meaningful instruction or assessment of Spanish students had taken place since the first grading period.
- High school students who remained registered in the Spanish class in the second and third grading periods were given the same grade they had earned from the qualified Spanish teacher during the first grading period.
- Spanish grades were filed over the name of the qualified teacher who had been placed on administrative leave. Subsequently this teacher requested in writing that the teacher's name be removed from grading reports, since neither teaching nor assessment had taken place during the administrative leave.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that Leggett Valley Unified School District:

1. make it a top priority to a) employ a full-time principal for the Leggett campus and b) employ a District superintendent who has had demonstrated success in managing student and parent behavior as well as effectively enforcing disciplinary policies. (Findings 13-16, 25)
2. consider contracting with the California School Board Association to conduct the District's administrator searches. (Findings 9-11)
3. contract with a qualified consultant to implement a multi-year, school-wide program to establish and enforce norms of student and adult behavior that are conducive to learning and to personal and academic achievement. (Findings 16-22, 25-29)
4. provide annual ethics, sexual harassment and incident management trainings for school board members and all employees, including part-time coaches, and school board members. (Findings 8, 18, 24)
5. direct the District administrator to hold regular lock down drills. (Finding 25, 38)
6. establish a closed campus during school hours and require a signed pass for any parent or other visitor seeking to access areas other than the school

office when classes are in session. Include this requirement in the Civility Policy and enforce any and all violations. (Findings 25, 36-38)

7. direct the District administrator to post all campus entrances prohibiting unauthorized access and stating consequences pursuant to Education Code § 32211(e) and § 44810 and Penal Code § 626.8 and § 627.7. (Findings 25, 30, 36-37)
8. direct the District administrator to promptly report to the Sheriff any and all violations of relevant sections of the Education and Penal Codes as referenced in the LVUSD Civility Policy and fully support the Sheriff and District Attorney in enforcing these laws. (Findings 20, 25, 30-35)
9. direct the District administrator to report on behavioral referrals, incident reports and Civility Policy violations at each regular board meeting (in closed session, if recommended by District Counsel) to monitor and ensure implementation of the Student Disciplinary Policy and Civility Policy. (Findings 16, 18-19, 25, 30)
10. make classroom video surveillance available to any teacher who believes that either safety or their personal credibility could be at risk. (Finding 29)
11. direct the District administrator to post the Williams complaint procedure in all classrooms. (Finding 39)
12. direct the District administrator to engage faculty in providing input to curriculum decisions in a timely manner and ensure that the adopted books and materials are available to all students as required by the Williams Settlement. (Finding 39)

The Grand Jury also recommends that:

13. the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office require that deputies assigned to the North County familiarize themselves with the Leggett Valley Unified School District Civility Policy and that they respond promptly to calls and arrest all violators of the Education and Penal Code Sections included in the District Civility Policy. (Findings 20, 30-34)
14. the Mendocino County District Attorney's Office prosecute all violations of the Leggett Valley Unified School District Civility Policy to the full extent of the law. (Findings 30-34)
15. the County Superintendent of Education exercise his authority and monitor and support progress by the LVUSD school board and new administrators to establish uniform behavioral expectations and restore civility to the school community. (Findings 8, 13, 16-19, 25-39)

Discussion

Small, rural school districts play a vital role in their communities. They provide jobs, address a wide variety of educational, health and social needs, and unify local residents around the central task of educating and socializing successive generations.

Responding to a flurry of complaints from Leggett Valley, the Grand Jury found a tense and divided school community suffering from damaging rumors and a lack of effective administration in the face of disruptive behavior by students and parents.

Numerous interviews and documents revealed deteriorating student and parental behavior and a lack of the uniform, appropriate discipline, trust and basic civility that are essential for effective teaching and learning.

Several respondents described the robust local marijuana industry as creating a general disrespect for authority on the part of students and adults and as being at odds with the public school mandate to maintain a drug-free environment.

A drug-related sub-culture influences the life of the community, making it difficult for the school administration or community members to invite the presence of law enforcement without opening the door to drug-related investigations. Family loyalties and family disputes were both cited by some as contributing to the current unrest, but several of those interviewed alluded to a strong social norm against calling in law enforcement.

In the past school year, LVUSD has lost faculty, staff and about 20% of its small student population. Other individuals are expressing a need to leave unless the school community can regain its positive climate as a safe, productive learning environment. The Grand Jury sincerely hopes that this will be the case, but it will not happen without new site leadership and increased support by MCOE, the County Sheriff and the District Attorney.

The divisiveness that has taken root in the community will not be healed easily or quickly. It will require a sincere effort by all concerned to set aside their animosities and commit to civil behavior and effective problem solving if LVUSD is to focus, once again, on the teaching, learning, and positive social development of the students for whom the District exists.

Required Responses

Leggett Valley Unified School District Superintendent (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Leggett Valley Unified School District Board of Directors (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Superintendent of Schools (Findings 8, 13, 16-19, 25-39; Recommendation 14)

Mendocino County Sheriff (Findings 20, 30-34; Recommendation 12)

Mendocino County District Attorney (Findings 30-34; Recommendation 13)