



Hats Off to Round Valley!

**A 2007-08 Grand Jury Report on:
Round Valley Unified School District
Covelo, California**

HATS OFF TO ROUND VALLEY: A Report on Round Valley Unified School District

April 3, 2008

Summary

The 2007-08 Grand Jury conducted an oversight of Round Valley Unified School District (RVUSD) and found an isolated, deeply troubled school community in early recovery from an extended leadership crisis. Despite progress during three years of oversight by Mendocino County Office of Education (MCOE), administrative functions remained in disarray. Truancy and student misconduct were at critical levels in May 2007 when MCOE assigned a full-time Recovery Specialist to superintend the District. Additional MCOE staff joined the Intervention Team in fall of 2007. At that time, test scores for students in Round Valley Elementary/Middle and High Schools were in the bottom 1% of California schools despite a 200 point gain over the preceding three years.¹

Six months later:

- MCOE is contracting with the District to provide essential administrative services.
- All Elementary/Middle and High School teachers are credentialed and working within their subject areas.
- Classroom aides have Associate of Arts Degrees (AA) and/or a proficiency certificate in either reading or math.
- Instructional specialists help teachers focus on student achievement in math and English/Language Arts. Beginning teachers receive additional support.
- Interviewees reported marked improvement in staff morale and student behavior.
- District-wide staff development is on-going to establish consistent behavioral norms that foster positive social development and academic achievement.²
- The Tribal community is represented on the School Board and Board members are committed to their own on-going professional development.
- A Parent/Teacher Organization (PTO) and other student-focused Tribal and community groups are beginning to form.

In February 2008, the Round Valley School Board adopted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with MCOE to retain the current recovery structure for an additional 18 months. During this time, MCOE will continue its leadership role. The Recovery Specialist will serve as District Superintendent, working collaboratively with the Round Valley School Board and reporting to the County Superintendent. If the District continues to make necessary progress, a search will be undertaken for a permanent District Superintendent. MCOE

¹ Information on the State Accountability Academic Performance Index (API) is available online at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/>

² A description of the *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* professional development program is available on the National Technical Assistance Website at <http://www.pbis.org/>

will continue in an oversight role for the first 12 months under the new administrator.

Methods

The Grand Jury reviewed numerous documents and websites of the California Department of Education (CDE) and Mendocino County Office of Education. Jurors conducted four school site visits and interviewed MCOE and RVUSD administrators, consultants, teachers, students, safety personnel, School Board Members and staff of the Round Valley Tribal Administration.

Background

As part of an ongoing review of Mendocino County school districts, the 2007-08 Grand Jury conducted an oversight of RVUSD Elementary/Middle and High Schools. Located in the town of Covelo, approximately one and one-half hours northeast of Willits, the District serves youth from the Round Valley Tribal Community and the surrounding rural area.

Round Valley's 224 Elementary/Middle School students and 111 High School students are among the most geographically and culturally isolated in the State.³ Poverty is so pervasive that 100% of them qualify for free school breakfasts and lunches through the National School Lunch Program.

Administrative turnover and an on-going leadership crisis have steadily eroded educational programs. In 2004, after student test scores plunged into the bottom 1% in the State, Round Valley Elementary/Middle School became subject to State intervention by a School Assistance Intervention Team (SAIT). In 2007, low test scores qualified Round Valley High School for a "high priority grant" for supplemental teacher professional development. This is the first stage of intervention for low-performing high schools.⁴

Since the SAIT process was initiated, RVUSD has worked closely with MCOE to ensure that:

- 100% of teachers are credentialed and teaching in their areas of certification;
- all students have access to State-approved curriculum materials;
- classroom instruction is closely structured to foster achievement of State-mandated standards for Math and English/Language Arts (ELA);
- fiscal, personnel and facilities management systems are in order;
- governing RV School Board Policies are current and publicly disseminated.

Once a school has been identified for intervention, it has five years in which to

³ CBEDs data as of January 22, 2008.

⁴ Pursuant to Education Code Section 52055.5, schools not meeting growth targets and failing to show significant growth are subject to state sanctions including assumption of all legal rights and powers of the governing board and reorganization or closure of the school.

raise its Academic Performance Index (API) two years in a row. The API is based on annual STAR (California Standardized Testing and Reporting) results. It is one way that the State holds a school accountable for educating its students. When students fail to show required improvement, the State can take over, establish a charter school, or even close the entire District.

Round Valley Elementary School students have gained more than 200 points on their API score since the intervention began in 2004. In 2006-07 students demonstrated a 42 point gain; however, the school has yet to show improvement *two years in a row*.

Test performance in the High School has been less encouraging than in the Elementary School. In 2006, several families allowed their students to *opt out* of testing. Other students chose not to follow the test procedures. Resulting test scores did not accurately reflect student learning. An error in reporting the school drop-out rate contributed to the State's rejection of the year's scores.

Current goals for K-8 students are to continue the positive attendance and academic trends, and to prepare youth for a smooth transition to high school. At the high school level, improved attendance is the paramount goal because it is a necessary condition for improving academic achievement and graduation rates.

Findings Re: Demographics and Other External Factors

1. Round Valley Tribal youth comprise 75-80% of the District's ~ 350 students.
2. Unemployment in the valley is ~ 56%. Housing is limited and costly in relation to available jobs.
3. The illegal drug industry dominates the Round Valley economy.
4. One-hundred-percent (100%) of RVUSD students qualify for free meals through the National School Lunch Program. Meals are prepared in a central kitchen and served in the District's multi-purpose room.
5. Many students experience domestic violence and unstable home environments. Abuse of alcohol and illegal drugs is widespread.
6. Round Valley has few coordinated programs that focus the schools, Tribe and other community members on strong families, healthy children and academic success.
7. Deeply embedded family loyalties discourage organized gang activity, but, on occasion, family rivalries lead to divisive and violent behavior.
8. Round Valley residents have limited access to medical and dental care, counseling, and other health-related services.
9. Transportation is a chronic problem. The tradition of traveling as a family outside the Valley interferes with school attendance and disrupts learning.
10. The number of working adults is reduced by a lack of local jobs, making it difficult to enlist experienced people to work as Regional Occupation Program (ROP) instructors or to volunteer in the schools.

11. Due to isolation and economic conditions, some families leave Round Valley to seek more prosperous conditions. These factors also make it difficult to attract and retain teachers, staff, and other public service employees. They directly impact student social development and academic achievement.

Findings Re: Campus and Classroom Facilities

12. The campus consists of a K-8 Elementary/Middle School, the High School, Community Day School, Pre-School, ROP shop and agricultural facilities, a music studio, and counseling and tutorial spaces. Students share a gymnasium, central kitchen and multi-purpose room/cafeteria.
13. The campus is fenced and gated on the main street. Gates remain open during the day and are locked at night and on weekends.
14. The main school buildings were constructed in 1959. Several more recent permanent structures and modular units also house classes. All are in reasonably good condition.
15. The District maintains athletic fields for track, football, soccer and baseball. Well-maintained separate playground areas are provided for the pre-school center and elementary students. Updated equipment is in sound condition.
16. A new central heating system, installed in 2007 in the gym and main high school buildings, has made these buildings more comfortable and is also more energy efficient than the original boiler system.
17. A recently installed phone system makes it possible to communicate with teachers in their classrooms in the event of an emergency.
18. The classrooms, library, and ROP technology lab have updated computers and high speed Internet access acquired with ROP and grant funding.
19. A misunderstanding concerning wiring of the technology lab resulted in exposed outlets and cables that create serious trip hazards. Risks remain despite the use of highway cones to mark outlets.
20. Classrooms cannot be locked from the inside. Jurors were advised of the intention to install appropriate interior locks.
21. Most of the students ride District buses to school. Busing is provided for off-campus sports events and other school activities. The District has a bus barn and a full time mechanic to maintain its bus fleet.
22. Classrooms were clean and well lit. Evacuation maps and the Williams Uniform Complaint Policy were posted in classrooms. No graffiti was observed during Grand Jury visits. The amount of litter was minimal. Policy dictates that when vandalism occurs, it is promptly repaired.

Findings Re: School Culture/Academic and Behavioral Norms

23. Average daily attendance (ADA) in 2006 for the elementary/middle school was 88%; the goal for 2007 is 92-95%.
24. The high school ADA of 75% in 2005-06 is currently closer to 70%.
25. Some students miss school to fill lucrative jobs in the marijuana industry.

26. Not all students and families fully understand that successful learning depends on regular school attendance.
27. High school students and their parents are required to sign a statement acknowledging that they have read and agree to abide by school policies and procedures and guidelines for student behavior.
28. School Board policies set attendance and academic standards for participation in team sports that are highly valued by students and the community. Varsity and JV sports are cancelled when there are not enough players who meet the academic requirements.
29. The School Attendance Review Board (SARB) has been reinstated and truant students are referred for disciplinary action.
30. Incentives are offered for families, students, and classes to encourage regular attendance. Incentives, such as treats, art projects, and first access to the swimming pool are also built into after-school and summer programs to encourage participation and regular attendance.
31. The administration is committed to maintaining the school campus and a 100' perimeter as a safe zone: "...no drugs, no bullying, no bigotry." However, some younger and other vulnerable high school students are still subjected to hazing.
32. A zero tolerance policy for alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is rigorously enforced on campus. Alcoholic beverage containers, once observed in large numbers on campus, are now seen much less frequently.
33. Marijuana-related incidents occur at both the Elementary/Middle and High Schools. They are dealt with promptly in accordance with published disciplinary policies.
34. Clothing that displays drug-related or other inappropriate messages, including "gang colors," is not permitted.
35. A "Hats Off" rule in classrooms and the cafeteria has been instituted across grade levels as a symbol of respect.
36. A strong emphasis on respect and individual responsibility was evident in interviews with teachers and administrators, and in mottos and themes observed in classrooms, offices, the library and cafeteria.
37. Depictions of cultural and ethnic diversity are apparent in posted art, academic work, advertised activities for students and families, and murals produced by students and teachers with direction by a local artist.
38. Celebrations of Tribal Culture, sports events, musical programs, back-to-school nights and graduations are all well-attended by families and other community members.

Findings Re: Health and Safety

39. A nutritionist is responsible for daily school menus. Participation in meal programs is universal among elementary students, but is lower among high school students.
40. A full-time Licensed Vocational Nurse serves all RVUSD students during school hours.

41. The Round Valley Indian Health Center (RVIHC) has an MOU with the District to provide medical care for students. RVIHC also promotes teen fitness and informs youth about the risks of obesity and diabetes. Programs discourage use of all forms of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs. The Center's grant-funded Fit Teen Program provides classes and field trips.
42. The District purchases accidental-injury insurance that covers all students during school hours and during school-related activities.
43. The Covelo Volunteer Fire Department provides essential fire safety and emergency medical services and regularly inspects campus facilities and fire extinguishers. Fire drills are conducted regularly.
44. RVUSD is working with MCOE to develop a fully coordinated emergency response plan and to engage youth in emergency preparedness by establishing the Teen CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) program.
45. Lockdown drills have been discussed but have yet to be implemented.
46. The District has received a grant to secure video surveillance cameras for the campus but has not yet acquired and installed them.
47. State categorical funding currently provides a Campus Security Supervisor, who is on the grounds during school hours and sporting events to monitor student behavior and intervene as necessary. Continued funding for this position is uncertain.
48. Two resident Sheriff's Deputies were hired in spring of 2008 to fill long-standing vacancies and serve Round Valley.
49. In keeping with long-standing tradition, Tribal Police provide back-up when needed. Tribal Police have a good working relationship with the District although an MOU is not yet in place to formalize the relationship.

Findings Re: Courses, Instruction and Academic Performance

50. The Elementary/Middle School API score for 2006-07 was 594. This reflects a 42 point increase over the 2005-06 score of 552.
51. The High School API for 2005-06 was 552. Test results for 2006-07 are not available.
52. In June 2007, of the 25 seniors: 14 graduated; one received a certificate of completion; 13 passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) with minimally acceptable scores.
53. Under SAIT restrictions, elementary teaching is strictly monitored to focus on math and English/Language Arts instruction (ELA). Tutorial, after-school and summer programs also focus on math and ELA for elementary students and on the CAHSEE for high school students.
54. Educational emphasis is on raising performance of low-achieving students.
55. *Honors* and *Advanced Placement* classes are not regularly offered for college-bound youth. Arrangements can be made for online courses. These are offered at no cost through the University of California Advanced Placement Program. Local school support for online classes is not currently available.

56. There are no high school science labs.
57. A vast majority of RVUSD students remain in Round Valley as adults. ROP hands-on learning engages students and is seen as most relevant to their lives.
58. The ROP program offers classes in Culinary Arts, Computers, Advanced Computers, Desk Top Publishing, Web Design, Ornamental Horticulture, Ag Mechanics and Animal Science. The District has facilities for additional ROP classes in auto mechanics, welding and woodworking. Teachers have yet to be found with these qualifications. Courses in fashion design and recording arts have also been proposed.

Findings Re: Instructional Staff

59. The average elementary/middle school class size is 18-20.
60. All regular classroom teachers are credentialed and teaching in their area(s) of certification.
61. Five of 16 current elementary teachers are in their first or second year of teaching. They participate in the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA) offered on site by arrangement through MCOE. All teachers receive support through MCOE as part of the SAIT process.
62. The elementary school's 10 classroom aides all have AA Degrees and/or a Math or English Proficiency Certificate.
63. Retirements have left several critical staff vacancies for ROP instructors and for a Speech Therapist. Staff restructuring has provided leadership for the High School and Independent Studies/Continuation School effective 2/25/08.
64. Scarcity of affordable housing, isolation, and limited social activities were all cited as reasons teachers leave the district.
65. Teachers are recruited through *Ed-Join*, a statewide internet site for public school job postings and applications. Applicants are interviewed in Round Valley after on-line screening. The District has been successful in recruiting employees raised in Round Valley.
66. The RVUSD Superintendent checks references for prospective hires. Fingerprinting is documented by the District and credentials are confirmed and filed with MCOE.
67. RVUSD has covered the full cost of medical insurance for its employees and this was repeatedly described as an important incentive to work for the District. Current year contracts are not yet finalized.
68. Beginning teacher salaries in Round Valley are the highest in Mendocino County. Salaries for experienced teachers are at mid-level for the County.

Findings Re: The Administration and School Board

69. In the past five years, there have been four (4) superintendent changes, four (4) high school principals and five (5) elementary school principals. The District currently lacks a business manager. These frequent leadership changes have eroded educational programs by undermining the District's

management systems, disciplinary procedures and classroom instruction. Relationships between the schools, the Round Valley Tribe, and other community members have suffered.

70. In June of 2007, MCOE assigned a Recovery Specialist to serve as District Superintendent and lead an Intervention Team; additional team members were assigned in fall of 2007.
71. In February 2008, the School Board adopted an MOU with MCOE to retain this leadership structure for the next 18 months. The Recovery Specialist will serve as District Superintendent, working collaboratively with the Round Valley School Board and reporting to the County Superintendent.⁵
72. The MOU stipulates that if the District continues to make necessary progress, a search will be undertaken for a permanent District Superintendent. MCOE will continue in an oversight role for the first 12 months under the new administrator to assure sustainability.
73. RVUSD currently contracts with MCOE to provide financial services and to establish tracking systems for students and personnel.
74. RVUSD spends more per student than the average within Mendocino County. Sources of supplemental funding include Forest Reserve Funds through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).
75. RVUSD has cash reserves and owns property adjacent to the school campus.
76. The projected 2007-08 budget was based on anticipated State funds. It was in balance, with a 5% contingency reserve. However, the 1st Interim Budget update reflected deficit spending of \$319,316. Considerable State budget uncertainty remains.
77. BIA funding is declining. In 2008, Forest Reserve Revenue of \$207,154 will phase out. Grants are an increasingly important funding source.
78. Two of the five RVUSD School Board members are employees of the Round Valley Tribe. Board Members have participated in group trainings for the past two years and have approved funds for additional training in 2007-08.
79. The Board Chair recently completed the California School Board Association (CSBA) Masters in Governance Program, a 60-hour professional development program for school board members. Three other board members are at various stages of completing this program.
80. The Board is in the process of reviewing all school policies with support from the CSBA. When completed, policies will be maintained on the CSBA website.

⁵ Pursuant to Education Code Section 1240, the County Superintendent is required to "Superintend the schools of his or her county" and to "learn of its problems." Education Code Sections 1241.5 and 42127.6 provide additional authority and responsibilities relative to fiscal oversight duties.

Comments

The Grand Jury has attempted to:

- identify factors underlying the District's decline;
- document the recovery efforts by the current Intervention Team and the dedicated teachers, staff, school board members, students and other community members.

Poverty and widespread abuse of alcohol and illegal drugs in Round Valley undermine family stability and are serious obstacles to the development of the community's children and youth. Irregular school attendance interferes with learning.

Strong leadership was described as the most important factor for improving the quality of the District's schools. Jurors heard promising reports of improved staff morale and student behavior. A Parent Teacher Organization and other school/community partnerships are beginning to form. Also noteworthy, is the emphasis on expanding the number of ROP classes that engage students in hands-on learning that is directly relevant to their lives and potential future occupations.

Repeated site visits made it clear that continued MCOE support and even broader student-focused community involvement will be needed if Round Valley youth are to reach their full potential. Round Valley has experienced many academic peaks and valleys; the challenge is to preserve the impressive but fragile gains that have been made and to achieve a high and sustainable plateau.

On an early visit to Round Valley, Jurors learned of a new District-wide policy requiring the removal of hats when students are inside the school. In the short time, since the term had begun, this traditional gesture of respect was surprisingly noticeable...both in the relative uniformity of its enforcement and in the apparent willingness of most students to comply. After years of declining discipline, accountability, morale, and performance, most teachers and many students appeared to recognize the rule as symbolic of positive change. Every journey begins with a single step, and in Round Valley, the "hats off rule" may well prove to be that first critical step toward renewed respect and personal responsibility.

Our hats are off to those who are making success a reality in this exceptionally challenging environment.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that Round Valley Unified School District:

1. establish an on-going public forum to foster school/community discussion and widespread engagement with the recovery process; (Findings 5-7, 9, 26, 30-35, 38, 49, 64, 70-72)
2. complete an emergency response plan, including implementation of the Teen CERT Program; include campus health and safety personnel and representatives from the Sheriff's Office, Tribal Police, and Fire Department in the planning process; (Findings 44, 45, 49)
3. develop a lockdown plan, conduct periodic lockdown drills and install interior locks on classroom doors; (Findings 13, 20, 45)
4. install outside video surveillance on the campus; (Findings 7, 13, 31, 32, 33, 46)
5. finalize an MOU between RVUSD and the Round Valley Tribal Police; (Findings 3, 5-7, 25, 29, 33, 44, 49)
6. identify ways to support higher achieving students with advanced coursework, college counseling, and financial aid information; make these opportunities widely known to students and their families; (Findings 6, 28, 30, 54-58)
7. expand on current incentive programs and other efforts to engage and build family support for regular school attendance and academic achievement; (Findings 6, 7, 9, 11, 25, 26, 28, 30, 38, 41, 42, 54, 55, 57, 58)
8. explore the possibility of developing employee rental housing on District owned property; (Findings 11, 64, 75)
9. develop a centralized process for submitting and tracking applications for grants and other supplemental resources available to the District and/or through collaboration with the Tribal Council; (Findings 9, 10, 11, 73, 74, 76, 77)
10. explore collaboration with County of Mendocino Department of Public Health Division of Alcohol and Other Drug Programs (AODP) to supplement existing anti-drug and alcohol programs for students and their families; (Finding 3, 5, 6, 8, 25, 26, 31-33, 36, 37, 41)
11. correct trip hazards created by wiring and outlets installed in the Technology Lab. (Finding 18, 19)
12. The Grand Jury also recommends that Mendocino County Office of Education offer its full support to the expansion of Round Valley ROP and that it increase efforts to recruit and certify instructors for these programs. (Findings 10, 12, 18, 30, 37, 52, 54, 58, 63, 65, 75)

Required Responses:

Superintendent, Mendocino County Office of Education (All Findings; All Recommendations).

Mendocino County School Board (All Findings; All Recommendations).

Recovery Specialist/Superintendent Round Valley Unified School District (All Findings; Recommendations 1-11).

RVUSD High School Principal (Findings 1-22, 24-46, 51-58, 60, 63-65, 67-69; Recommendations 1-4, 6, 7 and 11).

ROP Director (Findings 10-12, 18, 57, 58, 63; Recommendations 7, 11 and 12).

RVUSD Elementary Principal (Findings 4-6, 23, 26, 33, 39, 45, 50, 53, 54, 59-62; Recommendations 1-4, 6, 7, 10).

RVUSD School Board (All Findings; All Recommendations).

Mendocino County Sheriff (Findings 3, 5, 13, 17, 20, 25, 29, 31, 33, 44-49; Recommendations 1-4).

County of Mendocino Department of Public Health, Director of Alcohol and Other Drug Programs. (Findings 3, 5, 6, 8, 25, 26, 31-33, 36, 37, 41; Recommendation 10).

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Findings 3, 25, 29, 33; Recommendations 1, 2, 10).

Requested Responses:

Chief, Round Valley Tribal Police (Findings 3, 5, 25, 29, 31, 32, 44, 45, 49; Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5).

Round Valley Tribal Council (Findings 5-7, 9, 25-27, 28, 30-35, 38, 49, 69, 78; Recommendations 1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 12).

Round Valley Tribal Health Center (Findings 5, 6, 8, 9, 25, 41, 44; Recommendations 1, 2, 9, 10, 12).

Covelo Fire Department (Findings 17, 19, 20, 43-45; Recommendations 1, 2, 3).

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