

West Side Union School District

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GRAND JURY

SEP 27 2007

RECEIVED

TO: The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury

FROM: Rhonda Bellmer, Superintendent/Principal
West Side Union School District

RE: **Response to Grand Jury Report "See Dick. See Jane. See Dick and Jane Go to School. Are they Safe?"**

DATE: September 21, 2007

Recommendation 1: Each public school district in Sonoma County should have at least one employee who is trained and authorized to access DOJ website within an official and specified schedule. This employee should fully understand the way in which information is to be communicated. Further, in the absence of this employee, a suitable alternate person or system should be in place to responsibly retrieve valuable information as it is posted. This system should also cover notices from the DOJ sent via U.S. Mail.

The West Side Union School District agrees with this finding. At present, we have one person who handles this aspect of personnel, but we do not have an official and specified schedule, and we do not have an alternate person.

Action based on recommendation 1: The WSUSD will establish an official and specified schedule for accessing the DOJ website, and identify a suitable alternate person, by December 30, 2007.

R4: School districts should consider changing their policies to require successful employee applicants to pay for their own fingerprinting and background responses from DOJ and FBI. There is at least \$65,000 in 06-07 school district budgets for fingerprinting. As costs are shifted to paid employees, districts could use savings to fund costs for volunteers.

West Side Union School District employs around 24 people with very a very low rate of turn-over. The District currently pays for employee applicants' fingerprinting costs, and this has not been a hardship on our budget. Over the past two years we have had many discussions in our District about fingerprinting volunteers. We have considered the idea of having our education foundation fund the cost of fingerprinting as a "cost of doing business." Our parent group, in conjunction with the Superintendent/Principal, currently coordinates volunteer involvement at our school. Because we are a publicly funded school, we are very concerned about requiring monetary expenditures from our families, and we would not want the cost of fingerprinting to interfere with a parent's right and interest to be involved in their child's education. Our main concern at this time is to find an affordable resource for accomplishing this goal. We are aware of mobile units that can come to our site and we are interesting in sponsoring a fingerprinting day.

Action based on recommendation 4: The WSUSD will continue its practice of covering the costs of fingerprinting employees, as well as continue with the idea of having the education foundation cover the cost of fingerprinting parent volunteers. If, however, it becomes important to have a county-wide budgetary approach to this issue, our District would cooperate and change its current practice and plan.

R5: School districts should amend their policies, if needed, to allow for volunteers names to be public information and readily available so that a greater scrutiny is provided.

The West Side Union School District does not have a policy against publicizing the names of volunteers. In fact, publicly acknowledging volunteer efforts is ongoing in our weekly newsletter, school bulletin boards, the local newspaper, and other publications. With consent, we release the names and contact information of every parent in the school in our school directory, which every family receives a copy of. It is extremely rare for a family to decline inclusion in this publication. Because of our small size, volunteers are extremely visible on our campus.

Action based on recommendation 5: No action is resulting from this recommendation.

R6: Schools should routinely check out names of adult volunteers on Megan's Law website (a public posting of sexual predators) even if fingerprinting is scheduled, and always do so if no fingerprinting is scheduled for that volunteer.

Our District's current practice is to look at the Megan's Law website occasionally, when we are suspicious about someone, and when we receive an inquiry about someone on the list who may or may not be residing in our rural neighborhood. We have also looked up parents new to the district who are not volunteers, but who have incited some suspicion. The parents in this district appear aware of this website, and many check out the names on this website routinely.

Action based on recommendation 6: We fully agree with this finding and will identify a key person and an alternate who will routinely check out the names on this website, as well as check out the names of all volunteers who are not fingerprinted, beginning October 1, 2007. We also know of a District that has created an information sheet on the Megan's Law website for inclusion in the parent packets issued at the beginning of the year. We like this idea and will consider adding a similar hand-out to our packet for the 2008-09 school year.

R7: School districts should request criminal activity record from the Sonoma County Superior Courts Records Division on any adult wanting to volunteer with students. This service is available at no cost to a district.

Our District was unaware of this service available through the Sonoma County Superior Courts Records Division.

Action based on recommendation 7: Our district will look into this service offered by the Sonoma County Superior Courts Records Division and evaluate the process for inclusion and implementation in our volunteer program policy, by June 30, 2008.

R8: School districts should, individual and collectively, request that the DOJ implement a system to confirm school district receipt of Notices of Subsequent Arrest. A system that would require the DOJ to follow up if no confirmation was received and would at least give school districts some assurance that information trusted to the U.S. Mail or electronic mail services is actually being received.

We agree with this recommendation.

Action based on recommendation 8: This item should be placed on the agenda for a future Superintendent's meeting for making a county-wide request to the DOJ.

R9: School districts should request FBI responses on all classified employees and volunteers that they do a DOJ response regardless of the time they have lived in California. The relatively small fee of \$24 to get prior criminal activity from a national database seems justifiable, reasonable and the right action to take.

We agree with this recommendation.

Action based on recommendation 9: Beginning with the next classified employee or volunteer that we request a DOJ response for, we will also request a FBI response.

R10: School districts should require fingerprinting for all adults (paid and volunteer) involved in athletic programs, overnight field trips, off-campus field trips, and any school sponsored student activity that occurs outside of the normal school day or hours.

WSUSD agrees with this recommendation in concept, and has plans underway that move us towards compliance with this recommendation. The district previously analyzed the situations that might allow a non-fingerprinted adult to be alone with children, and driving on field trips was identified to be such a situation. Consequently, during the 2006-07 school year, two parents were assigned to a car driving on field trips, whenever possible. For the 2007-08 school year parents driving on overnight field trips will be required to be fingerprinted.

Action based on recommendation 10: As WSUSD moves towards compliance with this recommendation, for the 2007-08 school year the District will develop a plan for facilitating the fingerprinting of all WSUSD volunteers. Our District volunteers are aware of our moving in this direction, and there has been no resistance to the idea. The next step is to come up with an agreeable way to fund the expense. One idea is to make the fingerprinting service free to all parents who intend to volunteer, and establish a fingerprinting budget line item, encouraging those who can afford it to donate (anonymously) the fee back to our education foundation to keep renewing fingerprinting fund.

R11: School districts should implement provisions of Ed. Code Section 33193 and 45125.2 requiring that certain independent contractors and employees of contractors undergo fingerprinting and background checks.

We agree with this recommendation and comply with this provision of the Ed. Code. When we have people briefly on campus for an inspection of one kind or another, after signing in, the custodian or superintendent/principal “shadows’ the person while they are on campus.

Action based on recommendation 11: There is no known action needed at this time

R13: School districts should not allow new employees to begin work until all pre-employment requirements are met. Most specifically, this means all fingerprinting and criminal history responses that are required must have been completed and properly evaluated.

The WSUSD agrees to this finding. While interviewing staff to respond to this recommendation, it was disclosed that on rare occasions throughout the years, some employees have begun work prior to meeting all pre-employment requirements. The new Superintendent/Principal developed two years ago a New Hire Checklist to assist in ensuring that all newly hired staff meet pre-employment and licensing and certification requirements.

Action based on recommendation 13: To re-establish the importance of ensuring that all new employees meet all of the pre-employment requirements. The Superintendent/Principal signs off on this checklist prior to hire and will provide close monitoring at the initial stage of hiring.

R14: The Sheriff’s Office should make available to all school districts information on how to access services available to them through the Sheriff’s Office that would aid districts in determining if individuals should be approved to serve as volunteers in our schools and at school sponsored activities.

The WSUSD would benefit from, and utilize, any information from the SO that would aid us in screening potential volunteers.

Action based on recommendation 14: No action required of WSUSD at this time.

R15: School districts should require all volunteers to sign an agreement that outlines behavior do’s and don’ts and consequences if agreement terms are broken.

The WSUSD agrees with this recommendation, and in fact, has issued Volunteer Guidelines to all volunteers for many years. The guidelines are updated to reflect new information or changes in policy, such as when Board policy on driving on field trips was changed. Also, all volunteers must receive an orientation from the Superintendent/Principal before volunteering. At the beginning of the school year, a group orientation is publicized and held. Approximately 30 volunteers attend. We review the Volunteer Guidelines, which include expectations, concerns, and the value and appreciation that our District places on the volunteer component of our educational program. Parents sign a statement that they have read and agree to the guidelines. The Question and Answer portion of the orientation is always informative. Volunteers unable to attend the group orientation set up meetings with the Superintendent/Principal, in small groups or individually. In addition to disseminating information, this provides an opportunity for the volunteers to meet one another, and for the Superintendent/Principal to know first-hand the

individuals who will be in contact with our students. The program is in its third year, and has been working very well. After receiving the orientation, the volunteers are “cleared” for service, and their names are forwarded to the appropriate district employee or volunteer committee. We do not, however, state what the consequences will be if volunteers do not comply with the Guidelines. In practice, anyone who presents a disruption to the education of West Side students would first meet with the Superintendent/Principal, and an appropriate plan of action would be developed. There have been instances in the past when a volunteer’s contribution did not benefit the students, and their services as a volunteer were ended.

Action based on recommendation 15: The District should consider adding a statement of consequence for volunteers who do not follow the Guidelines for Volunteers, in the next revision of the guidelines, or in the guidelines issued for the 2008-08 school year, whichever date comes first.

In conjunction with screening employees and volunteers, we believe in the importance of educating our students as to “the do’s and don’ts” for protecting themselves from the dangers associated with “predators.” The health and science curriculum, “My Body is Healthy,” has a component addressing student awareness and safety with adults and children. Additionally, with increased access to computers and the Internet, our district saw the importance of educating our students about the dangers lurking in cyber-space. For the past three years, a local police officer has presented to our students a powerful program on Internet safety. Our technology coordinator has attending trainings in this area, and has come back to staff meetings with important information and safeguards to consider. Our students have been trained and encouraged to tell us about any situation that causes them to feel afraid or uncomfortable, and they have on many occasions.

On behalf of West Side Union School District, we thank the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury for this important inquiry. As a District, we have been grappling for years with the pros and cons of fingerprinting volunteers. This report, and its findings and recommendations, has helped us to evaluate our district’s practices in ensuring that employees and volunteers are suitable for contact and interaction with our students. We have identified several ways that we can improve and “tighten-up” our internal procedures and practices. It also appears that there are community resources that our little District has not been accessing that will be helpful to us.

Keeping our students safe is a stated priority of West Side Union School District. We appreciate the Jury’s findings and recommendations and will use them to inform the development of our policies and practices related to fingerprinting requirements in our district.

Submitted by,



Rhonda Bellmer
Superintendent/Principal

Reviewed and approved by the President of the Board, as authorized by the Board of Trustees at their meeting of September 16, 2007.