

Ventura County Middle Schools Safety and Welfare

Summary

School safety and the welfare of our students have always been important issues in Ventura County. The 2001–2002 Ventura County Grand Jury issued a report, *Safety and Security in Ventura County High Schools*, focused on safety issues. The 2007–2008 Ventura County Grand Jury (Grand Jury), elected to open an investigation to determine possible safety issues at middle schools (Schools).

The Grand Jury conducted a survey of Ventura County middle schools. The survey, "How Prepared Is Your School?" gathered information regarding various aspects of safety issues at these schools. [Att-01]

The Grand Jury found that 48% of Schools are out of compliance with California State Assembly Bill 722 (AB722) which recommends a students:counselor ratio of 461:1 for middle schools. [Ref-01]

The Grand Jury further found that 36% of the responding schools have a dedicated School Resource Officer (SRO) (usually a police officer) assigned to school campuses. The Missouri School Board Association states, "The successful SRO works during the normal school day as well as during co-curricular events. The SRO is instrumental in providing a safe environment conducive to the learning process. Students and faculty have a heightened perception of safety due to the work of the SRO. The SRO strives to improve the 'working' environment for students, administrators, faculty, custodians, food service workers and others." [Ref-02]

The Grand Jury concluded that all Schools meet California building standards for fire and earthquake safety and that emergency evacuation and lockdown drills are practiced regularly.

The Grand Jury concluded that 25% of Schools do not have full perimeter fencing with locking gates, making it difficult to control access to their campuses. The Grand Jury also concluded that 54% of Schools have classrooms that do not lock from the inside which could expose students to intruders.

The Grand Jury recommends that all Schools comply with AB722 and maintain the recommended students:counselor ratio. [Ref-01]

The Grand Jury also recommends that all Schools have a dedicated SRO on site.

The Grand Jury further recommends that all schools have perimeter fencing and locking gates securing their campus and that all classrooms have doors that lock from the inside.

Background

The 2001–2002 Ventura County Grand Jury issued a report, *Safety and Security in Ventura County High Schools*, focused on safety issues. The Grand Jury, elected to look at middle Schools to determine possible safety issues at these schools.

Methodology

The Grand Jury mailed surveys, “How Prepared is Your School?”, to 27 Ventura County school principals with copies to their respective School District Superintendent or Director of Secondary Education (DSE). Twenty-five responses were received; twenty-two Principals and one DSE (responding for three Schools in his District). [Att-01]

The findings in this report are derived from survey responses submitted by Schools Administration, various related Websites, printed media, and visits to law enforcement agencies.

The Grand Jury also visited four of the surveyed Schools and interviewed the Principals. The Ventura County Superintendent of Schools was also interviewed to discuss the survey.

All responses were completed and received by January 2008 and do not reflect the tragic event that took place at E.O. Green Middle School on February 12, 2008.

Findings

Questions and responses to the survey:

Question 1: Is your school free of hazardous materials (asbestos, pesticides, and paint)? How do you handle poor air quality days?

- F-01.** It was reported that 76% of the Schools were free of hazardous materials. Twenty-four percent reported having some hazardous materials (e.g., paints, asbestos, and chemicals); however, these were appropriately stored and were, “. . . encapsulated and were non-friable.”
- F-02.** The Office of the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools issues air quality alerts to all Ventura County School Districts. Schools reduce physical activities and outdoor exposure of students and staff during these alerts.

Question 2: Is your school in full compliance with all fire codes? How often is your school inspected and when was the last inspection?

- F-03.** All Schools reported that they are in compliance with fire codes.
- F-04.** All Schools are inspected annually by a Ventura County Fire Marshall. Many Schools reported additional unscheduled local Fire Department inspections.

Question 3: Is your school campus secured with fencing and gates?

F-05. Seventy-six percent of schools are secured with fencing and gates; the remainders have partial perimeter fencing.

Question 4: What measures are taken to limit and control points of entry?

F-06. Schools with full perimeter fencing have locked gates for outside entry during the school day. Schools with partial perimeter fencing have assigned Campus Supervisors to control all entry points. Signage at Schools directs all visitors to the front office.

Question 5: Are your school buildings earthquake safe?

F-07. All Schools are in compliance with Title 5, California Code of Regulations, which requires "Educational facilities planned by school districts shall be designed to meet federal, state, and local statutory requirements for structure, fire, and public safety." [Ref-03]

Question 6: Does each classroom have a telephone with outside line access?

F-08. Ninety-two percent of classrooms have telephones with outside line access.

Question 7: Is all appropriate campus maintenance being performed?

F-09. All Schools reported that campus maintenance is being performed appropriately by their respective District Facilities and Maintenance Departments.

Question 8: Do the doors in your school lock from the inside?

F-10. Forty-four percent of Schools have classroom doors that lock from the inside.

F-11. Fifty-six percent of Schools report that some of their classrooms do not have doors that lock from the inside.

F-12. None of the portable classrooms have doors that lock from the inside.

Question 9: Does your school have an updated School Safety and Crisis Response Plan that is familiar to staff and students and is practiced regularly? When was the last update?

F-13. All Schools have updated comprehensive School Safety Plans. Drills are practiced regularly and results are recorded, filed, and discussed by staff to ensure expected results were achieved.

F-14. Most schools completed updates of their safety plans during the fourth quarter of 2007; other Schools updated plans during the first quarter of 2008.

Question 10: Does your school have a comprehensive Crisis Containment Plan (lock-down)?

F-15. All Schools have a Crisis Containment Plan that is part of their comprehensive School Safety Plan. Lock-down drills are performed several times annually and results are recorded, filed, and discussed by staff to ensure expected results were achieved.

Question 11: Does your school have in-service training for staff on safety issues and ongoing drills and practice? How often?

F-16. Ninety-six percent of Schools have annual in-service training for staff on safety issues as directed by their School Safety Plans.

F-17. All Schools conduct safety drills several times annually.

Question 12: Are staff members notified about potentially violent or troubled students? How?

F-18. All schools notify staff regarding potentially violent/troubled students. Staff notification may be done by:

- e-mail
- staff meetings/conferences
- personal briefings
- memoranda, including lists of suspended students
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Student Study Team (SST) meetings

Question 13: Has your school prepared an "Emergency" parent notification plan for major emergency events (i.e., earthquakes, fire, violent intrusions, etc.)? Is it telephone, e-mail, public media, or other? Please specify.

F-19. All Schools have emergency parent notification plans in place. Notification options include automated telephone message systems (Connect-Ed, Parent-Connect, All Call Voice Out), and some Schools may also use e-mail and local radio station broadcasts.

Question 14: Does your school have appropriate enforcement of discipline? How?

F-20. Schools use various policies/actions as guided by the applicable Education Code, to enforce discipline including:

- referrals to school administration
- parent conferences
- Student Attendance Review Boards (SARB)
- progressive discipline plans (e.g., detention, suspension, expulsion)

Question 15: How does the school determine if a potential visitor belongs there or not?

F-21. All school visitors are required to sign in at the front office and most are provided a visitor's identification badge if they have a valid reason to be on campus. Staff checks visitor information including:

- verifying emergency cards against valid visitor identification
- verifying campus volunteer identification to ensure that they are cleared by District Offices
- requiring that all vendors check in at the front office before entering campuses
- challenging any visitor who does not have a valid visitor's identification badge

Question 16: Is an identification badge system, including visitors, used on your campus?

F-22. Eighty-eight percent of Schools have an identification badge system.

Question 17: Is your school equipped with emergency supplies? What type?

F-23. All Schools have approximately three days of emergency supplies on campus. These typically include:

- potable water
- food
- emergency medical supplies
- blankets
- flashlights
- communication devices (e.g., two-way radios, etc.)

Question 18: Does staff supervising the campus have hand held communication devices? What are they?

F-24. All Schools have several two-way radios (walkie-talkies) that are used by campus supervisors.

Question 19: Does the school have peer mediation and conflict resolution programs? If so, what programs are available?

F-25. Ninety-two percent of schools have peer mediation and conflict resolution programs. The other Schools have counselor/administration mediation and conflict resolution programs in place.

F-26. Counselors provide support for these programs through individual and group counseling. The programs include:

- Rachael's Challenge

- Second Step
- Safe School Ambassadors Programs
- “Don’t laugh at me.”
- Character Counts
- Word Trait of the Month
- Pride Program

Question 20: Does your school have anti-bullying, tolerance, and character education programs? What are they?

F-27. All Schools have unique programs that address bullying, intolerance, and that provide character education. Schools often use one or more of the programs listed in the previous finding.

Question 21: Does your school have counselors who can provide help to troubled students? What is your ratio of student to counselor?

F-28. All Schools except one have at least one counselor.

F-29. Students:counselor ratio ranges from 314:1 to 840:1.

Question 22: Does your school have a close cooperative relationship with local law enforcement? Does your school have a School Resource Officer (SRO) or something comparable? If so, what do they do? Is there a job description? How many hours a week are they on campus? How are they paid?

F-30. All Schools report having a close working relationship with their local law enforcement and have direct and immediate access to officers via telephone.

F-31. Nine Schools have dedicated SROs assigned to their campuses; some schools may share one officer. These officers are generally on campus two to four hours, three or four days each week. SROs provide services such as:

- counseling students
- serving as deterrent to inappropriate behavior
- conducting home visits as necessary
- citing students for infractions
- dealing with truancy issues
- monitoring campus for intruders

F-32. SROs are generally compensated by local law enforcement agencies, School Districts, individual cities, Federal grants under Title IV (Safe and Drug Free Schools) and/or combinations of these. [Ref-04]

Question 23: Do you provide encouragement for parents willing to help in crime prevention? If so how many parents are involved in your school?

F-33. Eighty-four percent of Schools encourage parental participation in their school crime prevention effort.

F-34. The number of parents actively involved in crime prevention programs at these Schools is minimal.

Question 24: Do you take threats seriously and deal with them as acts of violence? How are they followed up on and what actions are taken?

F-35. All Schools report that they take threats seriously and deal with them immediately.

F-36. Schools follow district, local, state and federal guidelines for threats including:

- investigating all threats thoroughly
- notifying parents
- involving SRO/law enforcement agencies when appropriate
- debriefing staff
- notifying district administrators
- taking appropriate disciplinary action

Question 25: Do you have a method to facilitate anonymous reporting of threats or problems? What is it?

F-37. All Schools have systems/procedures to facilitate anonymous reporting of threats/problems. These include:

- WeTip
- Safe School Ambassadors
- Standardized Emergency Management System
- anonymous telephone hotline
- anonymous notes to staff
- e-mail

F-38. Students are reluctant to report threats or problems.

Question 26: Is training being provided for school staff and students in becoming aware of their surroundings, meaning they will notice and report behavior that presents cause for concern or the presence of people who don't belong on campus? What is it?

F-39. Eighty-four percent of Schools have formal and/or informal awareness training programs for their staff and students. Various School safety issues are discussed at staff meetings, student body assemblies, and during counselor presentations. Topics include:

- lock-down procedures
- awareness of strangers
- identification badge system
- incident reporting procedures
- gang awareness
- anti-bullying/anti-harassment
- sexual harassment
- sexual abuse
- physical abuse
- school safety rules

Other Findings:

F-40. School campuses observed by the Grand Jury were well maintained.

F-41. School administrators interviewed stated that perimeter fencing and gates help control access to their campuses.

F-42. AB722, *Study of Pupil Personnel Ratios, Services, and Programs*, dated July 2003, recommends that the "adequate ratio" of students:counselor at middle schools is 461:1. [Ref-01]

F-43. AB722 also states, "Today's students face increased challenges with decreased support. Peer pressure, bullying at school, dysfunctional families, drug and tobacco use, growing teen suicide rates all contribute to student feelings of anxiety and depression and create barriers to learning. More than ever before, counseling and pupil support services play a critical role in the academic preparation and social development of our youth." [Ref-01]

F-44. law enforcement agencies throughout the County expressed support for having SROs on all Middle and High School campuses. They further said that SROs help maintain secure campuses and promote safer learning environments.

F-45. "The successful SRO works during the normal school day as well as during co-curricular events. The SRO is instrumental in providing a safe environment conducive to the learning process. Students and faculty have a heightened perception of safety due to the work of the SRO. The SRO strives to improve the 'working' environment for students, administrators, faculty, custodians, food service workers and others." [Ref-02]

Conclusions

C-01. All Schools maintain and meet California school building standards for fire and earthquake safety. Hazardous materials are accounted for and locked-up. (F-01, F-03, F-04, F-07)

- C-02.** All Schools have comprehensive procedures regarding actions required during a fire, earthquake, and school lockdowns. Drills are conducted on a regular basis. (F-03, F-04, F-07, F-10, F-11, F-13 through F-15)
- C-03.** Schools have and maintain adequate amounts of water, food, and emergency supplies. (F-23)
- C-04.** Schools with complete perimeter fencing and locking gates are able to control access to, and egress from, campuses. (F-06, F-41)
- C-05.** Classrooms that lock from the inside offer protection. (F-10 through F-12)
- C-06.** Classrooms that have telephones with outside line access are able to contact emergency services directly. (F-08)
- C-07.** Schools with automated telephone message systems are able to efficiently contact parents/emergency contacts. (F-19)
- C-08.** The use of unique identification badges allows staff to quickly identify anyone who does not belong on campus. (F-21, F-22)
- C-09.** The Grand Jury agrees with AB722 that counselors at middle schools provide support to students at a critical time in their lives. (F-42, F-43)
- C-10.** There are an inadequate number of counselors assigned to Schools. (F-29, F-42, F-43)
- C-11.** SROs help create and maintain a safe, secure, and orderly learning environment for students, teachers, and staff. (F-30, F-31, F-44, F-45)
- C-12.** Anti-bullying and tolerance programs have the potential to effectively change aggressive behavior. (F-27, F-37, F-38, F-43)

Recommendations

- R-01.** All school districts should comply with AB722 to maintain recommended students:counselor ratios. (C-09, C-10)
- R-02.** All Schools should have a dedicated SRO on campus during school hours. (C-11)
- R-03.** All permanent and temporary classrooms should have doors that lock from the inside. (C-05)
- R-04.** All Schools should issue unique identification badges to visitors. (C-08)
- R-05.** All Schools should have perimeter fencing with locking gates to secure their campus. (C-04)
- R-06.** All Schools should continue/enhance anti-bullying and tolerance programs. (C-12)

Responses

Responses Required:

- Board of Education Conejo Valley Unified (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Education Fillmore Unified (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Hueneme Elementary School District (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Mesa Union (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Education Moorpark Unified (R-01 through R-06)
- Governing Board Ocean View (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Education Ojai Unified (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Oxnard Elementary (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Pleasant Valley Elementary (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Rio School District (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Santa Paula Elementary (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Education Simi Valley Unified (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Trustees Somis Union (R-01 through R-06)
- Board of Education Ventura Unified School District (R-01 through R-06)

Responses Accepted:

- Ventura County Superintendent of Schools (R-01 through R-06)
- Oxnard Police Department (R-02)
- Port Hueneme Police Department (R-02)
- Santa Paula Police Department (R-02)
- Simi Valley Police Department (R-02)
- Ventura Police Department (R-02)
- Sheriff, County of Ventura (R-02)

References

- Ref-01 California State Assembly Bill 722, Study of Pupil Personnel Ratios, Services, and Programs, dated July, 2003
- Ref-02 *What is a Resource Officer?* Missouri School Board Association Website <http://www.schoolsprepared.org>
- Ref-03 Title 5, California Code of Regulations §14001(f)
- Ref-04 Title IV, Part A, Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities §4001

Attachments

- Att-01 Survey: *How Prepared is Your School?* (These questions are based in part on an article in *California Educator*, October 2007.)

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Attachment-01

Survey: How Prepared is Your School?

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How Prepared is your School?

	Yes	No	Building and Grounds
1.			Is your school free of hazardous materials (asbestos, pesticides, and paint)? How do you handle poor air quality days?
2.			Is your school in full compliance with all fire codes? How often is your school inspected, and when was the last inspection?
3.			Is your school campus secured with fencing and gates?
4.			What measures are taken to limit and control points of entry
5.			Are your school buildings earthquake safe?
6.			Does each classroom have a telephone with outside line access?
7.			Is all appropriate campus maintenance being performed?
8.			Do the doors in your school lock from the inside?
	Yes	No	Administration
9.			Does your school have an updated School Safety and Crisis Response Plan that is familiar to staff and students and is practiced regularly? When was the last update?
10.			Does your school have a comprehensive crisis containment plan? (lock down)
11.			Does your school have In-service training for staff on safety issues and ongoing drills and practice? How often?

	Yes	No	Administration
12.			Are staff members notified about potentially violent or troubled students? How?
13.			Has your school prepared an "Emergency" parent notification plan for major emergency events (i.e., earthquakes, fire, violent intrusions, etc.?) Is it telephone, e-mail, public media, or other? Please specify.
14.			Does your school have appropriate enforcement of discipline? How?
15.			How does the school determine if a potential visitor belongs there or not?
16.			Is an identification badge system, including visitors, used on your campus?
17.			Is your school equipped with emergency supplies? What type?
18.			Does staff supervising the campus have hand held communication devices? What are they?
19.			Does the school have peer mediation and conflict resolution programs? If so, what programs are available?
20.			Does your school have anti-bullying, tolerance, and character education programs? What are they?

	Yes	No	Administration
21.			<p>Does your school have counselors who can provide help to troubled students?</p> <p>What is your ratio of student to counselor?</p>
22.			<p>Does your school have a close cooperative relationship with local law enforcement?</p> <p>Does your school have a School Resource Officer or something comparable? If so what do they do?</p> <p>Is there a job description?</p> <p>How many hours a week are they on campus?</p> <p>How are they paid?</p>
23.			<p>Do you provide encouragement for parents willing to help in crime prevention?</p> <p>If so, how many parents are involved in your school?</p>
24.			<p>Do you take threats seriously and deal with them as acts of violence?</p> <p>How are they followed up on and what actions are taken?</p>
25.			<p>Do you have a method to facilitate anonymous reporting of threats or problems?</p> <p>What is it?</p>
26.			<p>Is training being provided for school staff and students in becoming aware of their surroundings, meaning they will notice and report behavior that presents cause for concern or the presence of people who don't belong on campus ?</p> <p>What is it?</p>

These questions are based in part on an article in "California Educator, October 2007".

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