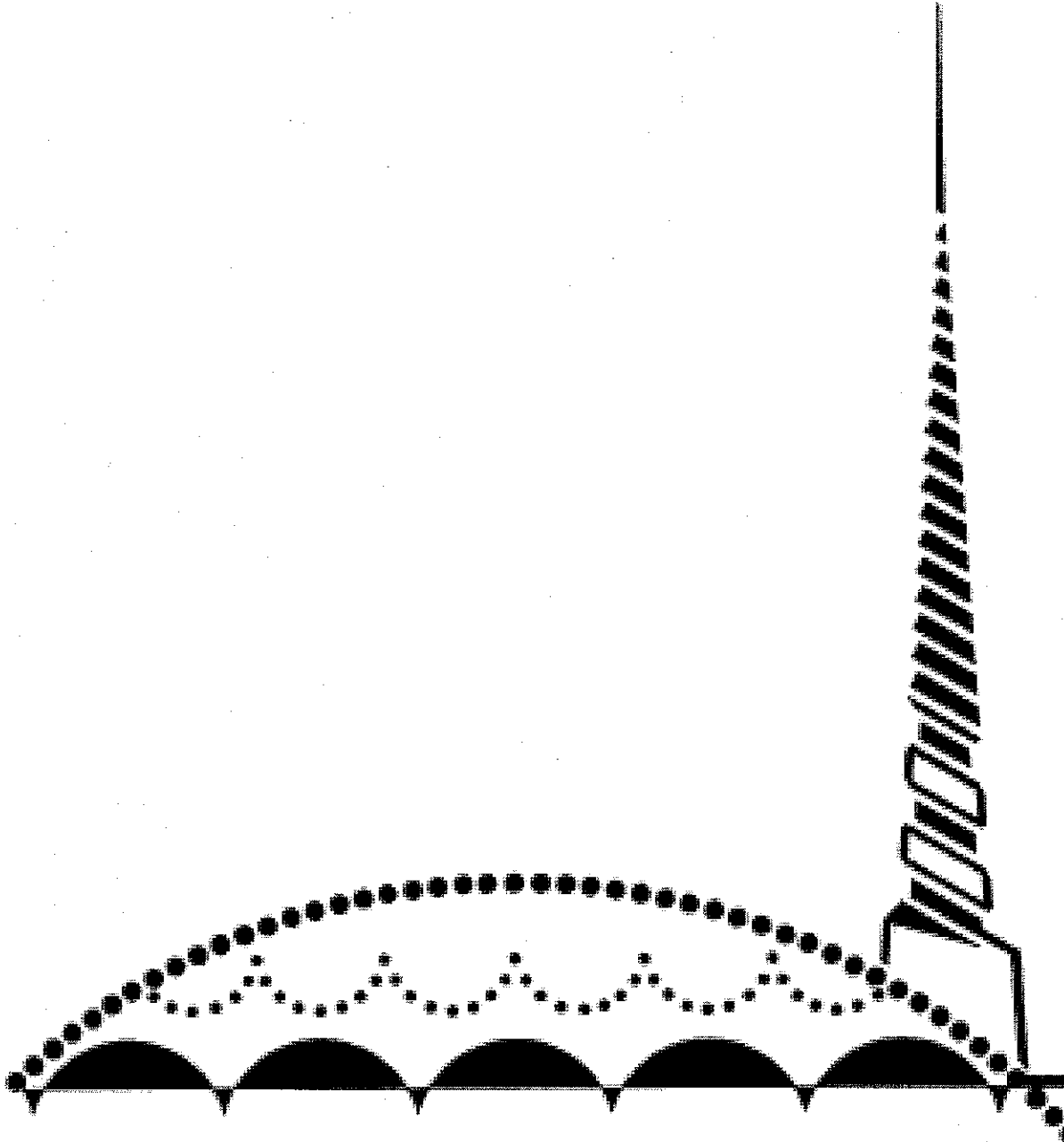
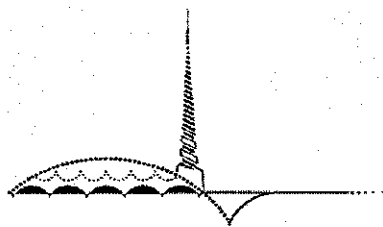


2007-2008 MARIN COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

**The Sausalito Marin City School District:
Then and Now**

Date of Report: June 26, 2008





THE SAUSALITO MARIN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT: THEN AND NOW

SUMMARY

Profound changes have taken place throughout the Sausalito Marin City School District (the District) since the 1997 Grand Jury published a scathing report. That Grand Jury cited the District's dismal test scores, lack of leadership, and violent student behavior. It also pointed out that, based on Sausalito's strong property tax base, the District enjoyed three times Marin's average financial resources per student, so scarcity of funds was no excuse.

Since 1997, the District's schools have been restructured. The K-8 configuration of a single school has been divided into an elementary school in Sausalito and a middle school in Marin City, the two sharing a principal. A semi-independent charter school was formed on the Sausalito campus in 2001 with a separate administration and board. The District currently consists of three schools: the K-6 Bayside Elementary School (Bayside) in Sausalito; Martin Luther King Jr. Academy (MLK), the 7th and 8th grade middle school in Marin City; and Willow Creek Academy (Willow Creek), the K-8 charter school in Sausalito.

Now in 2008, Bayside is certified as a California Distinguished School. Parent involvement and student behavior have improved at Bayside and MLK and test scores at Bayside have soared. Tardiness and truancy are being managed. Steps have been taken to strengthen relations with the Marin City community, although more needs to be done. In recognition of these efforts and accomplishments, Bayside has received coveted performance awards from the State of California. Almost all of this school's students are of color and from single-parent, economically disadvantaged families living in Marin City.

The District devotes similar levels of effort and resources to Bayside and MLK, but results at MLK are disappointing. While student behavior is now better managed, test scores at MLK have not improved. The 28 middle school students at MLK attend classes in unattractive portable structures in Marin City while a new school building for 140 students is under construction nearby. MLK operates in relative isolation from Bayside and Willow Creek. Being part of the successful Bayside operation could stimulate improvements for MLK. Recent studies conclude that the K-8 configuration has a high rate of success.

The Willow Creek charter school was founded to stem the outflow from Sausalito of families seeking a better and safer school for their children. Its 140 students share a beautiful campus in the northern part of Sausalito with Bayside's 98 students. Willow Creek is an integrated school that attracts students from Sausalito and Marin City, which are the District's two population centers, and from other areas within and outside of Marin County. Student behavior is not a notable problem and Willow Creek test scores are good. Most of its graduates succeed in high school.

Tensions exist among District board members about money and space for the semi-independent charter school. With increased financial support and public acknowledgement by the District of Willow Creek's performance, and with its attractive campus, the charter school could launch a serious recruitment program to achieve a substantial enrollment increase. Bayside also has a high potential to increase its enrollment.

The Grand Jury concludes that:

- The District should improve communication with Marin City organizations and families, adding staff as needed to enhance relationships, participation, and cooperation.
- The District should consider ways to blend MLK with the successful and productive Bayside learning environment.
- The District should assist its Willow Creek charter school to become more attractive to Marin City and Sausalito families by providing it significantly greater financial support and public acknowledgement.
- The District should increase outreach to recruit more students in Sausalito and Marin City to its three schools.

BACKGROUND

Since the 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk," published by the U.S. Department of Education, reform of our public schools has been high on the national agenda. Particular attention has been paid to the gap between test scores and other performance indicators of inner city schools and those of more prosperous neighborhoods. Marin City has the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics of an inner city neighborhood, yet it is within the same small school district as the city of Sausalito. The Sausalito Marin City School District (the District) is a "basic aid district," which means that its strong property tax base enables it to pay for its schools entirely out of local taxes. It has no ceiling on what it can spend on its schools except local taxpayer willingness. Most others, called "revenue limit districts," are provided funds from the state to supplement local taxes to reach a uniform level per student, currently about \$8,000 per year. These districts must raise anything else needed through grants, community events, and private donations.

The 1997 Grand Jury issued a scathing report on the District for its dismal test scores, lack of leadership, and violent behavior. The District was in serious trouble despite an average class size of 18 pupils and an annual expenditure per student of almost three times the Marin County average. Over ten years later, profound changes have taken place. A new superintendent of the District and a new principal shared by Bayside Elementary School (Bayside) and Martin Luther King Jr. Academy (MLK) middle school have been on the job for two years. Test scores at Bayside are up, and it has been designated a California Distinguished School. For the second consecutive year, Bayside also has received a state award for placing in the top ten percent of demographically similar schools in California.

Because over ten years have passed since the Grand Jury's 1997 report and since strong community interest in the District continues, we decided to take a new look at Bayside and MLK. While this investigation focuses on Bayside and MLK, we also address issues of Willow Creek Academy (Willow Creek), the District's K-8 charter school founded in 2001. The relationship between the charter school and the District was also part of a Grand Jury report released in June 2007.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed District board members, administrators at the county, district, and school level and at Tamalpais High School. We also spoke with non-teaching staff, teachers, community leaders, local government officials, parents, and education consultants. Additionally, the Grand Jury reviewed websites, in particular those maintained by the California Department of Education and the Marin County Office of Education. We attended District school board meetings, toured the Sausalito and Marin City campuses, and observed classroom instruction. We read an extensive file of newspaper and journal articles on the condition of U.S. public schools and strategies for their improvement. We talked with students and were present during student presentations.

DISCUSSION

Academic progress

Profound changes have taken place throughout the Sausalito Marin City School District (the District) since the 1997 Grand Jury published a scathing report. That Grand Jury cited the District's dismal test scores, lack of leadership, and violent student behavior. It pointed out that the District enjoyed three times Marin's average financial resources per student, so scarcity of funds was no excuse.

Twenty years ago, Bayside received recognition as a California Distinguished School. In 2008, Bayside is certified as a California Distinguished School. Only 343 of the state's 5,000 elementary schools, seven percent, won this prestigious honor. In just under two decades, this school, in the view of outside investigators, has gone from wonderful to awful and back to wonderful.

The demographics of today's student population have not changed much since 1997, and therefore cannot account for the dramatic improvement at Bayside. In 2001-2002, when the first test scores under the newly passed No Child Left Behind legislation appeared, Bayside's Academic Performance Index (API), the figure used nationally to summarize academic performance, was 695. The latest state test results released in May 2008 show Bayside rising from 796 last year to 808, surpassing the state benchmark of 800. Bayside is in the top ten percent of the state's demographically comparable schools.

Reading and math test scores in recent years show a similar upward trend. Thirty-seven percent of Bayside students scored "proficient" in the English language in 2004-2005. By 2005-2006 this had risen to 48 percent. The most recent figure for 2006-2007 is 62 percent. Mathematics has shown the same trend, 2004-2005 at 35 percent, 2005-2006 at 48 percent, and 2006-2007 at 61 percent.

Bayside still has a way to go to catch up with the average for Marin schools, the highest in the state. Bayside leaders are committed to getting there. Since the API scores of outstanding public schools in Marin exceed 900 out of a possible 1,000, the District has set this score as its goal and called it "Vision 900." Eighteen schools in Marin scored that high this year out of 68 mainstream and charter public schools.

The outstanding progress shown by Bayside has not yet extended to MLK, the middle school which Bayside students will attend. The Grand Jury identified three reasons for this. The first is that MLK is receiving students who have only spent a year or two in the educational environment improved by the dramatic leadership changes at the District and Bayside that took place in 2006. The second is the challenge of entering adolescence, with all of its insecurities and distractions, without the family support typical of other Marin school districts. The third reason is MLK's physical isolation from the productive atmosphere at the Bayside campus, further aggravated by the limitations of its portable buildings.

The District has enriched the MLK program with supplementary resources that have demonstrated their effectiveness in other schools. In spite of this, MLK continues to show no progress in the most recent No Child Left Behind examinations (the STAR tests). Some in the District place hope in next year's opening of the new campus under construction nearby in Marin City.

Added resources and new buildings may not solve the problem. The **Appendix** shows average test scores of students in Bayside and MLK alongside test scores of Willow Creek, the District's K-8 charter school. While scores in both English and Mathematics drop sharply when students move from Bayside to MLK, there is not a comparable drop

in scores when entering the seventh grade at Willow Creek. The Grand Jury believes that were the students at Bayside to continue on the same campus and in the same learning environment through the middle school years, as students do at Willow Creek, the decline in their test scores might be reversed. Returning Bayside and MLK to a K-8 configuration has been suggested.

Order and discipline

In 1997, the Grand Jury reported: “Problems at the Bayside/MLK School are particularly severe....Teachers have said there is so much defiant behavior that they actually fear turning their backs to students.” Sausalito police were called to the school 50 times during the 1996-97 school year, when there was an enrollment of 248. Twenty-one of those occasions involved aggressive or destructive student behavior such as fighting, stealing, or vandalism. There was a detailed discipline policy for both parents and students, but it was not enforced consistently. Qualified staff was not on board to administer discipline. Some students were “seriously emotionally troubled” and could not function in a regular classroom, but were left there. An expulsion policy existed, but no student had been expelled for two years.

Today the District contracts for the services of an academic counselor and a psychological counselor. A set of increasingly severe steps has been laid out for discipline, the teachers have been trained to make it work, and it is followed. Verbal insubordination is the most common problem. The Grand Jury visited classrooms at Bayside and MLK and found them to be orderly, with most of the students paying attention to the teacher or focused on their work. The teachers report that they are not in fear. In 2007, with an enrollment of 265 students, the two schools called the police 31 times, but only three of those were for student aggression against persons or destruction of property.

Despite these improvements, order and discipline challenges continue. As in 1997, there is an expulsion policy and until recently no one had been expelled. However, the Grand Jury has been told by residents of Marin City that a complex web of multiple family relationships within their community makes discipline more difficult because children carry sibling and family rivalries into the school environment. This is reflected in the comparatively high number of suspensions at Bayside and MLK for threatening another child and for fighting. A few students, as might be expected, persistently make trouble and do not respond to disciplinary action, including suspension.

Parent and caregiver support

In his book *Caring for Children We Share*, a text about partnerships among schools, family and community, J.L. Epstein writes, “The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families.” The Grand Jury found in its 1997 investigation that only a handful of parents participated in their children’s education and school activities. Many teachers expressed concern that they were receiving very little support from their students’ homes. The Grand Jury went on to

recommend a concerted effort to actively involve parents and guardians by building consistent and effective communication between home and school.

Today, the current District administration recognizes the need to inform and support the home and help reinforce the importance of academic standards. The District distributes a variety of publications on a monthly, quarterly, annual, and occasional basis. The District also has a marquee at the entrance to the Sausalito campus highlighting news, special events and assessment data. It is also developing a website.

At school events, parents are personally encouraged by staff and others to participate and volunteer at school. Teachers send student progress reports to parents every six weeks. Parent conferences are conducted in the fall and spring. A full-time counselor and teachers offer counseling support and make home visits. Accordingly, parent participation improved in the past several years. The Parent Teacher Student Association is active but still struggling for members.

Marin City community relations

The 2007-2008 Grand Jury learned from Marin City interviewees that, before 2005, the District superintendent was not inclined to work with the community and little progress, if any, had been made for years. However, these interviewees reported that things quickly began to improve two years ago when a new superintendent and new Bayside/MLK principal came on board. Effective after-school programs were implemented, creating more access for the children to other community programs. A Marin City youth council was formed to provide movies, a graduation exercise, community awards nights, and leadership training. One interviewee said, "Overall, things are much better than four years ago and three of the [District] board members are more often actively involved with various community activities."

Despite these enhancements, the Grand Jury also heard from Marin City residents that students graduating from MLK lack the skills needed to compete in high school and will likely drop out. We heard repeatedly that while the Bayside/MLK principal seeks community and parent involvement, the relationship between the Marin City community and the District board is "strained," that community input is not sought, commitments are not always kept, and despite good teachers, students are not being prepared for the reality of high school.

Leadership

The 1997 Grand Jury reported on the findings of a team hired by the District school board, including:

- Teachers and support staff believed more dynamic and creative leadership was needed.
- The District had failed to establish lines of communication with parents.
- Morale was universally low.

- The District had failed to provide adequate support in dealing with discipline and safety problems.
- Tardiness and absenteeism were unusually high.
- There were few effective procedures in place to deal with these problems.

In recent contrast, Bayside was named a California Distinguished School in April 2008. For the second year in a row, it received the Title I Achieving School Award from the California Secretary of Education. Morale among faculty and staff at Bayside has greatly improved. In 2006 the District board hired a new superintendent and a new principal because these two positions are key in sustaining a “success culture.”

Members of the Marin City community, District board, and teaching and support staffs report that recent improvements in the District include test scores, morale, lines of communication, and the effectiveness of the new superintendent and new principal. This contrasts strongly with the message received by the 1997 Grand Jury.

With the new District administration in place, tardiness and truancy have been reduced through systematic and effective cooperation with the Marin County Office of Education, the county social services department, and occasionally law enforcement. In addition, an assistant principal at Tamalpais High School now devotes significant effort to assisting graduates of MLK in adjusting to the strikingly different academic and cultural milieu of the high school.

Financial strength

In the Grand Jury’s 1997 report, the District was heavily criticized for the poor testing and other results of the then K-8 Bayside School, given its high expenditure of funds per student per year compared with other Marin public schools. Bayside’s high rate of expenditure, the result of the extraordinary level of revenue received from the Sausalito property tax base, was accomplishing little.

Today, the District’s rate of expenditure at Bayside and MLK is still the highest in the state at over \$31,000 per student per year, but the taxpayers are getting more for their money. Examples include Bayside’s designation as a California Distinguished School, improved teacher training and support, and the retention of specialists in the latest proven educational strategies. Today’s Bayside has an enriched curriculum, augmented counseling services, an improved physical environment, additional extracurricular and after-school activities, and increased contact with parents and the community.

While research has shown little or no correlation between money and performance in large-scale surveys of public education, it is clear to the Grand Jury that an extraordinary level of financial resources intelligently applied has enabled the District to achieve remarkable results at Bayside.

The District spends more than a thousand dollars per student at both Bayside and MLK during the course of a year in educational and psychological consultants alone. These two schools together have a nearly four times greater budget per student per year (\$31,000) than most Marin public schools (\$8,300). In 1997 that did not make any difference. Ten years later, under new leadership, it has made a large difference indeed, at Bayside. Improved results are hoped for at MLK but not yet demonstrated.

The District's charter school, Willow Creek, has done extraordinarily well despite the fact that Willow Creek's funds are now restricted by the District to the state's minimum requirement plus whatever Willow Creek can independently obtain through fund raising. The net effect is that Willow Creek's annual per student funding of under \$9,000 is less than one-third of the over \$31,000 per student allocated to Bayside and MLK by the District.

To compare the test results of Willow Creek with those of Bayside and MLK would not be fair. Financial resources do not make up for parental commitment, parents' education level, family income, family stability, neighborhood safety, and peer group support. All of these are present in greater measure at Willow Creek, where parents from Marin City, Sausalito, San Rafael, Novato, and even East Bay cities enroll their children in search of a special quality of education and social diversity.

Tensions within the District

Tensions about money and space for the semi-independent Willow Creek charter school arise at meetings of the District's school board. Of five board members elected by the Sausalito and Marin City communities, two have children at Willow Creek and three generally identify with Bayside and MLK. Bayside and Willow Creek share a campus in Sausalito and space is tight. Money has been a problem for Willow Creek and it has come to the District for assistance. While the District has an extraordinarily large revenue stream, it faces challenges that Willow Creek does not and guards its funds aggressively.

The three-to-two majority on the District board believes that Willow Creek should get along on its restricted allocation from the District, plus what it can raise on its own, despite the tremendous disparity in funding this creates between Willow Creek and the District's other two schools, Bayside and MLK.

Many teachers at Bayside, MLK and Willow Creek are friendly with one another, but there is an element of hostility toward Willow Creek by some of the non-academic staffs of Bayside and MLK, who are Marin City residents and view Willow Creek as Caucasian and privileged.

Potential to increase enrollment

All three schools—Bayside, MLK and Willow Creek—are the responsibility of the District board. It has the right to take pride in the remarkable progress of Bayside and the

success of Willow Creek. Instead of focusing on diminishing the value of any school, board members should be basking in their successes and attempting to increase enrollment in its public schools.

The District's objectives in establishing a charter school were threefold: to provide an alternative to the historically low performance and perceived lack of safety of the public schools; to attract families and their children back to Sausalito's public schools; and to recruit Sausalito children back from private schools. Because District funding is remarkably ample, it makes eminent sense for the District to apportion additional financial resources to Willow Creek to achieve these objectives. The charter school could then launch a serious recruitment program in Sausalito and expect, given its performance and attractive campus and location, to achieve a substantial enrollment increase among the estimated 400 to 500 Sausalito children now attending private schools.

In addition, although it has taken Bayside some time to reach its current level of performance, District support to increase parent and community awareness of Bayside's dramatic improvements should increase that school's enrollment.

Facilities changes

Bayside, grades K-6, shares its campus in northern Sausalito with Willow Creek, grades K-8, and the District offices. MLK, grades 7 and 8, is alone in Marin City. The Sausalito campus is of contemporary wooden construction, attractive and comfortable. The Marin City MLK campus is of old portable buildings, dismal in outside appearance, although inside the four classrooms are pleasant and well equipped. The ground has been cleared nearby and construction is beginning on a new building to accommodate a student body of 140. In the meantime, MLK's 31 students and their teachers make do.

The Grand Jury is impressed by the idea that Bayside and MLK return to a K-8 configuration, with MLK being part of the successful Bayside operation instead of continuing in relative isolation. Recent studies by the Rand Corporation and by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation conclude that the K-8 configuration has a high rate of success.

Then and Now

The Sausalito Marin City School District has made tremendous headway over the last decade in resolving or partially correcting numerous deficiencies cited in the 1997 Grand Jury report. These include academic performance, student discipline, parent support and involvement, community relations, administrative leadership, and overall morale. However, problems persist in 2008 in achieving academic progress at MLK and appropriate acknowledgement and economic support for the District's charter school. The 2007-2008 Grand Jury intends by this report to affirm and encourage the District's trend of improvement, and provide ideas for further achieving a unified purpose—the success of all District students.

CONCLUSIONS

The Grand Jury learned that recent test scores have improved dramatically at Bayside compared to 1997. This year it was designated a California Distinguished School. Test scores at MLK have not significantly improved since 1997 and constitute a major challenge for the District.

The Grand Jury learned that the District and its administrative staff and teachers have reached out to communicate and interact with Marin City parents, with modest improvement in parent participation since 1997. Some Marin City organizations report frequent staff and trustee visits and good relations with the District. Others report that the District takes little interest in support from the community and District commitments are not always kept.

The Grand Jury learned that lines of communication among staff and teachers of all three District schools are excellent. Morale among teachers at Bayside is high. At MLK morale is remarkably good despite the lack of improvement in test scores.

The Grand Jury learned that annual District expenditures at Bayside and MLK are the highest in the state at over \$31,000 per student. Annual District expenditures are under \$9,000 per student at the semi-independent charter school, Willow Creek Academy (Willow Creek).

The Grand Jury learned that the District board has recently retained excellent administrative leadership that has introduced significant improvements.

Willow Creek, the District's successful K-8 charter school, was founded in 2001 to attract and retain Sausalito families seeking a quality school in a safe environment for their children. The Grand Jury learned that Willow Creek has partially achieved this objective, and would do better with a significant infusion of funds from the District.

The Grand Jury learned that tensions about money and space for the semi-independent Willow Creek charter school arise at meetings of the District's school board.

The Grand Jury believes that Bayside can expect its enrollment to increase, based on its recent accomplishments and improvements. The Grand Jury further believes that Willow Creek should be able to launch a recruitment program in Sausalito and increase its enrollment with additional financial support from the District.

The Grand Jury learned that a new school building for 140 students is under construction on the Marin City campus. The Grand Jury believes that this may provide an opportunity for the District to blend MLK into the successful Bayside learning environment. Recent studies by the Rand Corporation and by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation conclude that the K-8 configuration has a high rate of success.

The Grand Jury concludes that the District should improve communication with Marin City organizations and families, adding staff as needed to enhance relationships, participation, and cooperation.

The Grand Jury concludes that the District should assist its Willow Creek charter school to become more attractive to Marin City and Sausalito families by providing it significantly greater financial support and public acknowledgement.

The Grand Jury concludes that the District should increase outreach to recruit more students in Sausalito and Marin City to its three schools.

The Grand Jury concludes that the District should consider ways to blend MLK with the successful and productive Bayside learning environment.

RESPONSES

This is an informational report only. Responses are neither required nor requested.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person, or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Civil Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.

APPENDIX

COMPARISON OF AVERAGE ENGLISH AND MATH SCORES, GRADES 2 - 8, YEARS 2006-07

GRADE	BAYSIDE-MLK				WILLOW CREEK			
	ENGLISH		MATH		ENGLISH		MATH	
	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007	2006	2007
2nd	3.4	3.7	3.3	3.6		3.8		4.5
3rd	2.6	3.3	3.9	3.9	3.2	3.1	4.5	4.1
4th	4.2	3.9	4.9	4.0	3.0	4.2	2.7	4.1
5th	3.0	4.6	2.6	3.9	3.7	4.1	3.1	3.9
6th	3.8	2.9	2.9	2.8	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.5
7th	3.0	2.8	2.1	2.2	3.6	3.4	3.7	4.3
8th	3.0	2.3	2.4	2.3		4.0		3.8

5 = ADVANCED 4 = PROFICIENT 3 = BASIC 2 = BELOW BASIC 1 = FAR BELOW BASIC