

SAFETY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Concerns about Yolo High School

A report by the 2022-23 Yolo County Grand Jury

June 1, 2023

*“I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions
in which they can learn.” – Albert Einstein*



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SUMMARY

The [mission](#) of Yolo High School (YHS), part of the Washington Unified School District in West Sacramento, is “to challenge and support each student to develop effective critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills in a safe and positive environment in order to become lifelong learners and active citizens serving a broader community.” (1) The 2022-23 Yolo County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) received a complaint that raised concerns about school safety for students, teachers and administrators at Yolo High School.

The Grand Jury concurrently published a report entitled *Are We There Yet? On the Road to School Safety*. That report investigated safety concerns at Washington Unified School District, in addition to the other four school districts headquartered in Yolo County. That report investigated “school hardening”¹ measures, safety training, working with law enforcement, emergency notification to parents or guardians, and mental health

¹ Schools use a variety of tools to help them harden their campuses against unwanted intrusion. These can range from surveillance cameras and door-locking systems to armed guards and arming teachers.

support for students should an emergency occur. As with the other four school districts, the Grand Jury found that Washington Unified School District continues to take appropriate steps toward improving overall safety, but additional actions were recommended.

The Grand Jury had concerns about the safety of students, teachers and administrators at YHS, how investigations are conducted and how victims of bullying are treated. Despite those concerns, the Grand Jury found that the teachers and administrators interviewed are dedicated to serving students to the best of their abilities given limited safety resources.

The Grand Jury would have preferred to do a more extensive investigation but was precluded due to limited time and resources. The Grand Jury believes that further review and/or investigation is merited.

BACKGROUND

Schools nationwide are grappling with [crime](#), including school shootings, use of other weapons (such as knives), bullying and theft. (2) YHS is part of the Yolo Education Center, which encompasses YHS, Evergreen Middle School and Office of Education programs. YHS, which has approximately 100 students, offers several programs. These include Transition to Adult Living with approximately 12 students, Evergreen Opportunity (a program for the 7th, 8th and 9th grades) with approximately 30 students, and the Horizon Program offered by the Yolo County Office of Education (YCOE) that serves approximately a half dozen students with disabilities. The James Marshall Parent Nursery School (preschool) is also on site. Programs and student groups are divided, depending on age and focus, but are all housed on the same campus so that what happens in one area of the campus can be witnessed by students in different age groups and programs or at least heard about via social media.

YHS, like other schools in Yolo County, has experienced violent incidents over the past two years, but it has a special challenge with the student population it serves. YHS is an [alternative school](#), which the Public Policy Institute of California defines as “a set of schools that provide different educational settings for students who are ‘at risk’ because they have dropped out, are pregnant or parenting, exhibit behavior problems, or need an alternative schedule to accommodate outside work.” (3) Students who “exhibit behavior problems” can create safety concerns for their fellow students or teachers and administrators which can impede the learning environment.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury reviewed findings from its report on school safety (*Are We There Yet? On the Road to Safety*). The Grand Jury then interviewed teachers and administrators at YHS who are knowledgeable about incidents of violence and bullying as well as the school's responses. Following the interviews, the Grand Jury reviewed handbooks and documents related to incidents of violence, school responses to the incidents and concerns about bullying.

DISCUSSION

Pursuant to the California Education Code, schools must investigate situations that involve actual or potential violence or bullying before taking action. California Education Code section [48900](#) specifically prohibits a student from being suspended from school or recommended for expulsion unless the school district superintendent or school principal determines the student has committed specific acts. (4) Four of the acts listed in the code – attempting or causing injury to another person, possessing a dangerous object, damaging school or private property, and bullying – are discussed below. The Yolo County Office of Education and the Yolo County Board of Education have taken firm stances against weapons on school property and bullying.

Incidents of Violence

Through interviews and other materials, the Grand Jury verified five specific incidents of violence at YHS during school hours between 2021 and 2023: two incidents involved students with items that could be considered weapons, such as knives; one involved a student punching another student while in the act of bullying that resulted in serious harm; one was a fight between two students; and the fifth involved a parent attacking another parent. In two of the verified incidents, students verbally threatened others and vandalized property. Other incidents or situations, including another two with students having knives on campus, were described during interviews but could not be verified.

While guns have been the focus of media reports over the past several years, knives are increasingly challenging for schools since they can be acquired, carried and concealed easily, and can create serious harm to a person, furnishings or equipment. A [policy brief](#) published by the American Psychological Association on March 17, 2022, found that: "In California alone, 4% of students reported bringing a gun to school, 8% reported bringing a knife, and 6.8% reported they were threatened or injured with a gun, knife, or a club.

Additionally, 23.3% saw a gun, knife, or other weapon on school grounds. That is, in any given year, **almost a quarter of all secondary school students in California—representing more than half a million students—have seen, been threatened by, or brought a weapon to school.** Nationwide, millions of students each year may have such experiences with weapons in schools. In California, weapons are present in many schools, with very high rates of weapons in a small number of schools” (emphasis added). (5)

California Penal Code section [626.10](#) prohibits “dirks or daggers” on school grounds and defines them as “a knife or other instrument, with or without a handguard, that is capable of ready use as a stabbing weapon, and that may inflict a significant or substantial physical injury or death.” (6)

The Washington Unified School District (District) provides several guides for parents, students and staff covering procedures and expectations. These [guides](#) can be found on the Yolo Education Center website. (7) Its *Parent Handbook*, which is required to be signed by parents or guardians, specifically prohibits “possession of a firearm on campus.” It also notes that a student can be expelled if found to have seriously injured another person or have been found to possess “any knife, explosive, or other dangerous object of no reasonable use to the pupil.”

The District’s *Student Behavioral Expectations Handbook* identifies several situations that could result in disciplinary action. Included are “weapons or injurious objects” described as “the possession, use or sale of any object that might be used to inflict bodily injury to another person.” The *Yolo High School Student Handbook 2022-2023*, which is also signed by students and their parents or guardians, covers expectations and resources. While the Student Handbook discusses bullying and other prohibited conduct at length, it does not mention weapons of any kind or consequences of having weapons on site.

The “Know Your Educational Rights” section of the *Parent Handbook* states, “All students and staff have the right to attend safe, secure, and peaceful schools.” Teachers and Administrators interviewed shared concerns about their and their students’ safety due to violence, threats of violence and what they perceived to be deficient responses by leadership to such situations. Teachers and administrators also expressed concern about reductions in safety staff and other measures due to budgetary constraints as well as changes in past practices which prevented desired steps from being taken to make YHS as safe as reasonably possible for students and staff.

Suspension is one action that can be taken when a student threatens or acts violently. However, YHS staff and teachers may not know that a student has been suspended or the length of the suspension until the next school day. As a result, the student could more easily return to the campus shortly following the start of the suspension, such as by simply jumping a fence, and continue to act improperly – or worse.

Teachers and administrators voiced concerns about the YHS investigation process following incidents of violence or other inappropriate behavior. In its section entitled “Investigation Procedures,” the *Parent Handbook* provides detailed information about its process, including the expectation to “[p]rovide an equal opportunity for the parties to present witnesses including the fact and expert witnesses, and other exculpatory [sic] and exculpatory evidence.” The Grand Jury has concerns that in at least one case at YHS an investigation may not have reflected all facts available.

Bullying

The Grand Jury received a complaint and corroborating information that raised concerns that victims of bullying were removed from YHS while the bullies were allowed to remain. Bullying is a serious matter for schools and is discussed at length in both the District’s *Student Behavioral Expectations Handbook* and the *YHS Student Handbook*. In both cases, bullying behaviors are detailed at length, as are the procedures for investigating and taking action on complaints and resources, or what are deemed as “supportive measures” available to the victims. This issue is beyond the scope of this report. Records and facts were requested from District personnel concerning this issue, but no response has yet been received.

A student support strategy noted in the *Parent Handbook* is “Voluntary Short Term Independent Study.” Article 5.5. [51744 - 51749.6] of the Education Code defines independent study as a short-term solution for specific circumstances and needs. (8) A significant percentage of YHS students are in such independent study programs. When students are on independent study, they are not in their classrooms or on campus. As a result, they are separated from their friends and school support programs. This separation can be especially impactful for students who are in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or who are English Language Learners.

COMMENDATIONS

Despite concerns about safety, the YHS teachers and administrators interviewed are committed to serving their students and their communities to the best of their abilities.

FINDINGS

- F-1 Unlike the District's *Student Behavioral Expectations Handbook*, the *Yolo High School Student Handbook* does not mention prohibitions against and consequences of having weapons, such as guns or knives, on school grounds during school hours despite incidents involving knives continuing to occur. Not including such discussion might prevent Yolo High School students from fully understanding the seriousness of bringing such items onto school grounds.
- F-2 Teachers and administrators are not notified of student suspensions as they occur. This increases the chances that a suspended student could return to school before allowed, possibly with intent and the means to harm others or property.
- F-3 Investigations of incidents of threats or acts of violence are not as thorough or considered as needed.
- F-4 A significant percentage of Yolo High School students are in what is commonly known as independent study at any given time, thereby unable to attend classes or events on the campus. This isolation prevents them from receiving the full benefit of services provided to attending students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R-1 By January 1, 2024, the Washington Unified School District should revise the *Yolo High School Student Handbook* to identify opportunities to address prohibitions against and consequences of having weapons on Yolo Education Center grounds.
- R-2 By January 1, 2024, the Washington Unified School District should develop a plan to improve the process by which teachers and administrators are promptly notified of student suspensions from the campus.
- R-3 By January 1, 2024, the Washington Unified School District should initiate an audit of investigations involving violence and bullying, conducted by Yolo High School leadership between 2021 and 2023, using independent experts in order to identify any investigations found to be incomplete or improperly concluded, then take remedial action. In addition, the District should review the investigations training completed by school administration to evaluate its effectiveness and seek opportunities for improvement. The findings and outcomes of this review should be shared with the Grand Jury.
- R-4 By June 30, 2024, the Yolo County Board of Education should conduct a study of the circumstances under which students are assigned to independent study at Yolo High School. This review should identify whether practices at Yolo High

School disproportionately harm victims of bullying or students who need support provided at their schools.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses to its Findings and Recommendations from the following governing bodies:

- Board of Education/Trustees Washington Unified School District – F-1, F-2, F-3, F-4, R-1, R-2, R-3
- Yolo County Board of Education – F-4, R-4

END NOTES

- 1 Yolo High School Mission: <https://yolo.wusd.k12.ca.us/>
- 2 Jocelyn Gecker, “After Year of Violence, US Schools Try to Tame Tensions,” Associated Press, June 23, 2022, (<https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2022-06-23/after-year-of-violence-us-schools-try-to-tame-tensions>)
- 3 Paul Warren, “Accountability for California’s Alternative Schools,” Public Policy Institute of California, Report, May 2016, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/accountability-for-californias-alternative-schools/#:~:text=In%20California%2C%20E2%80%9Calternative%20school%E2%80%9D%20refers%20to%20a%20set,need%20an%20alternative%20schedule%20to%20accommodate%20outside%20work>
- 4 California Education Code 48900, https://california.public.law/codes/ca_educ_code_section_48900
- 5 Dr. Ron Avi Astor and Dr. Rami Benbenishty, “Reducing Weapons in Schools,” Division 15 of the American Psychological Association, March 17, 2022, <https://apadiv15.org/reducing-weapons-in-schools/>
- 6 Shouse California Law Group, “Penal Code § 626.10 PC – Weapons on California School Grounds,” <https://www.shouselaw.com/ca/defense/penal-code/626-10/#:~:text=California%20Penal%20Code%20%C2%A7%20626.10%20PC%20makes%20it,can%20be%20charged%20as%20a%20misdemeanor%20a%20felony>
- 7 Yolo Education Center, Handbook and Forms: <https://yolo.wusd.k12.ca.us/Our-School/Handbooks-and-Forms/index.html>
- 8 California Legislative Information: https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=EDC&division=4.&title=2.&part=28.&chapter=5.&article=5.5

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.