

**2009 – 2010**  
**Madera County Grand Jury**  
**Final Report**  
**Western Sierra Charter Schools**

**Introduction:**

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 925, on March 11, 2010, the Madera County Grand Jury (Jury) visited Western Sierra Charter Schools composed of Mountain Home School (grades k – 8) and Glacier High School (grades 9 – 12). The Schools are organized under the Charter Section of the California Education Code. While the charters are granted by the Yosemite School District, the supervision and control of the schools reside in the Board of Directors of the Western Sierra Charter Schools, Inc., a non-profit corporation. The administrator gave a briefing covering the mission, staffing, operations, resources, and procedures of the schools.

**Findings:**

As indicated, Western Sierra Charter Schools serves students from kindergarten through high school. The current enrollment is approximately 340 of which 225 are in the elementary school and 115 in the high school. Mountain Home School was granted its charter by the Bass Lake School District in 1994; Glacier High School received its charter in 2002. The two combined under a common board during the 2008-09 school year. The current location, a renovated commercial building, has been operational for about 10 years. Two additional classroom buildings have been subsequently added. While the campus is small, the buildings are well maintained and measures have been taken to provide a limited outdoor recreation area as well as a family picnic area. No food service is provided. Families are responsible for student transportation to classes as needed as well as to all field trips or other off-campus activities.

The staff consists of nine credentialed faculty as well as the administrator, a secretary, and a part-time custodian and librarian. Teachers serve as academic counselors; any other specialized staffing, such as a psychologist, are arranged by contract with the Yosemite School District. The schools are fully accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Funding is based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) distributions. The schools do not accept federal funds in order to preserve flexibility in curriculum and operational matters. The schools are seeking status from the Internal Revenue Service as a non-profit, charitable organization with the goal of facilitating fund raising and building an endowment.

A student may seek admission to the schools without regard to school district boundaries. Students and parents meet with a teacher upon initial acceptance to determine class standing, education needs, interests, and goals. Parents are critical to student success as they do much of

the teaching in accordance with assigned lessons. Mandatory meetings of the students, parent, and teacher are required, usually on a periodic two to three week basis. The administrator proudly noted that the most recent Annual Performance Index (API) score for Glacier High School was 835, well above the scores of neighboring district schools. The API for the elementary school was also above the state target for success. In addition to the required state testing, the schools do testing at the beginning and end of each school year to measure progress.

While in-classroom attendance is not mandatory, many students take advantage of the formal classes, especially in math and the sciences, which are taught one or two days a week. Parents frequently attend with the student or work with the student using the school library or other education materials available either at the campus or checked-out for home use. The Jury met several faculty members who were uniformly enthusiastic and positive in their attitude toward the students and the learning environment offered by the schools. On the day the Jury visited, many students, parents, and family members were present. The schools provide a play area for non-students, which are supervised by volunteers and student assistants. A number of voluntary field trips are available to students.

The governing board of the non-profit corporation is composed of nine members: four are parents, two are teachers, and one is a community member. Yosemite School District represents the eighth member. The administrator, in his role as Executive Director of the corporation, is the ninth member. As noted, parent involvement in the educational effort is paramount and obvious. As the schools are chartered, students who do not comply with the expected standards for academic performance or deportment can be returned to the regular school environment. The administrator noted very minimal behavior problems or student alcohol or drug use. Again, as the majority of the instruction occurs in the home, observation by faculty or administrators of such issues is limited.

The high school graduation rate is very high, but as the class size is so small, even a small change can produce a significant movement in the graduation rate. The administrator noted that students have been quite successful in achieving acceptance at colleges and universities. Some students have gone on to the military academies despite the school not having a strong athletic program. The administrator noted that some students do come to the schools with special educational needs. The schools work with professionals from the Yosemite School District to develop Individual Assessment Plans to meet such learning requirements.

Campus security apparently is not a high priority, primarily because the majority of the instruction is home based. However, on-campus activities and instruction may bring a relatively large number of students, parents and others on campus. Fire drills are not rigorously conducted. Planning for disasters or emergency situations appears to be rudimentary at best.

**Conclusions:**

The Madera County Grand Jury found the Western Sierra Mountain Charter Schools to be generally well run with a highly motivated staff. Parent involvement is very high and student success is paramount.

School leadership and faculty were knowledgeable about the students and genuinely enthusiastic regarding the academic process unique to the schools.

The campus is clean, functional, and offers adequate resources to aid in the learning process.

Safety and emergency preparedness need to be addressed in a more definitive manner.

**Recommendation:**

- The schools should review the requirements within the California Educational Code, Section 32001 in particular, regarding fire drills and other security/safety issues as applicable.
- Faculty and staff should be familiarized on a regular basis with emergency procedures. Parents and students should be given at least basic instructions regarding safety and security when visiting campus.

**Respondents: Written response required pursuant to PC933(c)**

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**Respondents: Response optional**

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