

County superintendent speaks out on school closures

Letter to the Editor:

As you are may be aware we had school closures that occurred with three schools in the El Dorado Hills area on Friday because of an odor that resulted from a sealant applied to the Oak Ridge track. Folks did an exceptional job of evacuating approximately 2,300 students from Oak Ridge to the LDS Church on Green Valley Road, approximately 1,000 students from Rolling Hills Middle School to Brooks Elementary and approximately 700 students from Silva Valley to Oak Meadows. The Rescue School District also offered their buses to help in the evacuation. After students were evacuated, Raley's and Nugget markets donated water for students and the El Dorado Hills Fire Department picked up and delivered the waters. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were delivered to the LDS Church for high school students, and grilled cheese sandwiches were delivered to the elementary schools for the Buckeye District students. Both districts' food service programs kicked into high gear to make this happen. Students were then picked up by parents or delivered home by the transportation departments that responded admirably.

Environmental testing has continued to occur on all three campuses and no substances have been detected of concern. The county's Environmental Management Department, under the direction of Gerri Silva, has been on the school sites from the early morning hours of September 18 and continued to work with schools, the Office of Emergency Services, the Sheriff's Department, the Fire Department, and Public Health to ensure that there was no risk for students, staff and the community. What was most impressive in the response was the cooperation among all departments and agencies. Even though there was not a detection of substances that would cause

concerns for the community health, the decision was made to take a precautionary stance and to close the schools. Schools stayed closed, and the CSD park also closed over the weekend, again just to be cautious because if there were any substances in the air that would be of a health concern, children playing and breathing harder would be at greater risk.

The equipment available from both the county and the state of California that could test the particular substances that would cause a health concern could only measure the presence of these substances at a certain level. Because all agencies desired to ensure that there were no harmful substances present in the air, the USEPA was called in to provide the sophisticated measurement equipment that could measure to a more finite level. The federal EPA responded by bringing in a team from Las Vegas and had equipment shipped overnight from a variety of sites to ensure that we had the equipment that could test for harmful substances and could be used in the field and provide real time information. The EPA testing on Saturday afternoon into the evening again did not detect any issues of concern. After meeting with all departments and agencies on Saturday evening, the decision was made to continue sampling and monitoring the air on Sunday by collecting samples that would be sent for analysis. This was essentially the third level of review that was conducted to protect the health of our community.

After reviewing the results of the additional testing that had been completed on Saturday and discussion with the federal EPA team, under the direction of Michelle Rogow, the Public Health Officer, Environmental Management Director, Gerri Silva, and the Fire Prevention Specialists, Walter Jukes and Battalion Chief Brad Ballenger, the decision was made with the school districts to open school on Monday.

In addition to commending the county departments and agencies that were engaged in this issue, the three campuses are to be

applauded for their handling of a difficult situation. Principals, teachers, and support staff all worked together to ensure that children were safe and that parents were informed of the status of the schools. Superintendents Terry Wenig and Sherry Smith are to be congratulated for having put in place teams that can effectively implement the Safe School Plans and communicate in a timely and accurate manner with parents. There was tremendous cooperation and support from all involved. Again automated telephone and e-mail messages were used throughout the process to keep parents informed of the issue.

We would never want to have to execute the Safe School Plans, but it is comforting to know that we have staff trained, cooperation and relationships between departments and agencies to ensure effective communication, and procedures ready to respond to emergencies. As we always do, a debriefing will occur with all the agencies involved to discuss how we can continue to improve in our emergency response. Thanks to all that gave so many hours and assistance to make this work.

Vicki L. Barber, El Dorado County superintendent of schools

September 21, 2009