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MARIN COUNTY  
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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MARY JANE BURKE  
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June 11, 2008

The Honorable Verna Adams  
Marin County Superior Court  
P.O. Box 4988  
San Rafael, CA 94913-4988

Roberta Robinson, Foreperson  
Marin County Grand Jury  
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room 275  
San Rafael, CA 94903

Your Honor and Madam Foreperson:

Attached are the responses of the Marin County Office of Education to the report of the 2007-2008 Marin County Civil Grand Jury Report entitled "*Emergency Communications at Marin Schools: A Tale of Catastrophe.*" These responses were discussed in a public meeting of the Marin County Board of Education on Tuesday, May 13, 2008.

On behalf of the 40,000 students, parents, staffs and Boards of Trustees of the public and private schools in Marin County, I want to thank the Marin County Civil Grand Jury for their interest and concern related to emergency communications in our schools. While initially appearing to be only a problem of finances, the connection of our schools to MERA or the development of any updated system has become more complicated. Certainly, these fiscally uncertain times pose additional challenges to the school entities of our community. My commitment to the Grand Jury is that the Marin County Office of Education will work with and coordinate the efforts of the various school entities to review the systems in place and to determine what configurations will best facilitate school emergency communications. We will also work with MERA to determine its ability to serve the school entities and, if that is not possible, to determine what other systems might need to be established.

A preliminary plan related to the above paragraph has already been developed and a status report will be made to the Grand Jury by March, 2009.

Sincerely,

MARY JANE BURKE  
Marin County Superintendent of Schools

**RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY REPORT FORM**

**Report Title: Emergency Communications at Marin Schools: A Tale of Catastrophe**

**Report Date: March 13, 2008**

**Response by: Marin County Office of Education Title: Mary Jane Burke  
Marin County Superintendent of Schools**

**FINDINGS**

- I (we) agree with the findings numbered: \_\_\_\_\_
- I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: \_\_\_\_\_

**(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefor.)**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Recommendations numbered \_\_\_\_\_ have been implemented.  
**(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)**
- Recommendations numbered \_\_\_\_\_ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.  
**(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)**
- Recommendations numbered \_\_\_\_\_ require further analysis.  
**(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.)**
- Recommendations numbered \_\_\_\_\_ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.  
**(Attach an explanation.)**

Date: 6/11/08 Signed: Mary Jane Burke

Number of pages attached 5

**RESPONSES FROM THE MARIN COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF  
SCHOOLS**

**TO THE FINDINGS (F) AND RECOMMENDATIONS (R)**

**OF**

**THE 2007-2008 MARIN COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT**

***“Emergency Communications at Marin Schools: A Tale of Catastrophe”***

**PROLOGUE**

Before making formal responses to the Findings and Recommendations of the Marin County Civil Grand Jury, it is important to put the responses in the context of what has been happening related to emergency radio systems for school entities and what developments have affected MERA. Prior to December, 2007, the view was held by school entities that becoming a part of MERA was only an issue of available funding. Following the storms of late December, it became clear in January, 2008 that the capacity of MERA to include all of the school entities had come into question. It also became clear that school entities needed to do more formal planning about what talk group configurations might be needed to become a part of MERA and what equipment each school entity might require. (For example, requirements for West Marin may well be different than for those communities along the central 101 corridor such as San Rafael, Novato, etc.)

It is also important for the Grand Jury to know that our partners who are mentioned in the findings and recommendations have been working over a period of many years with school entities on issues of emergency preparedness, including radio systems. As school entities formulate more exactly what radio requirements are needed, I believe our partners continue to be ready to help us in any way that they are able to do so.

With this background, the commitment of the Marin County Office of Education is to work with and to coordinate the efforts of the various school entities to review current systems in place and to determine what configurations best facilitate local school communications should MERA determine that it will be able to include the school entities in the countywide system. It is the intent of the Marin County Office of Education to provide a progress report to the Grand Jury by March, 2009.

It is in this context that the responses provided below should be read.

**FINDINGS**

**F3. No public or private school in Marin is part of MERA.**

Response: Agree.

**F4. Marin County is a likely candidate for a major disaster at any time.**

Response: Agree.

**F5. The present public school emergency radio communication system is about to go belly up, leaving the schools with no emergency radio communication capabilities.**

Response: Each school entity in Marin County has prepared an Emergency Plan which includes provisions for emergency communications between individual school sites and school district offices. There is agreement that the current countywide system used by district offices and the Marin County Office of Education is in need of upgrading, given the age of the equipment, etc.

**F6. Repeated attempts by the Marin County Office of Education to fund MERA in the schools has failed to raise any money.**

Response: Agree. (See the Attached Chart)

**F7: Money from Homeland Security grants for MERA radios in the schools has not been made available because of questionable interpretations of Homeland Security guidelines by local authorities.**

Response: Unable to Respond

**F8. Money has been the stumbling block for MERA radios in the schools. The immediate need for an emergency radio communication system for Marin's schools has been trumped by the lack of financing and what seems to be a widespread attitude that puts money before school safety.**

Response: Prior to January, 2008, the primary issue for not having MERA radios for school entities was the availability of financial resources. It has since become apparent that, even with adequate funding, planning is needed so that a determination can be made relative to the appropriate talk group configurations for school entities to interface with the MERA system and what equipment each school entity might require.

- F9. Both the Red Cross and Department of Health & Human Services recognize the importance of the school sites as gathering places in times of emergency. Both have contracted with various school districts for their use in times of crisis.**

Response: Agree.

- F10: There is a belief that installing MERA radios now could instill a false sense of security in the schools, because in any major crisis the MERA system would be overwhelmed with any immediate help unlikely in spite of MERA.**

Response: Agree

- F11. An alternate plan to equip the schools with an emergency radio communications system that could be outside the MERA radio network is in an early stage of consideration.**

Response: As stated in the Prologue, these considerations will be coordinated and intensified by the Marin County Office of Education in the coming period of time with a preliminary report to the Marin County Civil Grand Jury by March, 2009.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Board of Supervisors, the Marin Emergency Radio Authority, the Disaster Council, the Marin County Office of Education, the Marin County Office of Emergency Services, the Marin County Department of Public Works, the Marin County Administrator's Office, the Marin County Department of Health & Human Services, the various public school districts and the private schools should immediately work together to fund and install the MERA system and its radios in all of the Marin's public and private schools.**

Response: It is clear now that further planning on the part of the school entities is needed. When the intensified, coordinated efforts of the Marin County Office of Education and the school entities to determine all of the needed steps and information to become a part of MERA is complete and when the ability of MERA to serve the school entities is determined, we will continue working with all of our partners to find a way to activate an improved emergency radio communications system for school entities.

Responses from the Marin County Superintendent of Schools  
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**R2: In the event it is determined that MERA is not a feasible option for Marin's schools, an effective, alternative emergency radio communication network, independent of MERA, should be immediately modeled, funded and installed in Marin's public and private schools through the collective efforts of the entities identified in Recommendation (R1) above.**

Response: See the Response to R1.

# MARIN COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION CHRONOLOGY OF ACTIVITIES WITH MARIN EMERGENCY RADIO AUTHORITY (MERA)

- January, 1999** Discussion took place with representatives from MERA and the Marin County Radio Shop regarding schools' participation in the system.
- February, 1999** MERA provided information and projected cost of radio equipment to outfit each public school in Marin County. Discussions indicate schools will be charged for operating costs for system.
- March, 1999** Discussion with legislative analyst, Jeff Frost, to have Kerry Mazzoni, State Assemblywoman, submit a budget augmentation request.
- April, 1999** Marin County Superintendents' support letter sent to Kerry Mazzoni, State Assemblywoman, requesting her budget augmentation of \$520,000 for radio equipment.
- December, 1999** Marin County Superintendent of Schools speaks to Marin's Disaster Council and requests their support to have schools exempt from operating system costs.
- February, 2000** Meeting with Fire Chief John Lando, Kentfield Fire Department (MERA Chairperson), to discuss schools' participation in the system and request that schools be exempt from operating system costs.
- March, 2000** Discussions with MERA Executive Committee and consultant on Marin County schools projected needs and use of system.
- September, 2000** Discussions and planning between the Marin County Office of Education and MERA for schools "talk group."
- October, 2001** Meeting with Marin County Telecommunications Agency Director responsible for MERA Project. Requested information on costs of capital equipment and exemption from on-going operational expenses.
- December, 2001** Letter to Marin Telecommunications Agency Director on schools' participation in system.
- April, 2002** Meeting with MERA Technical Advisory Committee Meeting to provide input on School talk groups.
- April, 2003** MERA Board approval for Marin County public and private school participation in MERA.
- January, 2004** Grant request #1 submitted in the amount of \$386,807 for Homeland Security Grant funding for MERA radio equipment for Marin County public schools. No funding approved.
- April, 2005** Grant request #2 submitted in the amount of \$72,882 for Homeland Security Grant funding for MERA radio equipment for Marin County public schools. No funding approved.
- June, 2006** Grant request #3 submitted in the amount of \$48,458 for Homeland Security Grant funding for MERA radio equipment for Marin County public schools. No funding approved.
- 2007/2008** Discussion with Marin County School District Superintendents to plan for acquisition of MERA equipment.