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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Parents' health concerns swept under the rug

Woodland, CA. Woodland Coalition for Green Schools members were stunned by their school district's board of trustees' vote on Thursday, February 8th *not* to remove the carpet from three classrooms at Beamer Elementary where children have been suffering headaches, rashes, red eyes, fatigue, concentration problems, and other worrisome symptoms since last fall.

Background. Shortly before school started in August 2017, the Woodland Joint Unified School District (WJUSD) laid new carpets in a total of four classrooms (Campos #22, Salazar #15, Saunders #24, Anaya #25) plus the front office at Beamer Elementary. These homerooms are also used for the ASES afterschool programs, and other children switch into them in the mornings for Spanish/English language instruction. A concerned parent, Dr. Liza Grandia, filed complaint with the district on August 28 about the strong odor of the new carpet in her daughter's classroom (Room #22). After months of delay, the district finally accepted two donations she secured in September to replace the carpet in Room #22 with "marmoleum" (a natural linoleum made from tree resin and linseed oil on a jute backing). The district hired DFS Flooring, the same company that installed the carpet, to install the marmoleum the third weekend of January.

The issue was not yet solved. Grandia and other coalition members learned late into the fall that three other classrooms at Beamer had also received the new carpet. Through word of mouth, parents began connecting it with symptoms observed in their children. Grandia and coalition members spoke in public comment about carpet at every trustee meeting from September 28 onward and provided books, materials, and briefing papers to board members and WJUSD leadership about their concerns.

At a December 21 meeting covered by Jenice Tupolo of the Woodland Daily Democrat, Superintendent Thomas Pritchard promised concerned Beamer mothers that he would remove the carpet in the other three classrooms. After a long holiday silence, he notified coalition leader, Liza Grandia on January 12 that the board of trustees would have to approve the contract/Purchase Order per board policy 3300. Skipping the opportunity to consider the issue January 25, the agenda item was slotted for February 8. As the last item of business at approximately 10:30 p.m. that evening, with only brief discussion and no procedural opportunity for coalition members to participate, six trustees (*in alphabetical order*: Bayne, Childers, Decker, Guerrero, Pyeatt, Tafoya) voted against the environmental remediation, with only Trustee Zendejas in support.

Response from the Woodland Coalition for Green Schools

A worried mother of a severely affected child in one of the three classrooms, Cristina Brambila asks, "How many children have to suffer? Were five sick children not enough to convince the district to fix these classrooms? . . . I only heard about the carpet through word of mouth. Why hasn't the district formally notified parents?" Learning about the problem through social media since Thursday's meeting, several more parents have come forward to coalition leaders to report symptoms.

Superintendent Pritchard reasserted at Thursday's meeting that the Green Label ensures that the carpet is safe. Facilities Manager Nick Baral also stated to CBS Sacramento on January 25 that he had checked with the carpet manufacturer about the carpet and installation process and there were 'no concerns.' The district seems to be trusting the word of the carpet industry over the testimonies of parents. Quips the Coalition's coordinator, Dr. Liza Grandia, "Yeah, Philip Morris will also tell you that cigarettes are safe."

Dr. Grandia, a professor at UC Davis, has presented at academic conferences about the history of the carpet industry and air quality controversies. As she explains, "'Green Label' is a marketing tool created in 1992 by the Carpet and Rug Institute, a multi-million dollar political lobbying group that represents the \$16 billion carpet industry. It's a voluntary metric with 'safe' levels set by the carpet industry itself." Grandia notes, "It's a little like the trusting the fox to guard the hen house."

Right before the Carpet and Rug Institute proposed this voluntary program to pre-empt regulation, the EPA had just completed extensive investigation into a chemical called 4-PC (4-phenylcyclohexene) that is responsible for the acrid "new" smell of carpet. It is a byproduct of the styrene/butadiene glue used to bind synthetic fibers to carpet backing. Grandia notes, "While EPA scientists were recommending that the agency set an emissions level for 4-PC at no more than 5 parts per trillion (.005 ppb), the carpet industry countered with a voluntary limit at 300 parts per million."

Through private laboratories contracted by the carpet industry itself, the "Green Label" plus program tests a small sample of carpet for 13 volatile organic chemicals just once a year. However, according to **a scientific report released in October 2017** by the Healthy Building Network (a written summary of which Grandia gave to WJUSD trustees on December 14), carpet can contain up to 44 hazardous chemicals including: lead, mercury, arsenic, triclosan, PBDEs, and many other substances under scrutiny for adverse health impacts. Until this pathbreaking report was issued, the public had little information about what's in carpet. Grandia observes, "Because carpet is ubiquitous, people assume it's safe. So it's disturbing to learn that carpet industry actually only tests for only one of these 44 hazardous chemicals under its so-called 'green' label." Moreover, there is no process for checking if millions of carpet feet sold to consumers have the same quality as the sample.

The district usually makes powerpoint presentations available to the public before meetings, so Superintendent Pritchard's presentation came as a surprise late Thursday night. He alluded to tests commissioned by the district's insurance company, but no data were included in the slides for the public to view. As night passed into day, the Woodland Coalition for Green Schools therefore filed a public records request to see what slate of chemicals were tested. "In the meanwhile, it's difficult to comment on air testing data that we haven't seen" said Grandia. "I wonder why the district waited five months to test the air? This should have been done when I first wrote to the district in August."

Recently recognized by the Mellon Foundation as an emerging international expert in environmentally-induced illness, Dr. Grandia notes, "What may be safe in a one-time exposure for an adult male factory worker may not be safe for children exposed the same chemical day in and day

out." Of the 85,000 chemicals in commerce, only about three thousand have been tested for basic toxicity. Grandia adds, "Our regulatory systems review chemicals one by one. They know next to nothing about the synergistic impact of chemical cocktails in the body. For example, 4-PC is thought to be an immune 'sensitizer.' Although the strong odor of the carpets may have dissipated to an adult nose, chronic exposure to 4-PC over five months may have hyper-sensitized some children's immune systems to low doses of this and other synthetic chemicals.

Justifying her "No" vote, Trustee Debbie Decker said she wanted more information about how the natural linoleum ("marmoleum") laid on January 20 in Room 22 holds up to traffic in the classrooms. Grandia interjected to say that she had provided to Superintendent Pritchard last September 13 a list of a half dozen school districts and colleges between Oakland and Folsom that have been replacing carpet with marmoleum for some time. "It's guaranteed to last 30 years. You could just call the facilities manager from any one of these districts to see how the marmoleum floors are performing."

Long-term community member of the Facilities Advisory Committee, Jen Hulbert asks, "If they are concerned about costs, why did the trustees not ask any questions about the bid itself? We know that for each classroom, marmoleum installation should only cost about four thousand and the underlayment probably another thousand. Eighteen thousand dollars for carpet removal and prep work for just three classrooms seems exaggerated." As upset coalition members talked late into the night outside the district offices after the disappointing trustee vote, Deborah Zavala wondered, "If the flooring contractor wouldn't give the district back its money for the carpet, then why would you hire them again? Isn't that a conflict of interest? If they are concerned about costs, why did no board members ask about the handwritten fee for \$4,999 in overtime handwritten in the margin?"

Grandia asks, "If the carpet is safe, why did the district deny my request in January to release a sample from the carpet removed in Room #22 for independent testing by known academic experts?" Grandia concludes, "The onus shouldn't be on parents to prove what exactly in the carpet may be making our children sick. As a precautionary measure, the district should remove these carpets now. They shouldn't be treating our children like experimental lab rats by waiting for further evidence."

The coalition applauds Trustee Tico Zendejas for his courageous minority vote and hopes that the other trustees will read the materials the coalition provided to them over the fall about health concerns with carpet and then reconsider their decision.

About the Woodland Coalition for Green Schools. We are a community coalition of parents, teachers, staff, and students that formed in August 2017 for more environmentally safe schools. Our goals are to:

- (1) To remove all environmental health hazards from classrooms, cafeterias, and campuses.
- (2) To reduce the district's ecological footprint and to integrate sustainability principles throughout all aspects of facilities management.
- (3) To help form and educate the next generation of environmental citizens.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1250758841694750/>

Other recent news coverage:

TV

[CBS Sacramento, November 29, 2017](#)

[Fox40, January 8, 2018](#)

[Good Day Sacramento, January 25, 2018](#)

Newspaper, Woodland Daily Democrat

["Carpet Causes Controversy at Woodland School" \(12/27/17\)](#)

["Alternative to Pesticide Spraying at Woodland Schools Sought" \(1/6/18\)](#)

["Environmental Issues and Ongoing Concern for Woodland Parents" 1/27/18](#)