



Cameron Goode stands next to the outlawed reading loft at A

Aptos classroom closed by firemen

By BOB SMITH

Students have been ordered out of an Aptos Junior High School classroom by the Aptos fire department.

The action is the strongest yet taken in a slowly simmering dispute between county and state fire officials and school administrators over the presence of massive wooden platforms in numerous elementary and junior high school classrooms.

Last Friday, Aptos Assistant Chief Nick Baumgartner told Principal Cameron Goode at Aptos Junior High School to keep students out of teacher Ron Dodd's classroom until a massively-built eight-foot-square, six-foot-high platform is removed.

Students were taken on a field trip Monday, thus complying with the fire department order. Goode said Wednesday morning that students were shifted into another classroom Tuesday and Wednesday.

In the cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville, fire prevention officers say there are additional platforms that also violate provisions of the Uniform Building code and the state fire marshal's regulations contained in Title 19 of the California Administrative Code.

Watsonville fire prevention officer Dave Williams said Wednesday morning that he believes one platform exists in the Mintie White School classroom. He's waiting for a ruling from the state fire marshal's office before proceeding.

"I'm hoping to get an interpretation on what it allows before I do anything," Williams said.

Santa Cruz County Fire Prevention Officer George Lopes has already sent letters to Mark Lewis, Santa Cruz city schools superintendent, asking that 17 platforms in that city's schools be ripped out.

"According to the code, they need to be removed," said Lopes Tuesday. "There is no easy way to make them meet the codes. They are not in the code (Title 19) and they don't meet the code's definitions for lofts (the closest applicable section)."

Lopes said Lewis told him that the platforms would be removed "if need be."

The district's alternative Gault School has the largest number — seven, Lopes said.

"Most are constructed of wood and this increased the fuel loading in a classroom that has a light loading (the amount of material available to burn)."

"But most important," the Santa Cruz official added, "if we allow this type of construction, we are opening the door to about anything. In theory, if we allow this, you could build a platform across the whole classroom."

Another problem arises with the platform. "You need a stairway. Ladders don't meet the codes for exits. You need a handrail and six to eight feet clear space above the top of the platform. Most classrooms only have eight-foot ceilings. There isn't enough height."

How did Santa Cruz get so many? "My predecessor allowed one or two to go in," said Lopes. "Had I known we had this many, I would have asked questions earlier."

Baumgartner learned about the Aptos Junior High School platform in December after being asked to approve a set of plans for it. Inspecting the school, he found it already built. Dodd, who was not available for comment, reportedly spent \$650 of his own money for the platform.

Since then, Baumgartner said he has learned that Rio del Mar School has five of the platforms and he'll be moving to get rid of those too.

State fire marshal representatives were called in by Baumgartner to inspect the platform since it wasn't specifically covered by the state regulations.

"He confirmed that it would be difficult to make it conform," Baumgartner said.

The issue is now in the Sacramento office of the state fire marshal, with fire and school officials waiting an interpretation of the code.

Bob Bowman, director of elementary education in the Pajaro Valley School District, said Wednesday morning that Dodd met with his parent steering committee Tuesday night.

"The committee is expecting some kind of decision from the state fire marshal's office."

But if the orders are to take it out, Bowman said, the district will comply.

"The ultimate authority lies with the local fire marshal," Bowman said, acceding to Baumgartner's authority. "We are concerned with safety and if they say that we move it, we will."

And in addition to the ones at Rio del Mar, Bowman said there's another one built at Hall District school.

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
January 25, 1978

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