

Dept. of Corrections: “Vast improvement” at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake

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(MADISON, Wis.) – The latest report from the court-ordered Monitor for Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School (LHS/CLS) was filed Tuesday and, for the sixth straight report, the Monitor found DOC in partial or substantial compliance with every aspect of the consent decree stemming from a 2017 lawsuit against the previous administration over conditions at LHS/CLS.

The Monitor visited the schools on March 19, accompanied by an attorney from the ACLU, and interviewed 48 youth and 33 staff members. [The 9th report of the Monitor](#) noted, overall, a “significant improvement in many key areas and in the overall atmosphere” at LHS/CLS, while also pointing out some areas for improvement.

“Our administration is proud of the steps we have taken at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake over the past two years,” said Department of Corrections Secretary Kevin Carr. “We look forward to working with the Monitor and engaging our staff in areas that can help lead to better outcomes for youth in our care.”

The report praised DOC and leadership at the schools for several initiatives, including:

- Increasing staff-led activities for youth
- Incorporating the Psychological Services Unit more into daily operations
- Resuming in-person education
- Training/ongoing implementation of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), the new behavior management system at the schools.

Among the prominent findings, the report provided data noting use of mechanical restraints on youth decreased 63% in this reporting period (Dec.-Feb.) and use of Administrative Confinement over the same period was reduced 36%. In addition, there has also been a precipitous decline in length of time a youth stays in Administrative Confinement. In November, the average length was 143 minutes, which was reduced to 74 minutes in February 2021.

The report also singled out some of the programs for youth at the schools, including art, gardening, welding and a new music program being offered under psychological services. The Monitor's report stated the youth's projects were "very impressive" and that "creative outlet is meaningful for youth who are in prime stages of identity development."

"We're really excited about our growing arts programming, especially our music program," said DOC Division of Juvenile Corrections Administrator Ron Hermes. "It's important to offer youth culturally relevant programs that provide them the opportunity to express themselves creatively. We are seeing the therapeutic impact that music has on our youth, and we are seeing that we have some very talented young writers and musicians who have something important to say through their music."

The Monitor suggested LHS/CLS explore ways to offer these programs on nights and weekends to prevent idleness and boredom, which she believes has contributed to past behavior issues among youth at the schools during the pandemic. She also recommends LHS/CLS continue working towards a full schedule that provides meaningful activities and accountability for youth.

The report also highlights the need for DOC to make staff wellness a major focus moving forward. It finds staff morale seemed improved over the previous visit and staff were more engaged with youth, but some staff appeared exhausted and stressed. Staff expressed concerns about having fewer "tools" available to manage behavior, youth acting out and working a significant amount of overtime. The Monitor emphasizes "staff wellness is a complex issue that impacts the overall culture, atmosphere and environment of the facility."

To help address these concerns from staff, DOC has put added focus on communications with staff, including regularly-scheduled town hall meetings with the Superintendent of the schools. The Monitor also suggests DOC continue its work to improve the new behavior management system, progressing with DBT and

improving youth incentives to help alleviate behavioral incidents.

DOC brought teachers back on site in March to resume in-person education, both in the school building and in housing units, for the first time since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic last spring. The past Monitor's report found remote learning was starting to have a negative impact on overall youth behaviors. In this report, she said she was, "pleased to see that during this site visit, youth were actively engaged in education both on and off the unit ... There was a much more positive energy during this site visit."