

BULLYING IN SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SCHOOLS

Addressing Aggressive and Violent Behavior Among Students

SUMMARY

Student bullying has been a chronic problem in some Santa Barbara County public schools for many years. It arises from a range of social and developmental factors, including students' desire for attention or status, peer pressure, and unresolved emotional challenges.

An analysis of countywide school data indicates that the prevalence and impact of bullying vary based on the community's socioeconomic conditions, race, gender, ethnicity, and the presence of gang activity. While most school administrators are aware of bullying-related challenges and have implemented strategies to address them, the effectiveness of these efforts has been inconsistent.

Based on its analysis of interviews conducted of school administrators and counselors, hundreds of pages of documents produced by the schools, and federal and state laws, the Grand Jury finds that:

- Bullying on county school campuses can be reduced by implementing additional safety measures
- Administrators do not consistently inform school counselors when students under their guidance engage in bullying
- Parent participation in outreach programs for bullying has been poor

Some school administrators continue to struggle with preventing and responding to bullying, resulting in unsafe and unhealthy learning environments. These schools require increased oversight, targeted support, and additional resources to ensure student safety and well-being. To that end, the Grand Jury recommends that schools:

- Increase staff presence in areas where students congregate before, during, and after school
- Have sufficient video cameras in order to monitor where students congregate before, during, and after school
- Add more counselors when the student-to-counselor ratio exceeds 250:1
- Inform school counselors whenever students under their guidance engage in bullying

- Schedule parent outreach programs regarding bullying on evenings, weekends, and online to accommodate working parents
- Encourage parents of students who have engaged in repeated acts of bullying to attend training programs
- Include non-monetary incentives to encourage parents to attend outreach programs

BACKGROUND

California Education Code sections 32261(f) and 48900(r) define school bullying as physical, verbal, written, or electronic communications that are sufficiently severe or pervasive to disrupt school activities, create substantial disorder, or infringe upon the rights of students or school personnel by creating an intimidating or hostile educational environment. Typically, minor, isolated incidents are not classified as bullying and may not result in formal intervention.

Bullying frequently coincides with students' developmental stages, particularly during transitions from elementary to middle school. At these ages, students often lack the social and emotional skills needed to manage conflict constructively.

Bullying is a learned behavior. It can be learned from friends, family or others who have exerted power over them. ¹Studies have shown a correlation between students' exposure to domestic violence at home and their participation in bullying at school.

Schools seek to avoid criminalizing or stigmatizing young students and, therefore, emphasize education, conflict resolution, and restorative practices. The effectiveness of these approaches, however, depends in part on meaningful parental engagement, which is often limited.

Bullying negatively affects all individuals involved, including victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Certain student populations - including female students and students with disabilities - experience bullying at higher rates. Cyberbullying presents an additional and growing concern, as it can occur both on and off campus and may have significant academic and psychological consequences. Research reveals that students who are

¹ Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (September 5, 2018) "[Bullies often victims of bullying themselves, research shows,](#)" accessed May 4, 2026.

bullied are more likely to experience academic difficulties, social isolation, physical symptoms, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. ² Prolonged exposure to aggressive bullying can result in lasting trauma extending into adulthood.

Surveys conducted by the California Department of Education indicate that every year, hundreds of students in Santa Barbara County feel unsafe, fear physical harm, or have engaged in fights at school. Such experiences can result in serious adverse effects on students' physical and mental health. ³

Although Santa Barbara County schools have implemented numerous programs to address bullying, many students continue to experience chronic bullying. Broader social and political factors may exacerbate these issues. For example, immigrant parents may face cultural, linguistic, or structural barriers that limit their engagement with schools, despite strong concern for their children's well-being.

During the 2024-2025 school year, Santa Barbara County public schools enrolled more than 63,000 students. The student population reflects significant racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, with a substantial proportion of students coming from economically disadvantaged households. Many parents work long hours, commute significant distances, and/or face language barriers, which can limit communication with their children and school personnel. As a result, incidents of bullying may not be discussed at home and, hence, go unreported or unresolved.

Improving school safety reduces risky behaviors and disciplinary issues, increases feelings of emotional and physical security, reduces bullying and victimization, and enhances social and emotional skills and attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

The 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury examined bullying in the County's twenty school districts. The investigation relied on:

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publications
- California and Federal statutes and regulations related to bullying

² <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/effects>, accessed December 10, 2025.

³ https://data.calschls.org/resources/Santa_Barbara_County_2325_Sec_CHKS.pdf, accessed March 20, 2026.

- County school district policies and procedures
- California Department of Education survey data
- School-reported bullying and incident data
- Relevant publications, articles, and media reports
- www.StopBullying.gov

The Grand Jury also conducted interviews with school administrators and counselors from various school districts throughout the County.

DISCUSSION

Applicable Laws

The state of California has enacted laws exclusively addressing school bullying. California Education Code section 234 *et seq.* (Seth’s Law) mandates that public schools implement anti-bullying policies, investigate complaints, intervene when bullying occurs, and train their staff on those policies and procedures. State law also requires school employees to receive annual training on recognizing and responding to bullying and cyberbullying.

Several new California laws have been enacted since 2025, which require greater emphasis on training and responding to acts of school bullying, including:

- AB 772 (2025) Off-Campus Bullying & Cyberbullying - requires the California Department of Education to create a model policy to address bullying that occurs off campus (such as online harassment). The policy must cover acts that create a hostile school environment, even if they happen outside school hours
- SB 939 (2024) Bullying & Cyberbullying Training - requires the state to provide online training modules about bullying and cyberbullying for school staff, administrators, parents, and students
- AB 3216 (2024) Phone Restrictions in Schools - requires all public schools to adopt policies limiting or banning smartphone use on campus by July 2026. Phones and social media are major drivers of cyberbullying, filming assaults, and online harassment
- AB 621 (2025) Deepfake Harassment and Abuse - targets AI-generated deepfake pornography used for bullying or harassment. Platforms that fail to remove harmful deepfakes within 30 days of receiving evidence can face damages up to \$250,000

- AB 715 (2025) Bias Prevention in Schools - creates a California Office of Civil Rights in the education system, which focuses on preventing discrimination and harassment based on bias in schools

County Policies Regarding Bullying

Santa Barbara County school policies prohibit bullying and cyberbullying against students or staff. All complaints alleging unlawful discrimination or bullying must be investigated, and appropriate corrective action taken. Students who engage in severe or pervasive bullying may face disciplinary action, including suspension or expulsion.

School Climate Survey Data

The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys (CalSCHLS) provide comprehensive data on school safety and climate.⁴ Survey data from 2023–2025 indicated that a large number of middle and high school students reported feeling unsafe at school and experienced bullying, physical altercations, threats, and exposure to weapons. Some students stated that they had experienced bullying due to their race, religion, gender, or disability.

CalSCHLS’s student surveys of all Santa Barbara County’s schools (including 7th, 9th, and 11th graders) reveal that during the 2023 to 2025 school years, of the 16,307 students who responded to the survey:

- 962 students felt unsafe at school
- 347 students were pushed, shoved, or kicked multiple times at school
- 231 students were afraid of being beaten up multiple times at school and
- 385 students engaged in fights multiple times at school

The number of affected students, incidents, and their severity is unacceptable and demands continued attention.

School Incident Reports

School incident reports record major student misconduct, such as:

- Threats of violence against students and staff
- Physical assaults
- Sexual harassment of students
- Cyberbullying involving explicit images and threats
- Slurs based on race, gender, and sexual identity/orientation

⁴ See footnote 3.

When bullying occurs, it can have a lasting effect on the students involved. Here is a small sample of recent reported cases of bullying in County schools:

- A student sent a text message threatening to kill another student
- Inappropriate and sexually explicit pictures of a female student were found on a male student's phone. The female student accused a male student of using the pictures to blackmail, humiliate, and harass her.
- Two students held a third student in the restroom against his will, insulted and threatened him, and asked him about his gang affiliation
- Two students punched and kicked a third student
- Two students attacked another student in retaliation for "ratting" out another student
- A student threw a large explosive firework at a staff member
- A student stabbed a staff member with a pencil
- A student told a counselor that he/she was going to shoot up the school

The role of school counselors

A school counselor provides guidance and support services to students in order to improve their academic, career, and personal outcomes, particularly for students with significant emotional needs. Counselors help students address trauma and emotional issues through direct interaction and also assist students with home issues such as domestic violence or other forms of abuse.

Many of the County's junior high/middle schools have only one counselor for the entire student body. For example, there may be one counselor responsible for as many as 500 or more students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a 250-to-1 ratio of students to school counselors. Some school counselors agree that it is very difficult to properly counsel more than 250 students. Some County school administrators have recognized the need to limit the number of students per counselor and maintain two or more counselors.

Enhanced supervision of students during breaks

Some school administrators have increased adult supervision on campus during breaks, using existing staff to monitor student behavior. This has had a positive impact on controlling bullying. The placement of existing staff among students would be cost-efficient since no additional hiring would be necessary.

School administrators have also reported the benefits of installing cameras on campus where students congregate. When students know cameras are present, they're less likely to engage in bullying. The visibility of cameras alone can prevent incidents before they happen. If a fight occurs, staff can monitor video footage and respond quickly. While cameras can help detect, document, and sometimes deter bullying in visible areas, they are not a proven or sufficient solution on their own. Some schools may not have cameras because of the costs involved. Some school districts fund such installation through local fundraising efforts and grants.

Improve communication between administrators and counseling staff

School counselors do not always receive updates about significant or potentially hazardous events concerning students under their guidance. Counselors help students address trauma and emotional issues through direct interaction. Rather than informing counselors in those instances, some administrators investigate and respond to these incidents themselves. If counselors are not notified, the students affected could experience negative consequences as a result.

Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), school principals and counselors can share student information without parental consent if the counselor has a "legitimate educational interest," the information is necessary to protect student safety, or there is a health or safety emergency. FERPA allows disclosure if there is a credible threat of violence, a student is being bullied in a way that threatens safety, or if there is a risk of harm to self or others.⁵

School counselors should be informed if any students under their guidance misbehave in ways that could affect the student, victims, or bystanders. More robust transparency would improve the school's working environment and relationships between administrators and staff.

Parent participation in school bullying programs

Parental participation in school bullying programs has been lacking since 2021. The number of parents attending parent-teacher association meetings has also dwindled in recent years. Many of the parents work long hours at multiple jobs plus long commute times, making attendance difficult at programs and training conducted during the day.

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/phlp/php/resources/family-educational-rights-and-privacy-act-ferpa.html>, accessed May 27, 2026.

Moreover, some parents do not speak or read English fluently, which affects their ability to understand program content.

School administrators have tried to encourage more parent participation in these programs, sometimes with little success. Every effort should be made to make these programs more accessible to parents.

How can schools stop bullying?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that someone who sees incidents of bullying should intervene, interrupt, or speak up to stop the bullying. The CDC suggests that parents, school staff, and other adults can:

- Help kids understand bullying and how to stand up to it safely
- Keep the lines of communication open by checking in with kids often and listening to them
- Encourage kids to do what they love, so they can build confidence and make friends
- Model how to treat others with kindness and respect

The CDC also recommends that schools avoid administering excessive student discipline, such as implementing extensive suspensions, expulsions, or transfers to other schools. Suspended students often return to school within days and resume the same behavior. The educators' focus should be to retrain, educate, and address underlying emotional issues causing bullying in the first place. In many instances, school staff, counselors, and administrators have utilized these options.

School administrators and counselors have reported success in responding to acts of bullying, including utilizing positive behavior systems, mediation, restorative programming, notifying parents, and contacting law enforcement. They admit the problem cannot be solved overnight; it can take years to fully change the culture, but every positive step helps.

Many Santa Barbara County schools use a school-wide framework known as Positive Behavior Intervention Systems to improve student behavior, school climate, and academic success. It emphasizes teaching expected behaviors rather than only reacting to misbehavior.

Some schools have also partnered with community groups such as:

- Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley is a nonprofit youth and family support organization in Santa Maria that focuses on substance abuse prevention, violence reduction, youth homelessness support, restorative practices, and family resilience. Their mission is to partner with all members of the community to achieve resilience against substance abuse, reduce violence, and promote a healthy and safe environment for our youth and families.
- AHA! (Attitude Harmony Achievement) is a Santa Barbara–based nonprofit that works with teens on social-emotional learning, leadership, bullying prevention, mental wellness, relationship skills, and school culture and belonging

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury applauds the efforts already undertaken by school districts to limit bullying in recent years. School administrators and counselors agree that while progress has been made, additional support is needed to address these problems and limit their impact on students and families. Students’ mental and physical health is at stake. No child should be the victim of bullying.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: Bullying in County schools will be reduced by implementing additional safety measures.

Recommendation 1a: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards increase staff presence in areas where students congregate before, during breaks, and after school. To be implemented by December 31, 2026

Recommendation 1b: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards have sufficient cameras in order to monitor where students congregate before, during, and after school. To be implemented by June 30, 2027.

Recommendation 1c: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards add more counselors to achieve a ratio no greater than 250:1. To be implemented by June 30, 2027.

Finding 2: Administrators do not consistently inform school counselors when students under their guidance engage in bullying.

Recommendation 2: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards inform school counselors whenever any students under their guidance engage in bullying. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 3: Parent participation in outreach programs for bullying has been poor.

Recommendation 3a: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards direct school administrators to schedule parent outreach programs regarding bullying on evenings, weekends, online and with archived recordings to accommodate working parents. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Recommendation 3b: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards implement non-monetary incentives to encourage parents to attend outreach programs. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Recommendation 3c: The Grand Jury recommends that school boards strongly encourage parents of students who have engaged in repeated acts of bullying to attend outreach programs. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree with an explanation
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule

- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of fewer than 6 months after the issuance of the report
- It will not be implemented with an explanation of why

Susan Salcido, Superintendent SBCEO - 60 Days

Findings 1, 2, and 3

Recommendations 1a, 1b, 1c, 2, 3a, 3b, and 3c

Santa Barbara County District School Boards: 90 days

Ballard School District Board

Blochman Union School District Board

Buellton Union School District Board

Carpinteria Unified School District Board

Cold Spring School District Board

College School District Board

Cuyama Joint Unified School District Board

Goleta Union School District Board

Guadalupe Union School District Board

Hope Elementary School District Board

Lompoc Unified School District Board

Los Olivos School District Board

Montecito Union School District Board

Orcutt Union School District Board

Santa Barbara Unified School District Board

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Board

Santa Maria Joint Union High School District Board

Santa Ynez Valley Union High School District Board

Solvang School District Board

Vista del Mar Union School District Board

Santa Barbara County Board of Education

Findings 1, 2, and 3

Recommendations 1a, 1b, 1c, 2, 3a, 3b, and 3c.