



SANTA YNEZ VALLEY UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT
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DR. KIMBERLY SHEEHAN
SUPERINTENDENT

July 8, 2026

The Honorable Patricia Kelly
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
pkelly@sbcourts.org

FILED
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

JUL 08 2026

Angela Braun, Executive Officer
By *M. Hanson*
Deputy Clerk
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Stacy Mezzetta de Cossio, Foreperson
Santa Barbara County Grand Jury
sbcgj@sbcourts.org

Re: 2025-26 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report on Gangs of Santa Barbara County: Should the Schools Do More to Address Them?

Dear Judge Kelly, Foreperson Mezzetta de Cossio, and Grand Jury Members:

The Santa Ynez Valley Union High School District (SYVUHSD) shares the Grand Jury's commitment to supporting safe, supportive, and positive learning environments for all students. SYVUHSD recognizes that gangs can have harmful effects on youth, families, schools, and communities and appreciates the Grand Jury's focus on prevention, early intervention, student well-being, and school safety.

SYVUHSD is committed to fostering safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments through student wellness services, counseling and behavioral health supports, family engagement efforts, mentoring and intervention strategies, school safety practices, and partnerships with community organizations and public agencies. These efforts are designed to support positive youth development, strengthen protective factors, and help students build successful futures.

It is with these responsibilities and considerations in mind that SYVUHSD provides the following responses to the Grand Jury's findings and recommendations.

Finding 1

Many student fights occur in the areas surrounding school campuses before and after school hours, outside school supervision, leaving a gap in County schools' responses.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 1: Disagree partially with an explanation

SYVUHSD agrees that student conflicts occurring before and after school hours, regardless of their location, can present challenges for schools, particularly when those incidents affect student safety, school climate, or students' ability to learn. However, incidents occurring off campus and outside school hours generally take place beyond the direct supervision and authority of school personnel. Schools have limited ability staffing-wise or legally to monitor, intervene in, or respond to activities occurring in public spaces before students arrive at school or after they leave campus. There is a gap in supervision but the gap is not one that school districts can reasonably be expected to fill.

When off campus after hours incidents become known, and have the potential to affect the school environment, SYVUHSD staff work collaboratively with students, families, probation personnel, mental health providers, community partners, and law enforcement agencies, as appropriate and as they are legally able, to intervene and address safety concerns, provide support services, and reduce the likelihood of future incidents.

Recommendation 1a

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County Education Office create a template for schools' response procedures for student safety in the areas surrounding school campuses before and after school hours. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 1a: Will not be implemented

SYVUHSD supports the intent of this recommendation and recognizes the importance of school safety planning and preparedness and the value of collaboration.

However, incidents occurring off campus and outside school hours generally take place beyond the direct supervision, authority, and control of school personnel. Given the wide variation in local circumstances and community needs across schools and districts throughout Santa Barbara County, a single "template" would neither be appropriate nor feasible to support off campus before and after school activities.

Additionally, while the SYVUHSD is a school District under the umbrella of the Santa Barbara County Education Office, we cannot control nor direct their programs or initiatives.

Recommendation 1b

The Grand Jury recommends that local law enforcement agencies, in conjunction with school districts, create policies and programs to extend the safe space for students to go to or from home. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 1b: Will not be implemented

SYVUHSD supports the intent of this recommendation and recognizes the importance of student safety before and after the school day. SYVUHSD also appreciates the working relationship between school and local law enforcement agencies. In fact, SYVUHSD hired a School Resource Deputy in 2022 to support communication and collaboration between law enforcement, parents, the district, and students.

However, incidents occurring off campus and outside school hours generally take place beyond the direct supervision and authority of school personnel. Incidents that occur in public spaces before students arrive on campus or after they leave for the day result in a limited or non-existent ability to monitor, manage, or regulate

directly. While SYVUHSD supports ongoing collaboration among schools, families, community organizations, probation personnel, mental health providers, and law enforcement agencies, it does not believe it is appropriate or feasible for schools to establish policies or programs that extend school supervision beyond school grounds and school-sponsored activities.

Finding 2

When children lack a set structure to occupy their time on constructive activities outside of regular school hours, they become vulnerable to recruitment from criminal street gangs.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 2: Disagree partially with explanation

SYVUHSD agrees that structured, constructive activities and supportive adult relationships can help reduce student vulnerability to negative influences, including gang recruitment. Research and prevention frameworks recognize that youth disconnection from family, school, community, and future opportunities can increase vulnerability, while positive school engagement, mentoring, and extracurricular opportunities can serve as protective factors.

However, SYVUHSD believes that vulnerability to gang involvement is influenced by a complex combination of individual, family, peer, school, and community factors. While a lack of structured activities outside of school may increase risk for some students, it does not necessarily result in gang involvement, nor does participation in organized activities alone prevent it.

SYVUHSD supports a comprehensive approach that includes positive youth development, family engagement, mentoring, counseling, educational opportunities, athletic opportunities and community partnerships to help students make healthy choices and avoid involvement in gangs and other harmful influences.

Recommendation 2a

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts implement more after-school programs such as music, sports, art, drama, and other extra-curricular activities. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 2a: Has been implemented

SYVUHSD recognizes that structured enrichment activities can promote student engagement, foster positive peer relationships, and provide opportunities for students to develop interests and skills outside the traditional classroom setting. Our district has under 900 student and under 100 employees. Despite our small size and rural location, we offer over 33 different Associated Student Body (ASB) student led clubs and over 73% of our students body plays at least 1 sport. Our football team has a leadership group where at-risk youth learn leadership skills. We have 9 CTE pathways which all include some aspect of extra-curricular or cocurricular commitment getting students out of the classroom and connected with community partners and leaders in their industry. We also have thriving theater, art and music programs as well.

Recommendation 2b

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts partner with others, including community-based organizations and local government entities, such as Parks and Recreation Departments, to offer after-school programs. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 2b: Has been implemented

SYVUHSD sees the value that community partnerships can provide in expanding opportunities and support services for students, both during and after school. We work annually with the Solvang and Buellton City Recreation Departments to offer swim lessons, free swim and other recreational activities on campus. We also partner with AYSO, YMCA, Pirate YOUTH Football, Pirate Youth Cheerleading, as well as over 10 different community-based Booster organizations designed to support extracurricular district programs and provide programs for students of all ages, not just those in 9-12th grade.

Finding 3

Gangs are increasingly grooming and recruiting students in elementary, middle, and junior high schools, yet many anti-gang programs focus on older students.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 3: Disagree partially with explanation

SYVUHSD agrees it is important to begin age-appropriate prevention efforts early and are most effective when implemented before gang involvement occurs. Research and prevention frameworks recognize that children and adolescents may become vulnerable to gang recruitment during the elementary and middle school years and that early intervention, positive school engagement, mentoring, family support, and access to constructive activities can serve as important protective factors.

However, there are numerous age-appropriate prevention, intervention, mentoring, education, and support services currently available to students of all grades throughout Santa Barbara County. As noted within the Grand Jury's report, these efforts include programs and services provided by schools, community-based organizations, public agencies (like the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office), and collaborative partnerships such as Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley, the South Coast Youth Safety Partnership, D.A.R.E. programs, and other youth-focused initiatives designed to promote positive youth development, violence prevention, mentoring, and healthy decision-making.

Recommendation 3

The Grand Jury recommends that Santa Barbara County school districts implement programs that are aimed at dissuading elementary, middle, and junior high school students from gang membership. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 3: Will not be implemented

While the SYVUHSD supports age-appropriate prevention, intervention, and student support efforts designed to strengthen student connectedness, resilience, and positive decision-making before gang involvement occurs, we do not serve students in elementary, middle, and junior high school and therefore will not implement programs for these grade levels.

Finding 4

Some school administrators across the County lack information to identify gang clothing, insignia, or signs.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 4: Disagree partially

SYVUHSD agrees that awareness of current gang trends, symbols, behaviors, and indicators can be an important component of school safety and student support efforts and recognizes the value of providing training opportunities and information-sharing resources to support school personnel in identifying and responding appropriately to gang-related concerns. However, with the addition of our dedicated School Resource deputy in 2022 we have a direct connection to law enforcement training, resources and information designed to assist school administrators in identifying gang clothing, insignia, or signs.

Recommendation 4

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County Education Office provide annual information to school administrators to make them aware of the latest gang clothing, insignia, and signs. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 4: Requires further analysis

SYVUHSD recognizes the importance of ensuring that school administrators have access to current information regarding student safety concerns, including gang-related trends that may affect their school communities.

Since youth task forces that address gang-related issues already exist in Santa Barbara County, SYVUHSD will consult with SBCEO to assess remaining needs, if any, and determine which external agency could provide such training and at what frequency. To be completed by December 20, 2026.

Finding 5

Students who bring guns, knives, and other weapons on campus, even when provided by parents for their children's safety, pose a threat to school safety.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 5: Agree

SYVUHSD agrees that weapons brought onto school campuses can pose a significant threat to the safety and well-being of students, staff, and visitors. Schools must maintain safe learning environments where students can focus on learning without fear of violence or intimidation.

SYVUHSD enforces policies, procedures, and educational efforts designed to prevent weapons from being brought onto campus and to respond appropriately when safety concerns arise.

Recommendation 5

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts remind parents and guardians annually of California Penal Code Section 25100 regarding the criminalization of unsafe storage of guns. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 5: Has been implemented

SYVUHSD supports the intent of this recommendation and recognizes the important role that safe firearm storage plays in protecting children and preventing access to weapons.

SYVUHSD provides parents and guardians with information regarding California laws related to firearm safety, storage, and California Penal Code Section 25100 through the Annual Notification to Parents. This information is provided annually in accordance with California education code § 49392.

Finding 6

Anonymous communications systems, both digital programs and physical drop-boxes, when made available to school students and personnel, can help identify gang activity ahead of serious consequences.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 6: Agree

SYVUHSD agrees that providing students and staff with accessible reporting mechanisms can help identify safety concerns, including potential gang-related activity, and support early intervention, prevention, and appropriate response efforts.

Recommendation 6

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts provide all schools with anonymous communications systems for student or staff reporting of danger on and off campus, both via digital media and local drop boxes. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SYVUHSD Response to Recommendation 6: Has been implemented

SYVUHSD has a Safety Hotline available on the website, where individuals can anonymously report incidents and concerns. Classrooms and common areas display posters in English and Spanish with a QR code that directs users to the Report a Concern platform. They can call in, email in, or text.

Finding 7

Socially isolated students can benefit from engagement with responsible mentors as a deterrent to negative manipulation by outside influences, such as gangs, social media, or other ongoing stresses in family life.

SYVUHSD Response to Finding 7: Agree

SYVUHSD agrees that positive relationships with trusted adult mentors can be an important protective factor for students. Mentoring can help promote student connectedness, resilience, positive decision-making, and overall well-being, particularly for students who may be vulnerable to negative influences.

Recommendation 7

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts create systems in their schools to pair socially isolated students with school mentors. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

SBCEO Response to Recommendation 7: Has been implemented

SYVUHSD utilizes a variety of systems to identify and support all students, including those who may be socially isolated or otherwise in need of additional support. Students have access to counselors, psychologists, educators, and community-based mentors. Through SST Team meetings, Group Counseling, Individual Counseling, and

mentoring partnerships with organizations such as Youthwell and People Helping People, students are connected with trusted adults who provide guidance, support, and mentorship.

Creating positive school climates where students feel safe, connected, and supported is a responsibility shared by educators, families, students, community organizations, and public agencies. SYVUHSD remains committed to supporting student wellness initiatives, family engagement efforts, professional learning opportunities, school safety resources, and district-wide collaboration to support all students as they learn and grow.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K Sheehan", with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr. Kimberly Sheehan
Superintendent