



July 24, 2026

The Honorable Patricia Kelly
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
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FILED
SUPERIOR COURT of CALIFORNIA
COUNTY of SANTA BARBARA
08/14/2026

Angela Braun, Executive Officer
BY *Mark Hanson*
M. Hanson Deputy Clerk

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?

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

The Orcutt Union School District ("Orcutt") shares the Grand Jury's commitment to supporting safe, supportive, and positive learning environments for all students. Like the Grand Jury, we acknowledge that criminal street gangs can have harmful effects on youth, families, schools, and communities, and we appreciate the Grand Jury's focus on this topic.

This being said, criminal street gangs are not a huge issue for our students at this time. We have had very few incidents or fights associated with gangs, and gangs are not pervasive in Orcutt and Los Alamos communities we serve. Our students recently confirmed this in their responses to the 2026 California Healthy Kids Survey. An item in the survey asks students, "Do you consider yourself a member of a gang?" Those responding "no" included 97% of seventh graders (516 respondents), 99% of ninth graders (161 respondents), and 98% of 11th graders (128 respondents).

With this background information provided, Orcutt respectfully submits the following responses to the Grand Jury's findings and recommendations.

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and community thrives**



Responses to Findings

Finding 1

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

OUSD Response to Finding 1: Disagree

In Orcutt, student conflicts occurring before or after school hours have been rare – generally less than five incidents per school year. When they happen, school personnel work collaboratively with students, families, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, and other community partners to respond to the incident, address safety concerns, provide support services, and reduce the likelihood of future incidents.

Orcutt does agree that student conflicts occurring before and after school hours can present challenges for schools, particularly when those incidents affect student safety, school climate, and/or students' ability to engage in learning. When these incidents occur, they generally take place outside of the direct supervision and authority of school personnel. Schools have limited ability to monitor or intervene in activities occurring in public spaces before students arrive at school or after they depart from school.

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.

OUSD Response to Finding 2: Disagree Partially

Orcutt 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.

That said, Orcutt also 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.



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

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.

OUSD Response to Finding 3: Disagree Partially

Orcutt is not seeing much, if any, recruitment of its elementary and junior high school students by criminal street gangs. That said, Orcutt recognizes that children and adolescents can become curious about gangs, as gangs are part of the media culture in which many youth are immersed.

In response to this, Orcutt has two programs in place that constitute early prevention of students gravitating toward gang involvement and fascination.

The first is SEE Learning, short for Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning. Research has shown that explicit instruction for students in self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills results in improved academic outcomes and improved behaviors both in and out of school. SEE Learning provides such instruction. A TK-12 curriculum developed at Emory University, SEE Learning includes nine components that are consistent across all age levels of the curriculum:

1. Attention and self-awareness
2. Self-compassion
3. Self-regulation
4. Interpersonal awareness
5. Compassion for others
6. Relationship skills
7. Appreciating interdependence
8. Recognizing common humanity
9. Community and global engagement

SEE Learning provides a full, developmentally staged curriculum comprised of over 40 20- to 40-minute learning experiences in these topics. Lessons are written in a straightforward way and are relatively easy for teachers to facilitate. Many lessons revolve around a topic, question, or



scenario that students can discuss. Students also learn to identify what emotional/energy zone they are in and acquire strategies to get to the desired "OK" zone where they are calm, regulated, and happy.

Orcutt has just completed its fourth year of implementing SEE Learning. We believe it is having a positive impact on students' self-image and behavior, and we also believe it forms an early resistance to negative influences such as gangs. In the words of Aniko Taubenheim, an OUSD teacher on special assignment who is a SEE Learning trainer, "SEE Learning helps kids to be kinder to themselves and others. It gives them emotional literacy and shows them how interconnected they are to other people. In the long run it will help them to be more resilient."

The second early intervention is DARE. For the past three years, Orcutt has partnered with the California Army National Guard's Counterdrug Task Force to provide DARE to all sixth graders. Over a nine-lesson series, students are educated on the dangers of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use and importantly learn about how to make good decisions – specifically, how to make good decisions when they face peer or societal pressure to do the wrong thing. DARE instruction is delivered by active duty members of the California Army National Guard who also teach at the Grizzly Youth Academy for at-risk teens in San Luis Obispo. "Soldier teachers" assigned to our district have been well received by our students, and we believe that DARE is another important force steering them in a positive direction.

Finding 4

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

OUSD Response to Finding 4: Agree

Orcutt 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. Orcutt would welcome additional training in this area from the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department, Santa Barbara County Probation Department, or other appropriate party.

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.



OUSD Response to Finding 5: Agree

No weapons brought onto school campuses are acceptable, as they 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. Orcutt supports policies, procedures, and educational efforts designed to prevent weapons from being brought onto campus and to respond appropriately when safety concerns arise.

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.

OUSD Response to Finding 6: Agree

Orcutt 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. The district has worked to put in place a "See Something, Say Something" anonymous reporting form on each school website. Anonymous reports are sent directly to school administrators for follow-up.

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.

OUSD Response to Finding 7: Agree

Orcutt 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.

Responses to Recommendations

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.



OUSD Response to Recommendation 1a: Will Not Be Implemented

As stated earlier, 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.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 1b: Will Not Be Implemented

Orcutt supports the intent of this recommendation and recognizes the importance of student safety before and after the school day. Orcutt also has an excellent partnership with its law enforcement agency, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Department. That said, it is not appropriate or feasible for school systems to be involved in policies or programs that extend school supervision beyond school grounds and school-sponsored activities.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 2a: Has Been Implemented

Orcutt 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. It has made significant strides in this area at each of its educational levels.

At the elementary level, state Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P) funding has enabled the district to provide more academic and recreational offerings after school. In the past two school years these have included academic intervention, academic enrichment, music enrichment, fitness enrichment, and even a special support class targeting students whose primary language is Mixteco. Additionally, this past year two elementary schools were able to participate in a fall flag football league organized by the Santa Maria-Bonita School District.



At the junior high level, cocurricular and athletic afterschool activities have been expanded. Both junior high schools now have Lego League robotics teams, both now have Battle of the Books teams, and sports open to students now include volleyball, basketball, and soccer.

Orcutt Academy High School offers a plethora of cocurricular, extracurricular, and athletic avenues for students. The school also has early college offerings that engage students before and after school. A recent student survey indicated that over 80% of the student body is involved in some sort of activity beyond being present for the school day.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 2b: Has Been Implemented

Orcutt sees its work in this area as ongoing. It does have partnerships in place around afterschool activities, the afterschool flag football partnership with the Santa Maria-Bonita School District being one example. It welcomes additional partnerships that will benefit students during the afterschool window.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 3: Has Been Implemented

SEE Learning and DARE are two programs Orcutt has implemented that steer students in positive directions. For more information on these early prevention programs, please see the response to Finding 3.

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.



OUSD Response to Recommendation 4: Requires Further Analysis

As stated in the narrative for Finding 4, Orcutt welcomes training for its administrators in the latest gang clothing, insignia, and signs. Discussion and coordination still need to occur as to which agency would be the most appropriate choice to deliver this training. Orcutt will await a decision on this.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 5: Has Been Implemented

Through its Annual Notice to Parents (ANTP), Orcutt annually provides parents/guardians with information regarding California laws related to firearm safety, storage, and California Penal Code Section 25100. Following is the specific item as it appears in the ANTP:

Safe Gun Storage

Guns are now the third leading cause of death for children in this country. Over 80 percent of teens who commit suicide with a gun used one that belonged to someone in their home. Anyone who reasonably knows a child might access a firearm without permission, loaded or not, is criminally liable for where that firearm is taken, brandished, or how it is used. This includes all school facilities or activities, events, and public places. More Information about gun safety and the safe storage of firearms can be found at <https://oag.ca.gov/firearms/tips>. Those responsible for access to a firearm could lose the right to own a firearm for 10 years, face fines, imprisonment, and civil liability. When there is a threat of a homicide, school staff shall notify law enforcement. [EC 48980, 48986, 49390, 49391, 49392; PC 25000-25140]

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 6: Has Been Implemented

As stated in the response to Finding 6, Orcutt has worked to put in place a "See Something, Say Something" anonymous reporting form on each school website. Anonymous reports are sent directly to school administrators for follow-up.

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.

OUSD Response to Recommendation 7: Has Been Implemented

Orcutt's schools utilize a variety of systems to identify and support students who may be socially isolated or otherwise in need of additional support. Counselor support has been expanded so all sites in the district have at least one full-time counselor available to assist students. Additionally, several schools have adopted a practice called "2 x 10" whereby staff identify students who are more socially isolated and then each staff member adopts a student to have two-minute interactions with for 10 consecutive school days. Schools report that 2 x 10 greatly increases these students' connectedness with staff and school. The practice enables identified students to have one more "go to" adult on campus.

Respectfully submitted,

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