



DR. HILDA MALDONADO
Superintendent

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Via Electronic Mail

August 26, 2026

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

Stacy Mezzetta de Cossio, Foreperson
Santa Barbara County Grand Jury
sbcgj@sbcourts.org

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

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

The Santa Barbara Unified School District appreciates the opportunity to respond to the 2025-26 Grand Jury Report on gangs in County schools. We share the Grand Jury's concern about the well-being of students countywide and take our role in supporting safe, inclusive learning environments seriously. Our District has invested in a wide range of student supports (after-school programs, mentoring, anti-violence partnerships, mental health services, and inclusive climate work) that we believe already advance the outcomes the Grand Jury seeks. We welcome the Grand Jury's attention to this work and remain open to strengthening it.

Our responses to each assigned finding and recommendation follow. The Grand Jury did not assign us Findings 4 or 8, or Recommendations 1a, 4, or 8, and we therefore do not respond to those items.

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.

FILED
SUPERIOR COURT of CALIFORNIA
COUNTY of SANTA BARBARA
09/15/2026
Angela Brown, Executive Officer
BY *Mark Hanson*
M. Hanson Deputy Clerk

Main Office 720 Santa Barbara Street Santa Barbara, CA 93101 Phone: 805.963.4338 | TDD: 805.963.7734

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Response: Disagree partially with an explanation. We cannot speak to conditions at other County schools. As applied to us, student fights in the areas surrounding our campuses have not presented as the gap the Grand Jury describes. Our sites use open-campus supervision structures for the periods before and after school, and we have not experienced the pattern of unsupervised student fights this finding identifies. Our sites also rely on Safe2SpeakUp, our anonymous reporting app; when an off-campus fight is reported through the app, our school staff respond and investigate.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. We already work to extend safe conditions for at-risk students traveling to and from school through targeted supports. Our community partnerships have included the Santa Barbara Alternatives to Violence Project, a Santa Barbara-based organization dedicated to reducing interpersonal violence, which offers conflict management workshops for youth referred by school personnel. Santa Barbara Alternatives to Violence Project works with youth on non-violent decision-making, leadership skills, and positive approaches to interpersonal conflict, reducing the risk of violence on and around campus. Our student and family services team maintains working relationships with local law enforcement to address individual safety concerns as they arise, and we maintain supervision structures at our campuses that support students in the transition periods before and after school. Together, these measures achieve the substantive outcome the recommendation calls for.

Recommendation 1c: The Grand Jury recommends that all school districts consider the templates, policies, and programs proposed in Recommendations 1a and 1b. To be implemented by June 30, 2027.

Response: Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule. We will review the templates and policies developed by the Santa Barbara County Education Office and by local law enforcement agencies under Recommendations 1a and 1b once they are available. We will complete our review by June 30, 2027.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. Our after-school programming is extensive and long-standing. At the elementary level, we operate the A-OK program for TK-6. At the junior high school level, we provide seasonal after-school sports. At the high school level, we offer

robust extracurriculars including athletics, music, theater, and ASB activities. La Cumbre Junior High operates the ACES program, an income-based after-school program funded through the state. We spend approximately \$5 million annually on after-school programs, serve roughly 1,400 TK-6 students, and maximize ELOP and ACES funding to support these programs. Most high school after-school programs are free of cost.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. We partner with a broad network of community-based organizations and local government entities that support students both during and after the school day. Our current partners include Santa Barbara Alternatives to Violence Project, AHA!, Freedom4Youth, Fighting Back Santa Maria, and YouthWell, among others. We also maintain an agreement with the City of Santa Barbara through the Recreation Afterschool Program (RAP), which provides after-school care and enrichment at the elementary level. These partnerships extend our programming reach and connect students to services aligned with their individual needs.

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.

Response: Disagree partially with an explanation. We cannot speak to conditions across the County. As applied to us, we have not experienced gang-affiliated incidents at our elementary or junior high schools that would place students in the recruitment pattern this finding describes. Our Student and Family Services team works with itinerant Youth Outreach Workers, site staff, and community partners such as Santa Barbara Alternatives to Violence Project and Freedom4Youth, to monitor school climate and student well-being continuously, and we have not identified this concern in our data. Our focus with younger students is to introduce positive role models, build trusted adult relationships and school connectedness, and provide education to students, families, and staff as strategies to identify and intervene with students who may be considered at-risk.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. Our approach to protecting students from negative influences, including gang membership, at the elementary and junior high levels focuses on inclusive school climate, resilience-building, and targeted mentoring. We have invested in Family Engagement Liaisons at all our school sites, giving families a consistent point of connection with the District and providing site teams with an early channel to identify students who would benefit from additional support. Our Youth Outreach Workers mentor at-risk students during the school day and build relationships through activities such as hiking and a variety of

field trips. Family Engagement Liaisons and Youth Outreach Workers run small group sessions with at-risk students, focusing on 7th, 8th, and 9th graders to help them build community and learn strategies for navigating school and social settings, and bring in young adult mentors and community partners to work with students. At the elementary level, we partner with Girls Inc. to work with young girls at various sites, providing programming focused on confidence, healthy relationships, and resilience. The Reconnecting Youth curriculum, used with our seventh- and eighth-grade at-risk students in partnership with Goleta Valley programs, addresses violence prevention, decision-making, self-esteem, and drop-out prevention through a peer-group approach.

At the TK-6 level, we implement the Second Step SEL program, which provides grade-appropriate lessons focused on growth mindset and goal setting, emotional management, empathy and kindness, and problem solving. At the secondary level, our junior high schools implement 7Mindsets BASE structured mental health awareness lessons, and we deliver Signs of Suicide (SOS) Program behavioral screenings in seventh, ninth, and twelfth grades to teach students how to identify signs of depression or crisis in themselves and their peers. All schools TK-12 have access to Ripple Effects, which provides Tier 2 and Tier 3 lessons for students identified as needing additional support.

Site administrators and counselors identify students who benefit from these supports.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. Our annual parent notice includes a dedicated section titled "California Law Regarding Safe Storage of Firearms," which reminds parents and guardians of their responsibilities under Penal Code § 25100 and related sections (§§ 25100-25125 and 25200-25220). The notice explains criminal exposure, describes the lock-and-store safe harbor under §§ 25105 and 25205, and references gun-free school zone provisions under § 626.9. We provide this notice annually pursuant to Education Code § 48986, which has required school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools to inform parents of California's child access prevention laws and safe storage of firearms laws at the beginning of the school year since July 1, 2023.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. We provide anonymous digital reporting through Safe2SpeakUp, which is available on student devices and integrated with our CrisisGo platform. Safe2SpeakUp allows students and staff to report a full range of concerns anonymously (including safety concerns and equity-related incidents such as racial slurs) and provides confirmation that the report has been received, an accountability feature that supports student trust in the reporting process. It reaches students through channels they already carry with them, both on and off campus. We complement Safe2SpeakUp with our Culture of Care framework at every school, which begins with a Prevent step focused on building belonging and adult modeling that reduce harm before it happens, followed by Recognize, Respond, Report, and Repair. We have not deployed physical drop boxes, because our digital tools capture the same reporting function with better traceability, receipt confirmation, and student adoption.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

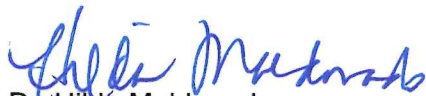
Response: Has been implemented. Our Youth Outreach Workers provide mentoring relationships with students identified by site administrators and counselors as needing additional connection and support. This work occurs during the school day and through activities that build sustained relationships. Our Family Engagement Liaisons, positioned at all school sites, give families a consistent point of connection and provide site teams with an early channel to identify students who would benefit from additional mentorship. At the elementary level, we partner with Girls Inc. to work with young girls at various sites, providing programming focused on confidence, healthy relationships, and resilience. The Reconnecting Youth program at the junior high school level pairs at-risk students with peer-group programming that reinforces trusted-adult connections. Site staff continuously identify students who would benefit from mentorship, including those who present as socially isolated, and connect them to available supports. We are also actively working with all site leaders and staff on creating safe, welcoming, and belonging school cultures and climates that ensure we know students by name, face, and story, provide safe spaces for belonging, and follow up with them when concerns arise.

At our junior high and high schools, school counselors also play a critical role in identifying and supporting students who may be struggling socially, emotionally, academically, or with their

sense of connection to school. Through individual check-ins, small-group supports, classroom lessons, and ongoing collaboration with teachers, administrators, families, and other support staff, counselors help identify students who may be experiencing isolation, disengagement, changes in behavior or attendance, or other indicators that additional support may be needed. Counselors provide direct support when appropriate and connect students and families to additional school-based or community resources when needs extend beyond what can be provided at the school site. They also serve as an important point of continuity for monitoring students and following up to ensure connections and supports are sustained.

We thank the Grand Jury for its focus on student safety and the risks that gangs pose to youth in our County. We share the goal of protecting our students from those risks and building on the work already underway.

Sincerely,



Dr. Hilda Maldonado

Superintendent

Santa Barbara Unified School District