



**Santa Maria-Bonita
School District**
CULTIVATING BRIGHT FUTURES

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Dr. Darren McDuffie
Superintendent

September 8, 2026

The Honorable Patricia Kelly
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
1100 Anacapa Street
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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:

**Draft Response: Santa Maria-Bonita School District
Report #5: GANGS OF SANTA BARBARA COUNTY: Should the Schools Do More to Address
Them?**

The Santa Maria-Bonita School District (SMBSD) thanks the 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury for its thorough and thoughtful review of how County schools address youth gang involvement, and for the time invested in interviewing school, public safety, probation, mental health, and community stakeholders throughout the County.

The Grand Jury's report acknowledges that, while some administrators were reluctant to address gang issues, most County schools are engaged in positive efforts to promote good learning environments for all students. SMBSD welcomes this acknowledgment and remains committed to building on that foundation.

The Santa Maria-Bonita School District recognizes that community violence, student conflict, social media, and off-campus incidents can impact students and school climate.

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

As a result, it has created multiple tiers to ensure that school climate is welcoming and positive, that students have opportunities to grow and learn, conflicts are addressed with positive, proactive approaches, and that parents have the opportunity to engage with their child's school and district. These efforts include utilizing multi-tiered systems of supports as well as partnerships with local law enforcement and community-based organizations such as Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV), Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (CADA), Family Services Agency (FSA), and Effective School Solutions (ESS).

The Santa Maria-Bonita School District takes seriously its responsibility to help protect students from violence and gang recruitment, and appreciates the opportunity this report provides to identify further steps to strengthen these ongoing efforts.

Please find the Santa Maria-Bonita School District's responses to the Grand Jury's findings and recommendations below:

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 1: *Disagree Partially*

While the district recognizes that student conflicts occur before and after school hours, SMBSD does not agree that the finding accurately describes a gap in the school or district's response.

The District provides supervision on campus 15 minutes before school, throughout the school day, until 15 minutes after school. The District also provides transportation to and from through regular bus routes, crossing guards at high-traffic intersections, and provides additional security personnel at Junior High Schools. Each of these helps provide positive adult presences and

SMBSD recognizes that conflicts that occur within the community are not solely the responsibility of the school, as they can involve individuals that are not SMBSD students, may be outside of the district's jurisdiction, and instead must be supported throughout the community by students, families, community members, partner organizations, law enforcement, and local government partners. SMBSD partners with local community based organizations to support prevention and intervention, as well law enforcement to address community based incidents.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 1b: Has been implemented

SMBSD maintains a partnership with local law enforcement, including direct communication with the Santa Maria Police Department to review annual Comprehensive Safe Schools Plans, provide parent education programs, attend school events, and to communicate about community safety concerns.

The annual review of Comprehensive Safe School Plans supports the partnership between the district and law enforcement to create safe spaces for students on campus.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 1c: Will be implemented

SMBSD welcomes any resources developed by the Santa Barbara County Office of Education (SBCEO) and will review and consider any such resources within a reasonable amount of time following the sharing of resources, with a goal of reviewing within the recommended times 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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 2: Disagree Partially

SMBSD agrees that structured, constructive activities, and supportive adult relationships can help reduce vulnerability to recruitment from criminal street gangs. While strong connections to school, family, positive adults, and community serve as protective factors for students, reducing vulnerabilities for students does not alone prevent gang involvement. Likewise, the lack of structure outside of school does not necessarily result in gang activity.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 2a: Has been implemented

SMBSD takes a proactive approach to supporting student safety, engagement, and well-being by providing comprehensive after-school programming at all 21 school sites in partnership with community-based organizations and district staff. These programs continue to expand, supporting student engagement in a wide variety of programs.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 2b: Has been implemented

SMBSD provides comprehensive after-school programming at all 21 school sites in partnership with community-based organizations and district staff. In addition, off-campus programs are available through partnerships with the Santa Maria Valley YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs of Mid Central Coast, and People's Self-Help Housing. For the 2026–27 school year, SMBSD expanded these efforts by welcoming Think Together as new partners, further increasing the availability of safe, structured, and supportive programming for students. These programs provide students with supervised environments during critical out-of-school hours, while promoting positive relationships with peers and trusted adults, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for academic support, enrichment, physical activity, and social-emotional development.

Programming is available after school and during extended school breaks, including Winter Break, Spring Break, and Summer Break, providing students with consistent access to positive and engaging opportunities throughout the year.

By keeping students connected to their schools, communities, and supportive adults, these programs serve as an important preventive measure by strengthening protective factors and reducing opportunities for involvement in gangs, violence, and other high-risk behaviors.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 3: Disagree Partially

Recruitment of students is a complex issue with many factors that occur outside of the school environment. SMBSD recognizes that students, including those in elementary and junior high school, may be exposed to factors outside of school that lead to their involvement in gangs. As a result, the district has implemented programs that provide protective factors to reduce vulnerabilities to gang involvement in grades TK-8.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 3: Has been implemented

The following programs implemented by SMBSD that support students feeling connected to school, having opportunities to grow socially and emotionally, and diversion programs:

- Positive School Climate with Caring Adults
- TK-6 Social Emotional Learning Curriculum (Second Step)
- 7-8 Social Emotional Learning Curriculum (Character Strong)
- Credentialed School Counselors
 - 1 Elementary Counselor at each Elementary School
 - 3 Junior High Counselors at each Junior High School
- Wellness Coaches (2) and Licensed School-Based Therapists (1) at each school
- Youth Diversion Programs through Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (CADA)
- Truancy Mentors in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)
- Homeless and Foster supports in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)
- Conflict Resolution Specialists at Junior High Schools in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 5: Agree

SMBSD recognizes that weapons pose a significant safety risk to the school environment. SMBSD has enacted policies and practices to ensure a safe school environment for all, including the prohibition of weapons. Reports of weapons on campus are responded to promptly by school administration to ensure school safety, appropriate discipline and support, and coordination with local law enforcement when warranted.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 5: Has been implemented

Through its Annual Notice to Parents, SMBSD provides reminders to parents and guardians annually about firearm safety, storage, and criminal liability for those who know a child might have access to a firearm. See the item below as it appears in the Annual Notice to Parents:

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 6: Agree

SMBSD agrees that having reporting systems that allow students to report in an anonymous way helps proactively identify conflicts, school safety, and potential gang activity. Having systems that allow for reporting in a variety of ways, such as online, drop boxes, or directly to trusted school staff, are positive systems that SMBSD has set up for students across the district. Reporting is not limited to students; having trusted adults as well as online reporting also provides parents with pathways to help their child communicate concerns to the school. As a community, “see something, say something” helps SMBSD schools proactively address concerns related to conflict, violence, and gang activity at all schools.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 6: Has been implemented

Each school within SMBSD has existing systems for reporting, including online and physical reporting pathways.

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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Finding 7: Agree

SMBSD agrees that students can benefit from positive adult connections, including mentorship, and these connections provide protective factors that can reduce vulnerabilities to outside 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.

Santa Maria-Bonita School District Response to Recommendation 7: Has been implemented

SMBSD has implemented a multi-tiered system of supports to help students that may feel socially isolated. These include some of the following programs on each campus:

- Positive School Climate with Caring Adults
- TK-6 Social Emotional Learning Curriculum (Second Step)
- 7-8 Social Emotional Learning Curriculum (Character Strong)
- Credentialed School Counselors
 - 1 Elementary Counselor at each Elementary School
 - 3 Junior High Counselors at each Junior High School
- Wellness Coaches (2) and Licensed School-Based Therapists (1) at each school
- Youth Diversion Programs through Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (CADA)
- Truancy Mentors in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)
- Homeless and Foster supports in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)
- Conflict Resolution Specialists at Junior High Schools in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV)

Creating positive school climates where students feel safe, connected, and supported is a responsibility shared by educators, families, students, partner organizations, law enforcement, government agencies, and the entire community.

The Santa Maria-Bonita School District remains committed to supporting student wellness initiatives, family engagement efforts, professional learning opportunities, and collaboration aimed at ensuring that all students have access to safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Darren McDuffie

Superintendent, Santa Maria-Bonita School District