

Solvang School District

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September 6, 2026

The Honorable Patricia Kelly
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
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FILED
SUPERIOR COURT of CALIFORNIA
COUNTY of SANTA BARBARA
09/09/2026
Angela Braun, Executive Officer
BY 
M. Hanson Deputy Clerk

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

Re: Solvang School District Response to the 2025-26 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 Board of Trustees and administration of the Solvang School District appreciate the opportunity to review and provide our response to the 2025-26 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report, "Gangs of Santa Barbara County: Should the Schools Do More to Address Them?" Ensuring a safe, supportive, and positive learning environment where every child is known by name, connected to caring adults, and protected from negative influences is the absolute priority of our district.

District Context: Local Realities and Safe Schools

Solvang School District serves transitional kindergarten through eighth-grade students across two campuses: the Lower Campus (grades TK-5) and the Upper Campus (grades 6-8) in the close-knit, historic community of Solvang. Solvang is an exceptionally safe, low-crime, small town. Disciplinary incidents are low, and there have been absolutely no reports of serious crime or gang-related activity on our school campuses in the past three years.

While we share the Grand Jury's concern for youth safety across Santa Barbara County, our response reflects our rural, low-risk local context. We focus our public education resources on proactive, evidence-based prevention, positive school climate, character development, and direct student support. We believe that building strong protective factors through our Multi-Tiered

System of Supports (MTSS), character education, and counseling is the most effective defense against gang gravitation and other high-risk behaviors.

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Solvang School District responds as follows to the specific findings and recommendations:

RESPONSES TO FINDINGS

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.

Response: Disagree partially Explanation:

While the Solvang School District agrees that student conflicts occurring before or after school hours can impact students, such incidents are extremely rare within our community. Solvang is a very low-crime area, and there have been no reports of serious crimes on Solvang campuses in the past three years.

Furthermore, incidents occurring off campus and outside of school hours generally take place beyond the direct supervision and legal authority of school personnel. Schools have limited practical and legal ability to monitor or intervene in public spaces before students arrive or after they depart. Furthermore, as the Grand Jury indicated, schools usually find out about fights after the fact.

To the extent possible, Solvang proactively manages student safety through active crosswalk supervision during arrival and dismissal, strict check-in protocols for all visitors, closed campuses, and close communication with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and the Santa Barbara County Office of Education (SBCEO).

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: Disagree partially Explanation:

The district agrees that structured, constructive activities and supportive adult relationships serve as vital protective factors for children. However, vulnerability to gang involvement is influenced by a complex combination of individual, family, peer, school, and community factors. A lack of structured activities alone does not necessarily result in gang involvement, nor does participation in organized activities alone prevent it.

In Solvang, where local gang activity is low, the district actively mitigates risk factors by providing a safe, supervised, and positive environment before and after school. This includes "Early Care"

supervision starting at 7:30 a.m. in the school library and offering after-school enrichment, academic intervention, and interscholastic sports programs. We also foster a strong, connected school culture through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the "Character Counts" program, VALOR, and restorative practices.

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 Explanation:

The district agrees that early intervention and prevention are critical to protecting youth before gang involvement can occur. However, we disagree that gang grooming or recruitment is an active issue within the Solvang School District elementary and middle school student populations. There is no evidence or history of gang recruitment or grooming attempts on or near our campuses.

Rather than implementing narrow, reactive anti-gang programs, Solvang utilizes a comprehensive, research-based Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and school-wide character education to build overall student resilience, social-emotional competence, and positive decision-making.

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 Explanation:

The Solvang School District agrees entirely. Weapons of any kind have no place on school grounds and pose a direct, significant threat to the safety and well-being of students and staff. The district maintains a strict zero-tolerance policy for weapons, which is integrated into our Comprehensive School Safety Plan (CSSP) and Student Conduct Code.

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 Explanation:

The district agrees that providing accessible and confidential reporting pathways is an effective mechanism for identifying safety hazards, bullying, and other potential dangers before they escalate. Solvang actively encourages open communication and provides students, staff, and families with both digital and non-digital channels to safely report concerns.

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 Explanation:

The district agrees that positive relationships with trusted adult mentors are among the strongest protective factors for children. Mentoring fosters school connectedness, academic engagement, self-regulation, and emotional resilience. In our small school environment, we prioritize ensuring that every student has a supportive "go-to" adult on campus.

RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

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: Will not be implemented Explanation:

While the Solvang School District strongly supports the safety of students traveling to and from campus, extending school supervision and creating policies that regulate public areas off school grounds fall outside the district's legal authority and direct control.

However, the intent of this recommendation is practically addressed through existing collaborative partnerships. The district maintains close communication with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and coordinates safety measures with local first responders.

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 not be implemented Explanation:

For the reasons stated in our response to Recommendation 1b, the district does not believe it is feasible or appropriate to establish formal policies that extend school supervision beyond school grounds and school-sponsored activities.

We will, however, continue to collaborate with the Santa County Office of Education (SBCEO) and local law enforcement to review safety recommendations, share regional insights, and adapt our local ingress, egress, and emergency response plans as necessary.

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 Explanation:

The district has fully implemented robust after-school and extracurricular programs. Solvang provides Early Care supervision starting at 7:30 a.m. in the school library. At dismissal, students are constructively engaged in a variety of sanctioned after-school activities, such as sports, enrichment clubs, academic intervention programs, and/or our TK-6 in-house after school program.

These structured environments offer safe, supervised, and positive spaces that keep students actively engaged and connected to their school community beyond regular school hours.

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 Explanation:

Solvang School District actively maintains and expands partnerships with regional entities to provide comprehensive youth services. The District offers robust after school offerings with our TK-6 After School Program, Middle School sports, homework club, and after school tutoring.

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 Explanation:

Rather than using a singular, narrow anti-gang curriculum, the Solvang School District implements a comprehensive, multi-tiered prevention and behavioral framework integrated into our daily instruction and school culture. This framework includes:

- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): A tiered system that explicitly teaches rules of safety, respect, and responsibility across all campus locations. Character Counts & VALOR: Programs that promote ethical values (Trustworthiness, Respect,

Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, Citizenship) and recognize students for "Viking VALOR" (Valiant, Authentic, Loyal, Optimistic, Respectful).

- Restorative Justice: Restorative practices that focus on repairing harm, building empathy, and resolving conflicts constructively, which has successfully reduced the need for exclusionary discipline.
- Credentialed School Counseling: Solvang employs a dedicated credentialed school counselor who provides direct 1:1 and small group support for student self-regulation, conflict resolution, and peer relationships.

We believe that strengthening these foundational protective factors and fostering a deep sense of school connectedness are the most effective means of preventing students from gravitating toward gangs or other negative influences.

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: Will be implemented Explanation:

Solvang School District complies with all state safety disclosure mandates. The district provides parents and guardians with detailed annual notifications and disclosures at the start of each school year in accordance with California Education Code § 49392.

The district has added a specific, dedicated notice regarding the provisions of California Penal Code Section 25100 and the criminal liabilities associated with the unsafe storage of firearms is explicitly highlighted within our Annual Notification to Parents (ANTP) and registration packets, mirroring the notifications utilized by other county districts.

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 Explanation:

Solvang School District has fully deployed anonymous communication systems across our campuses. The district utilizes the StopIT app, which allows students, parents, and community members to anonymously report bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and other safety concerns.

The app is electronically pushed out to all district-owned devices, made accessible on the school website, and promoted through posters throughout campus. In addition, students are regularly taught and encouraged to submit anonymous physical notes to school staff or administrators if they witness or suspect unsafe behavior.

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 Explanation:

The district utilizes a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Student Study Teams (SST) to identify students who are experiencing social isolation, academic struggles, or anxiety. These systems enable our credentialed school counselor, school psychologist, MTSS coordinator, and inclusion teams to coordinate targeted support.

Identified students are paired with trusted school staff and counselors for regular check-ins, small-group sessions, and direct guidance. Furthermore, due to our small district size, our educators maintain a high level of daily interaction and are able to build strong personal connections with students, ensuring that every child has a supportive "go-to" adult on campus.

Closing Statement

The Solvang School District appreciates the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury's dedicated work in examining strategies to improve youth safety. Although gang-related concerns are virtually non-existent in our immediate community, we remain vigilant and committed to proactive prevention. We will continue to prioritize a safe, welcoming, and high-trust environment where our students can learn, grow, and thrive.

Respectfully submitted,



Sierra Loughridge

Superintendent, Solvang School District on behalf of the Governing Board of Trustees