Santa Maria Joint Union
HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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SUPERIOR COURT of CALIFORNIA
COUNTY of SANTA BARBARA
08/11/2026
Angela Braun, Executive Officer
BY Mark Hanson Deputy Clerk
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August 4, 2026

The Honorable Patricia Kelly
Santa Barbara County Superior Court
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Stacy Mezzetta de Cossio, Foreperson
Santa Barbara County Grand Jury
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Re: Santa Maria Joint Union High School District Response to the 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report: *Gangs of Santa Barbara County: Should the Schools Do More to Address Them?*

Prepared pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05

Introduction

The Santa Maria Joint Union High School District ("SMJUHSD" or "District") appreciates the opportunity to respond to the 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury report concerning gangs in Santa Barbara County and the role of schools in discouraging youth involvement in gang activity. The District shares the Grand Jury's concern for student safety and for the well-being of youth throughout the community.

At the same time, SMJUHSD recognizes that the report was directed broadly to school districts throughout Santa Barbara County and includes findings and recommendations that may apply differently depending on grade span, geography, student age, community conditions, and local agency responsibilities. As a high school district serving students in grades nine through twelve, SMJUHSD serves students after many risk factors associated with gang affiliation or recruitment may already have developed. In the District's experience, gang influence is most often rooted in neighborhood, peer, family, and community circumstances, and early recruitment concerns more commonly emerge before students enter high school.

SMJUHSD does not agree that its high school campuses are places where gang recruitment commonly occurs. The District does, however, recognize that student conflict, community violence, social media activity, family circumstances, and off-campus incidents can affect students and school climate. For

that reason, the District maintains layered systems of supervision, prevention, intervention, student support, anonymous reporting, mentoring, and collaboration with law enforcement and community partners.

District Framework

The District's approach to gang-related risk factors is grounded in maintaining safe, connected, and supportive school environments. This work includes campus supervision, School Resource Officer partnerships, behavioral intervention, counseling and Wellness Center services, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, extracurricular engagement, family communication, threat assessment and safety practices, restorative and corrective interventions, and ongoing collaboration with other public agencies and community organizations.

SMJUHSD also recognizes the importance of upstream prevention. Because many students who are vulnerable to gang influence may encounter recruitment or normalization of gang affiliation before high school, the District believes effective prevention requires strong family, neighborhood, elementary, middle school, community-based, law enforcement, probation, parks and recreation, and mental health partnerships. High schools can and do play an important role, but they cannot alone resolve risk factors that originate outside the high school setting.

Within its high school role, the District focuses on prevention, early identification, adult connection, constructive student activities, timely intervention, and support for students who may be affected by community violence, peer conflict, social isolation, trauma, or other risk factors.

Response Methodology

This response is submitted pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05. The District has reviewed the findings and recommendations directed to the District Governing Board and responds below to those findings and recommendations applicable to County school districts.

Each finding is quoted directly from the Grand Jury report and is followed by the District's response. Each recommendation is likewise quoted and followed by one of the statutory response categories required by California Penal Code section 933.05, together with a summary of the District's rationale and implementation actions.

Finding 1 and Recommendations 1b–1c

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."

District Response: Disagree in part (as to SMJUHSD).

The District recognizes that conflicts among youth may occur before school, after school, online, in neighborhoods, or in other locations outside school supervision. However, SMJUHSD does not agree that this broad finding accurately describes a District failure or a gap in District response. The District provides supervision on campus before school, during the school day, during passing periods and lunch, at school activities, and after dismissal, and collaborates with law enforcement when off-campus safety concerns affect students or school operations.

Because incidents occurring off District premises, including in neighborhoods, parks, commercial areas, or online may fall outside direct school supervision and jurisdiction, effective prevention requires coordination among families, students, law enforcement, community organizations, transportation providers, and other local government partners. SMJUHSD will continue to participate in appropriate collaboration while maintaining a clear understanding of the District's legal authority and educational role.

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."

District Response: Has been implemented.

SMJUHSD maintains collaborative relationships with local law enforcement and works with law enforcement partners when student safety concerns arise before school, after school, or in areas adjacent to campus. These relationships support communication, coordinated response, and appropriate referral when off-campus conduct affects students or school operations.

The District cannot independently police neighborhoods, public streets, parks, or other areas outside school jurisdiction. However, within its role as a school district, SMJUHSD already maintains supervision practices, School Resource Officer partnerships, communication with law enforcement, and intervention processes intended to support student safety as students arrive at and depart from campus. Accordingly, the recommendation has been implemented within the District's authority and operational role.

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."

District Response: Will be implemented.

The District will review any templates, policies, or programs developed by the Santa Barbara County Education Office, local law enforcement, or other appropriate agencies that are intended to support student safety in areas surrounding school campuses before and after school. SMJUHSD will evaluate any such materials for alignment with District operations, student needs, legal authority, labor considerations, available resources, and existing safety practices.

The District anticipates completing this review by June 30, 2027, consistent with the implementation timeline identified in the recommendation.

Finding 2 and Recommendations 2a-2b

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."

District Response: Agree.

The District agrees that constructive activities, positive adult relationships, and structured opportunities outside the regular instructional day can reduce student isolation, promote belonging, and support healthy decision-making. SMJUHSD also recognizes that gang-related risk factors often arise outside the high school campus and may begin before students enter high school.

As a high school district, SMJUHSD supports prevention by providing and promoting extracurricular, athletic, academic, leadership, wellness, and intervention opportunities that help students remain connected to school and trusted adults.

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."

District Response: Has been implemented.

SMJUHSD offers a broad range of extracurricular, co-curricular, athletic, visual and performing arts, academic, leadership, career technical education, and student engagement opportunities. These programs provide constructive activities, promote student connectedness, and create additional opportunities for students to form positive relationships with peers and adults.

The District will continue evaluating student participation, access, staffing, funding, transportation, and program interest as part of its regular planning processes. Because after-school and extracurricular opportunities are already in place across the District, Recommendation 2a has been implemented.

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."

District Response: Has been implemented.

SMJUHSD partners with community-based organizations and public agencies to support student engagement, violence prevention, conflict resolution, mentoring, and access to constructive opportunities. These partnerships include Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley, One Community Action/Por Vida, Communify, and other community partners that support students and families through prevention, intervention, mentoring, restorative practices, and connection to services.

For example, Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley supports students and families through conflict mediation, youth and family support, and community-based prevention efforts. Additionally, One Community Action/Por Vida provides student and parent meetings focused on community safety, the dangers and consequences of negative influences, and connection to positive people and groups. Communify is expected to provide mentorship, paid internships, and support for students accessing higher education. Because the District already maintains partnerships that provide constructive after-school and support opportunities, Recommendation 2b has been implemented.

Finding 3 and Recommendation 3

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."

District Response: Agree.

The District agrees that prevention efforts should begin before high school and that students may be exposed to gang-related influences in elementary, middle, or junior high school years. This is consistent with SMJUHSD's experience that gang influence is more commonly rooted in neighborhoods, peer networks, family circumstances, social media, and earlier grade spans rather than recruitment occurring on high school campuses.

SMJUHSD does not believe that its high school campuses are common locations for gang recruitment. The District nevertheless recognizes its responsibility to support students who may arrive at high school with prior exposure to gang-related risk factors and to provide positive school connections, interventions, counseling, wellness supports, and community referrals when needed.

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."

District Response: Will not be implemented because it does not apply directly to SMJUHSD.

SMJUHSD is a high school district and does not operate elementary, middle, or junior high schools. For that reason, the District cannot directly implement programs aimed at elementary, middle, or junior high school students as described in the recommendation.

The District agrees with the underlying prevention principle that anti-gang education and intervention should begin before high school and supports efforts by elementary and middle school districts, community-based organizations, law enforcement, probation, and local agencies to address prevention earlier in a student's development. Within its high school role, SMJUHSD will continue supporting students through positive school connection, counseling, Wellness Center supports, extracurricular opportunities, student engagement, community referrals, and partnerships with organizations serving youth and families.

Finding 4 and Recommendation 4

Finding 4

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

District Response: Agree in part.

SMJUHSD agrees that school administrators benefit from current information regarding gang-related clothing, insignia, signs, terminology, and local trends. The District does not agree that this finding accurately describes a lack of information among SMJUHSD administrators.

Each comprehensive high school has a School Resource Officer or Deputy assigned to campus. These officers and deputies work closely with site administrators throughout the school year, including through frequent and often daily communication regarding campus safety, neighborhood conditions, gang-related indicators, student conflicts, and emerging concerns. This ongoing communication helps administrators remain informed about current local conditions rather than relying solely on periodic training.

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."

District Response: Will not be implemented because it is directed to another agency.

The recommendation specifically directs the Santa Barbara County Education Office to provide annual information to school administrators regarding gang clothing, insignia, and signs. SMJUHSD does not control SBCEO programming and therefore cannot directly implement the recommendation.

However, the District supports the recommendation's underlying purpose and would review and disseminate relevant information or training made available by SBCEO, law enforcement, or other appropriate partners. In addition, SMJUHSD already receives ongoing site-specific information through its School Resource Officer and Deputy partnerships, which provide administrators with timely updates regarding local gang-related indicators, neighborhood concerns, and emerging safety issues throughout the school year.

Finding 5 and Recommendation 5

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."

District Response: Agree.

The District agrees that weapons on or near school campuses pose a serious threat to student and staff safety. SMJUHSD prohibits weapons on campus, responds promptly when weapons are reported or discovered, and works with School Resource Officers and law enforcement when incidents involve firearms, knives, or other weapons.

The District also recognizes that students may bring weapons for a variety of reasons, including perceived personal protection related to off-campus or community concerns. Regardless of motive, weapons on campus are incompatible with a safe learning environment and require immediate response, appropriate discipline, support, and coordination with 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."

District Response: Has been implemented.

Education Code section 48986 requires local educational agencies to annually inform parents and guardians of California's child access prevention laws and laws relating to the safe storage of firearms, including, but not limited to, Division 4 (commencing with Section 25000) of Title 4 of Part 6 of the Penal Code.) The District complies with this legal requirement by including this information in its annual parental notifications.

Finding 6 and Recommendation 6

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."

District Response: Agree in part.

The District agrees that anonymous reporting can help identify safety concerns before they escalate. SMJUHSD maintains Securly Tipline, an electronic anonymous reporting system accessible through links on District and school websites. Anyone may submit an anonymous report through Tipline. When a Tipline report is submitted, notification is routed to appropriate site administrative teams and District leaders so the concern can be reviewed promptly, assessed for available facts, and investigated as needed. Anonymous reports are not ignored or discounted because they are anonymous; at the same time, reports are reviewed carefully because the information provided may be incomplete, inaccurate, or require verification.

The District does not agree that physical anonymous drop boxes are necessary or preferable of likely to be effective in the current school environment. Electronic reporting is more timely, accessible, trackable, and consistent with current student communication practices.

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."

District Response: Has been implemented with regard to digital reporting. Will not be implemented as written as to physical drop boxes because it is not warranted/reasonable.

SMJUHSD will not install physical anonymous drop boxes. The District's comprehensive high schools are large campuses serving thousands of students, including approximately 3,100 students at Santa Maria High School, nearly 3,100 students at Pioneer Valley High School, and approximately 2,500

students at Ernest Righetti High School. In that context, physical drop boxes would create significant practical concerns regarding placement, visibility, access, monitoring responsibility, frequency of review, documentation, confidentiality, response timing, and follow-up.

The District believes electronic reporting is a more reliable, timely, accessible, and accountable method for receiving anonymous safety concerns. Electronic reports can be routed immediately to appropriate site and District administrators, reviewed more efficiently, and acted upon more quickly than information placed in a physical box. In addition, students have multiple avenues to report concerns directly to trusted adults on campus, including administrators, counselors, teachers, coaches, campus security staff, School Resource Officers, Wellness Center personnel, and other school employees. SMJUHSD students are generally comfortable with and utilize District electronic systems, and the District believes are much more likely to utilize these digital options than physical reporting boxes.

For these reasons, the District has implemented digital anonymous reporting and multiple in-person reporting pathways, but will not implement the portion of Recommendation 6 requiring physical drop boxes.

Finding 7 and Recommendation 7

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."

District Response: Agree.

The District agrees that socially isolated, disconnected, or otherwise vulnerable students can benefit from positive relationships with trusted adults and responsible mentors. SMJUHSD recognizes that student isolation, chronic absenteeism, family stress, peer conflict, social media pressure, community violence, and other risk factors can increase vulnerability to negative influences.

The District identifies and supports students through multiple pathways, including counselors, Wellness Center staff, school psychologists, administrators, teachers, coaches, attendance data, referral processes, Panorama survey information, Aeries reports, Securly Tipline reports, Securly Aware alerts, and site-based student support teams. Securly Aware uses artificial intelligence to monitor student activity on District-provided one-to-one devices and generate alerts to site administrative teams and District leaders when digital activity indicates potential concerns involving violence, weapons, drugs, suicide, self-harm, depression, or related safety and wellness risks. When a student is identified as needing support, school personnel may connect the student with a counselor, Wellness Center staff member, teacher, coach, administrator, community partner, or other trusted adult as appropriate.

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."

District Response: Requires further analysis

SMJUHSD currently uses multiple student-support systems to identify and assist students who may be socially isolated, disconnected, chronically absent, or otherwise in need of adult connection. These supports include counseling, Wellness Center services, school psychologist support, MTSS-related practices, attendance monitoring, referrals, Peer Wellness Leaders, Link Crew, teacher and coach connections, and community partnerships.

The District does not currently operate one uniform districtwide one-to-one mentoring program for all socially isolated students. However, SMJUHSD will further review and refine its student-connection practices during the 2026–2027 school year, including how students are identified, referred, connected with trusted adults, and supported through school-based or community-based resources. The District may use existing structures, including counselors, Wellness Centers, site teams, Peer Wellness Leaders, Link Crew, Por Vida, Communify, and other community partners, to strengthen student connection and mentoring opportunities.

The District anticipates completing this analysis, review and any refinement by December 4, 2026.

Conclusion

The Santa Maria Joint Union High School District appreciates the opportunity to respond to the 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury report concerning gangs in Santa Barbara County. The District shares the Grand Jury's commitment to student safety, youth well-being, and community collaboration.

As described throughout this response, SMJUHSD does not view its high school campuses as common locations for gang recruitment. In the District's experience, gang-related risk factors are more often rooted in neighborhood, peer, family, and community circumstances, and prevention efforts must begin before students enter high school. Nevertheless, the District recognizes that high schools play an important role in supporting students who may be affected by community violence, social isolation, peer conflict, trauma, or other risk factors.

SMJUHSD will continue focusing on the areas within its educational role and authority: safe and supervised campuses, strong School Resource Officer and Deputy partnerships, ongoing communication with site administrators regarding gang-related indicators and neighborhood concerns, electronic anonymous reporting, counseling and Wellness Center supports, extracurricular and co-curricular engagement, community partnerships, family communication, student connection, and timely

intervention when concerns arise. The District also supports broader collaboration among schools, families, law enforcement, community organizations, probation, local government, and youth-serving agencies to address gang-related risk factors before they affect student safety and school climate.

Summary of District Commitments

- Maintain safe, supervised, and connected high school campuses.
- Continue working closely with School Resource Officers, Deputies, law enforcement, and community partners to share timely information with administrators regarding gang-related indicators, neighborhood concerns, and emerging safety issues.
- Maintain Securly Tipline electronic anonymous reporting, Securly Aware digital safety alerts, and multiple trusted-adult reporting pathways.
- Continue offering extracurricular, co-curricular, athletic, arts, academic, CTE, leadership, wellness, and student engagement opportunities.
- Maintain and strengthen partnerships with organizations such as Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley, One Community Action/Por Vida, Communify, and other youth-serving partners.
- Review annual family safety communications to include firearm storage reminders by December 31, 2026.
- Review and refine student-connection and mentoring practices during the 2026–2027 school year.
- Review and disseminate relevant gang-awareness information or training made available by SBCEO, law enforcement, or other appropriate partners.
- Continue supporting earlier prevention efforts through collaboration with elementary and middle school districts, community agencies, and local partners.

Governing Board Action

The Governing Board of the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District adopts and approves this response to the 2025–2026 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury Report, *Gangs of Santa Barbara County: Should the Schools Do More to Address Them?* at a regularly scheduled Governing Board meeting on August 4, 2026, pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, and directs the Superintendent or designee to transmit the adopted response to the appropriate agencies within the statutory timelines.

Signature Page

President, Governing Board	
Superintendent	
Date	8-4-2026
Board Action	8-4-2026