

RESPONSE FORM: 2024-2025 Marin Civil Grand Jury Report

Report Title: Feeling Safe at School - Let's Get Educated

Respondent/Agency Name: Novato Unified School District _____

Submitter Name: Dr. Tracy Smith _____ Title: Superintendent _____

FINDINGS

▪ Agree with the findings numbered: ___ 1-4 _____

▪ Disagree *partially* with the findings numbered: ___ 1 _____

▪ Disagree *wholly* with the findings numbered: ___ N/A _____

(Attach a **statement** specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefore.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

▪ Recommendations numbered ___ 1 and 5 _____ have been implemented.

(Attach a **summary** describing the implemented actions.)

▪ Recommendations numbered ___ 2 and 4 _____ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

(Attach a **timeframe** for the implementation.)

▪ Recommendations numbered ___ 3 _____ require further analysis.
(Attach an **explanation** and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a **timeframe** for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This **timeframe shall not exceed six months** from the date of publication of the grand jury report.)

▪ Recommendations numbered ___ 6 _____ will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

(Attach an **explanation**.)

Date: 6/10/2025 Signed: _____

Number of pages attached: ___ 8 ___

Tracy Smith
Dr. Tracy Smith
Superintendent
Novato Unified School District



Dr. Tracy Smith
Superintendent

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June 10, 2025

The Honorable Judge Mark Talamantes
Marin County Superior Court
P.O. Box 4988
San Rafael, CA 94913-4988
CourtroomL@marin.courts.ca.gov

Mr. Dick Dumont, Foreperson
Marin County Civil Grand Jury
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room #275
San Rafael, CA 94903
foreperson@MarinCivilGrandJury.org

Dear Judge Talamantes and Foreperson Dumont,

Below is the Novato Unified School District's response to the 2024-2025 Marin County Civil Grand Jury Report dated April 8, 2025, *Feeling Safe at School – Let's Get Educated*.

To begin, we want to share that a working group of NUSD Trustees and Staff convened to thoroughly review the 2024-2025 Marin Civil Grand Jury's Report *Feeling Safe at School – Let's Get Educated*. The group carefully reviewed the findings and engaged in thoughtful discussion considering implications at student, teacher, school, district, and community levels.

Prior to our formal response to your findings and recommendations, we thought it may be helpful to highlight a few elements related to school district governance.

School district governance is a shared responsibility between the elected school board and the superintendent, each with distinct but complementary roles focused on supporting student success.

The school board serves as the governing body, elected by the community to set the vision, goals, and policies that guide the district. Board members are responsible for setting direction, adopting policies, approving budgets, providing oversight, and hiring and evaluating the superintendent. Their role is to represent the community's values and priorities. Board members do not manage day-to-day operations or direct staff other than the superintendent. Their focus is on governance, not administration.

The superintendent is the chief executive officer of the district hired by the Board to implement its vision and policies. The superintendent manages the day-to-day operations of the schools,

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BOARD OF TRUSTEES: Chandra Alexandre, Debbie Butler, Diane Gasson, Julie Jacobson, Magali Limeta, Greg Mack, Abbey Picus

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leads staff, oversees resources, and advises the board with professional expertise and data to support informed decision-making. With these distinctions in mind, NUSD submits the following responses:

FINDINGS:

F1: Inconsistent use of available security-related resources and the lack of enforcement of smartphone restrictions contributed to a failure to prevent physical injury of students leading up to, and during, a 2024 fight at Sinaloa Middle school.

Response: We have two responses to Finding 1.

Partially Disagree with the "inconsistent use of available security-related resources..."

The Novato Unified School District has partnered with North Bay Security Group (NBSG) for over 10 years and has maintained a strong working relationship with the Novato Police Department (NPD) since 2017 when NUSD reinstated the School Resource Officer (SRO) program through a partnership with NPD. Since that time, the district, NBSG and NPD representatives have held regular joint meetings; over the past few years, these meetings have been monthly.

School administrators are trained on when, and how, to contact NBSG or the NPD. Decisions are based on NUSD established security procedures, collective expert experience and annual training as it applies to each individual situation.

Agree with "the lack of enforcement of smartphone restrictions..."

Beginning in June 2024, NUSD created an Electronic Device Committee to review and recommend cell phone guidance for each grade level: elementary, middle and high. The Committee met twice and developed cell phone use guidance that was distributed to all families at the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year.

Since the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year, cell phone use at the elementary and middle school levels is non-existent during the school day. Staff have seen a reduction in cell phone use and, through consistent implementation of the cell phone guidance, there has been an 11% decrease in cell phone infractions when compared to the 2023-2024 school year. Anecdotally, staff has also seen an increase in student interactions and socializing.

Adherence to the guidance on cell phone use at the high school level is more complex due to the increased need for academic flexibility, student independence, and the varying expectations across classroom environments. At this age, supporting student agency and autonomy is a careful balance—one that is essential to fostering a developmentally appropriate high school experience.

NUSD, in collaboration with high school administrators, is actively working to ensure consistent and effective implementation of the guidance while honoring the unique needs of high school students.

At Sinaloa Middle School, site leadership and staff have reinforced efforts to limit cell phone access during instructional time, resulting in a noticeable decrease in distractions. The district continues to assess and enhance safety measures to ensure they are applied consistently and effectively across all campuses, with a focus on preventing incidents and supporting a safe learning environment for all students. While no system is fail proof, the district continues to evaluate and reinforce its safety practices to ensure consistent application and effectiveness across all campuses.

F2: Inconsistent application of the Novato Unified School District’s Discipline Matrix resulted in an initial recommendation for harsher discipline than required for some students involved in a 2024 fight at Sinaloa Middle school.

Response: Agree. The Discipline Matrix has been revised to create a more accessible and user-friendly tool, now formatted on a single page, for ease of reference. This updated version has been implemented at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Site administrators were directly involved in reviewing and refining the matrix to ensure clarity and consistency in its application districtwide.

F3: A lack of familiarity with the Novato Unified School District’s Discipline Matrix and other conduct policies among staff of Novato Unified School District’s high schools resulted in the belief by nearly a third of staff that the rules around hurting other people (for example, bullying, hitting, and pushing) are not clear.

Response: Agree. The Discipline Matrix has been revised into a more streamlined, one-page format to improve clarity and ease of use. This updated tool has been implemented at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—and was developed collaboratively with site administrators. To increase staff familiarity and consistency in application, the matrix is regularly reviewed during site leadership and staff meetings.

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F4: The lack of a publicized process by the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees for follow-up after members of the public comment during Novato Unified School Board of Trustees meetings has resulted in the perception that these comments are not considered.

Response: Agree. Beginning in January 2025, the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees implemented formal Board Meeting Protocols to strengthen public engagement and follow-up. At each Board meeting, the Board President now reads a statement outlining the process for addressing public comments including that the Superintendent and staff respond to each individual who makes a public comment via email within 48 hours. These steps have been put in place to ensure that community input is acknowledged, considered, and documented.

Beginning with the May 20, 2025, board meeting, the Public Comment section of the Agenda reads, "The Board shall take no action or discussion on any item not appearing on the posted agenda, except as allowed by law (Education Code 35145.5, Government Code 54954.2). The Superintendent and staff will respond to speakers within 48 hours."

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees should direct the Novato Unified School District leadership and site coordinators to implement the following by January 1, 2026:

R1. Require consultation with North Bay Security Group and/or Novato Police Department School Resource Officer when there are threats of violence, disruption, or safety breaches.

This recommendation has been implemented. The Novato Unified School District has partnered with North Bay Security Group (NBSG) for over 10 years and has maintained a strong working relationship with the Novato Police Department (NPD) since 2017 when NUSD reinstated the School Resource Officer (SRO) program through a partnership with NPD. Since that time, district, NBSG and NPD representatives have held regular joint meetings; over the past few years, these meetings have been monthly. Starting in the 2024-2025 school year, a representative from Marin County Probation, Juvenile Services, attends these monthly meetings.

As such, consultation with the NBSG and/or the NPD School Resource Officer is already a standard practice when appropriate. When threats of violence, disruptions, or

safety breaches arise, district and site administrators assess the situation and promptly involve security consultants and law enforcement partners as needed.

This collaborative approach has been in place and is a critical part of the district’s commitment to maintaining safe and secure school environments. We will continue to engage these resources proactively to ensure thorough threat assessments, appropriate interventions, and the protection of students, staff, and the broader school community. This work continues to evolve as we learn from each experience, allowing us to strengthen our practices and adapt to emerging needs.

In addition, the NPD has recently partnered with the SAFE (Specialized Assistance for Everyone) Team to offer support services Tuesday through Saturday, from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. In response to this added resource, NUSD has developed an [NUSD Emergency/Safety Flowchart](#) to guide staff in handling emergency and safety-related situations effectively. The flowchart will be distributed to all administrators this school year and will be reviewed with staff during upcoming staff meetings and annual safety training to ensure clarity and preparedness beginning in the 2025-2026 school year.

R2. Implement a plan to conduct annual training for all teachers and administrators and track this training with documentation available for performance improvement, to ensure understanding of the Discipline Matrix and student conduct policies and consequences.

This recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future. Currently, the Novato Unified School District conducts annual training for administrators on the Discipline Matrix and related student conduct policies. Site administrators also address these topics in their regular staff meetings with teachers.

By January 1, 2026, the Superintendent and staff will develop a system to document and monitor staff training related to the Discipline Matrix and student conduct policies, ensuring consistent understanding and application of behavioral expectations and consequences. Additionally, by that same date, the Superintendent and staff will establish clear metrics to assess improvements in implementation and overall effectiveness.

R3. Implement a procedure to annually assess adherence to Novato Unified School District behavior policies and consequences.

This recommendation requires further analysis. The Novato Unified School District

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recognizes the importance of ensuring consistency and fairness in the implementation of behavior policies. By January 1, 2026, the Superintendent and staff will assess the viability, scope, and resources needed to support this work which involves identifying key components that may be required to conduct an annual review of how behavior policies and consequences are applied across school sites.

R4. Add a process for public comment follow-up to the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees Governance Manual.

This recommendation has not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future. Annually, the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees reviews and updates their Governance Handbook. The process outlined in Finding #4 will be included in the next revision of the Governance Handbook which will be in August 2025. Key points will include:

- The Board President reads a statement outlining the process for addressing public comments.
- The Superintendent and staff respond to each individual who makes a public comment via email within 48 hours.

Additionally, the Public Comment section of the Agenda has already been revised to read, "The Board shall take no action or discussion on any item not appearing on the posted agenda, except as allowed by law (Education Code 35145.5, Government Code 54954.2). The Superintendent and staff will respond to speakers within 48 hours."

R5. Publicize the process for following up on public comments at every Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees meeting.

This recommendation has been implemented. Beginning in January 2025, the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees implemented formal Board Meeting Protocols to strengthen public engagement and follow-up. At each Board meeting, the Board President now reads a statement outlining the process for addressing public comments including that the Superintendent and staff respond via email, within 48 hours, to each individual who makes a public comment. These steps have been put in place to ensure that community input is acknowledged, considered, and documented.

Beginning with the May 20, 2025, board meeting, the Public Comment section of the Agenda reads, "The Board shall take no action or discussion on any item not appearing on the posted agenda, except as allowed by law (Education Code 35145.5,

Government Code 54954.2). The Superintendent and staff will respond to speakers within 48 hours."

R6. At each Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees meeting, summarize actions on behalf of public commenters from the prior meetings (within the boundaries of applicable law and privacy requirements).

This recommendation will not be implemented. The Novato Unified School District embraces transparency and accountability while balancing the requirement to adhere to all applicable privacy laws when responding to public comments, especially those involving students or personnel.

While we may provide general updates on actions or initiatives aligned with community concerns, we must avoid any inference or reference to specific cases involving students or staff to ensure legal compliance and protect individual privacy rights.

Under California Education Code § 49060–49079 and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), we are legally prohibited from publicly disclosing any personally identifiable student information without explicit written consent. Similarly, employee matters are protected under labor and privacy laws, including the California Government Code § 6254(c), which exempts personnel and medical files from public disclosure.

In general, family or student complaints follow a process that begins with addressing the concern at the school level. If appropriate, the steps include the following:

- The initial step is to speak directly with the teacher.
- If the issue is not resolved, the concern is brought to the school principal.
- If further support is needed, the matter is referred to the Human Resources department, which then determines the appropriate department to address the complaint—such as Special Education, Educational Services, or Maintenance & Operations—based on the nature of the concern.

Following this process ensures all concerns are addressed by the appropriate team in a timely and effective manner.

For more formal complaints, the Novato Unified School District follows California's Uniform Complaint Procedures (UCP) to investigate and resolve complaints related to specific programs and concerns. The UCP applies to areas such as discrimination,

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harassment, bullying, student fees, special education, Title IX, and other violations of federal or state laws.

Formal complaints must be submitted in writing and are typically investigated within 60 calendar days of receipt. NUSD ensures a fair, timely, and thorough process, and complainants receive a written decision. Appeals can be made to the California Department of Education if needed. Here is a link to [NUSD’s Uniform Complaint Procedures](#).

In closing, NUSD has welcomed the opportunity to reflect on its policies and practices so that we may further refine them to ensure consistency across sites, to enhance safe learning environments, and to build community trust through transparent and clear processes. As one of the largest districts in Marin County, it is our hope that our insights and actions taken, in responding to campus and other school safety concerns, may offer valuable guidance in policy and practice to other school districts in this ever-changing educational landscape.

Thank you for your continued attention and support of our public schools and our County’s young people and families.

Sincerely,

Julie Jacobson
President, NUSD Board of Trustees

Dr. Tracy Smith
Superintendent