

# Feeling Safe at School - Let's Get Educated

## April 8, 2025

### SUMMARY

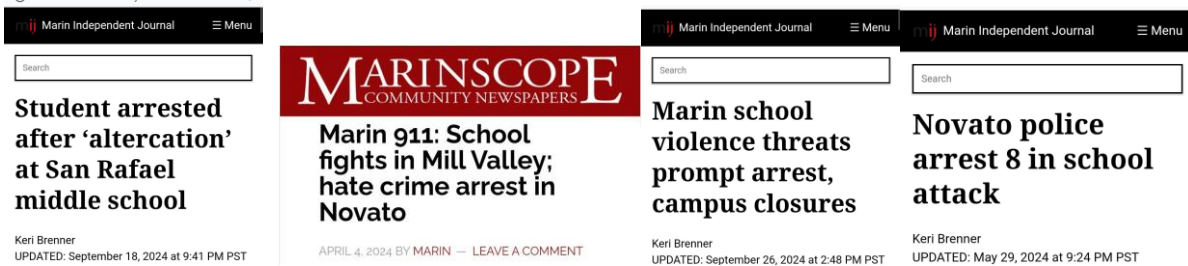
Do Marin County’s children feel safe at school? School climate surveys indicate many students do not.

A highly publicized attack at a Novato middle school last year and a spate of school violence headlines prompted a closer look at how public schools respond to their students' fears, using the Novato Unified School District (NUSD) as a case study.

The Marin County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) focused on the NUSD because of its recent experience addressing a violent attack on a school campus. The NUSD has done extensive work to reinforce and develop policies to address issues plaguing an education system struggling to keep up with twenty-first-century cultural shifts. While the NUSD has made a good start, the Grand Jury is asking the NUSD to do more by extending and maintaining a clearer focus on consistency and training around discipline, using their security resources more effectively, and improving communication.

### BACKGROUND

Headlines over the past year give the impression that Marin schools are not safe places to be.



Marin Online Headlines

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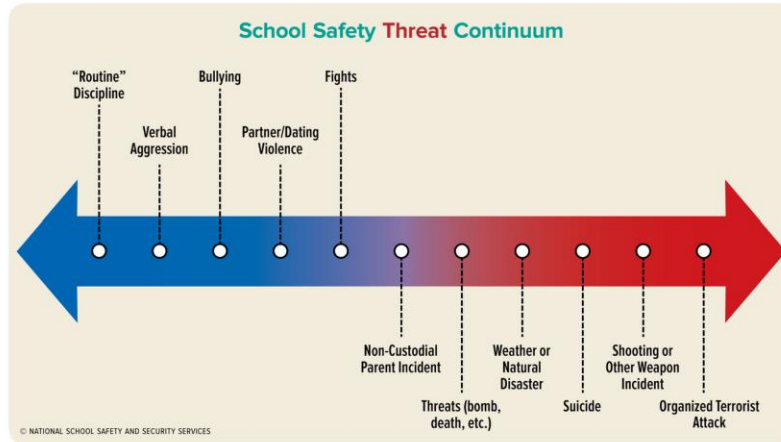
(Source: Used with permission of Marinscope Community Newspapers © 2024. All rights reserved.)

These reports and requests for investigation to the Grand Jury website provided the impetus to evaluate safety issues facing our schools. Safety is a broad topic, including anything from bullying to a terrorist attack.

The 2021–2023 California Healthy Kids school climate survey (CHK survey) asks the question, “Do you feel safe at school?” A slim majority (59 percent) of seventh graders in Marin County said they feel safe or very safe at school.<sup>1</sup> About 27 percent of seventh graders say they have been harassed for their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual identity, or disability.

<sup>1</sup> California Health Kids Survey, Marin County Secondary 2021-2023 Main Report, p. 36, [https://data.calschls.org/resources/Marin\\_County\\_2123\\_Sec\\_CHKS.pdf](https://data.calschls.org/resources/Marin_County_2123_Sec_CHKS.pdf), (accessed 1/11/25).

The harassment that students cite does not involve a physical weapon, but words. Thirty-five to 42 percent say they have been made fun of because of how they look or how they talk, called insulting names, or had rumors, lies, or hurtful pictures spread online, on social media, or via cell phone. Verbal aggression, bullying, and fights sit at the start of the school safety threat continuum and are where the Grand Jury focused its investigation.<sup>2</sup>



School Safety Threat Continuum

(Source: Reprinted with permission from "A Holistic Approach to School Safety" by Christine A. Eith and Kenneth S. Trump ©National School Safety and Security Services.)

This focus does not discount fear of school shootings. Reducing issues at the beginning of the continuum might be an area where improvement could have an impact farther along the continuum.<sup>3</sup> According to a 2019 U.S. Secret Service study of school attackers, 80 percent had experienced some form of bullying.<sup>4</sup>

There are over 30,000 public school kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) students in Marin.<sup>5</sup> Two school districts are unified, which means K-12 schools are in one district. The largest of the two districts is the Novato Unified School District (NUSD), which serves students beyond grade 12, from TK (transitional kindergarten) through adults. For the 2024–2025 school year, the NUSD served 7,400 students in 15 traditional public schools, adult, and independent study schools.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Christine A. Eith and Kenneth S. Trump, "A Holistic Approach to School Safety," *School Administrator*, April, 2019, p. 46, <https://www.schoolsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/A-Holistic-Approach-to-School-Safety-April-2019.pdf>, (accessed 9/1/24).

<sup>3</sup> Anna Merod and Kara Arundel, "Bullying is linked to school shootings. What do schools need to know?," K-12 Dive, 1/10/2024, <https://www.k12dive.com/news/bullying-school-shootings-prevention/704206/>, (accessed 3/5/25).

<sup>4</sup> Staff of the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), "Protecting America's Schools, a U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence," p. 33, [https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting\\_Americas\\_Schools.pdf](https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf), (accessed 1/11/25).

<sup>5</sup> California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, Enrollment by Grade for 2023–2024, Marin County Report, <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/Enrollment/GradeEnr.aspx?cYear=2023-24&cChoice=CoEnrGrd2&cLevel=County&ctopic=Enrollment&cType=ALL&cGender=B&myTimeFrame=S&TheCounty=21.MARIN>, (accessed 1/11/25).

<sup>6</sup> Novato Unified School District Home Page (District Overview), <https://nUSD.org/>, (accessed 1/11/2025).

The size and breadth of the NUSD made it the best option for study within the one-year time frame of this Grand Jury. The NUSD had a highly publicized middle school beating in the spring of 2024, providing the Grand Jury with access to staff with recent experience handling a significant safety event. Safety is among NUSD's highest priorities.

When the Grand Jury investigation started, under half of NUSD seventh graders said they felt safe or very safe at school when responding to the CHK survey.<sup>7</sup> By the time the 2023–2024 survey was published, the needle had moved to 52 percent.<sup>8</sup> That still means a large number of middle schoolers in Novato do not feel safe or are undecided about safety.

Middle school is a time of significant change hormonally, mentally, and physically.<sup>9</sup> The Grand Jury's focus on the age group is not because of those changes but because of the intersection with violence. Bullying peaks in middle schools<sup>10</sup> and it was a middle school where the NUSD faced a fight that shook it to its core.

While each district in Marin has its own challenge with the social and educational climate within their schools (school climate), there are lessons from the NUSD that could inform schools across the county.

## **APPROACH**

The Grand Jury completed nearly two dozen interviews with experts from the fields of education, safety, and law enforcement, and local school partners from parents to NUSD leadership.

Grand Jurors viewed recordings of more than a year's worth of Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees (NUSD Board) meetings and safety-related documents that came before the NUSD Board.

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<sup>7</sup> Californian Department of Education and WestEd, "California Healthy Kids Survey, Novato Unified Secondary 2021-2022 Main Report," p. 32, [https://data.calschls.org/resources/Novato\\_Unified\\_2122\\_Sec\\_CHKS.pdf](https://data.calschls.org/resources/Novato_Unified_2122_Sec_CHKS.pdf), (accessed 11/20/2024).

<sup>8</sup> Californian Department of Education and WestEd, "California Healthy Kids Survey, Novato Unified Secondary 2021-2022 Main Report," p. 38, [https://data.calschls.org/resources/Novato\\_Unified\\_21\\_2324\\_Sec\\_CHKS.pdf](https://data.calschls.org/resources/Novato_Unified_21_2324_Sec_CHKS.pdf), (accessed 11/20/2024).

<sup>9</sup> Casey Dianna Gilewski, & Monica Nunn (2016). Research summary: "Transitioning Young Adolescents from Elementary to Middle Schools," *Association for Middle Level Education Online Publication*, 2016, At Research Summary Section, <http://www.aml.org/ServicesEvents/ResearchSummary/TabId/622/ArtMID/2112/ArticleID/750/Transitioning-Young-Adolescents-from-Elementary-to-Middle-School.aspx>, (accessed 2/1/2025).

<sup>10</sup> Valerie L. Marsh, PhD, October, 2018, "Bullying in School: Prevalence, Contributing Factors, and Interventions Research Brief," *The Center for Urban Education Success at the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester*, October, 2018, p. 5, [https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/By\\_Division/MentalHealth/Child%20and%20Adolescents/SchoolBasedMH/Teachers/bullying\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/By_Division/MentalHealth/Child%20and%20Adolescents/SchoolBasedMH/Teachers/bullying_FINAL.pdf), (accessed 2/1/2025).

The following is a partial list of documents and websites used to prepare this report:

1. **Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP)** — An annually updated plan that outlines visions, goals, and actions to improve student outcomes in eight state-prioritized areas.
2. **NUSD Comprehensive Safety Plan** — An annually updated plan prescribing actions and preparations for potential safety events, including threats, earthquakes, etc.
3. **NUSD Discipline Matrix** — A matrix of Education Code violations and consequences for infractions.
4. **California Healthy Kids Surveys (CHK surveys)** — Marin secondary, NUSD elementary and secondary versions — Surveys of students at grades five, seven, nine, and eleven on many health issues such as school climate, safety, substance abuse, etc.
5. **NUSD Youth Truth Surveys** — students, family, and staff, elementary and secondary versions — A commissioned study of various constituencies at all grade levels covering the school experience from relationships with teachers and families to safety to academic support.
6. **Safety presentations** to the NUSD Board by vendors and staff.
7. **Parent Square and Community Cornerstone** communications from NUSD leadership.
8. **NUSD Student Rights and Responsibilities** documents and school handbooks.
9. **All NUSD websites.**

These activities were completed by March 1, 2025.

## **DISCUSSION**

The people who work in and run the Novato public schools are dedicated to protecting and teaching their students, especially when students are at risk of losing their education. Experts contend some schools' harsh disciplinary practices push students into the criminal justice system.<sup>11</sup> There is a desire in the NUSD to break this school-to-prison pipeline.

This can be perceived as leniency in discipline, but it is a philosophy meant to ensure children are educated while learning both the consequences of, and ways to improve behavior. The state reinforces the idea with laws to protect children from discriminatory discipline and bullying, and limit the use of cell phones. School districts must follow these mandates.

Not all of the state's requirements, whether academic or disciplinary, come with the dollars needed to get it 100 percent right, 100 percent of the time. This means the NUSD must figure out how to keep good programs operating when funds run dry. Sometimes, already overburdened

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Hemez, John J. Brent, and Thomas J. Mowen, "Exploring the School-to-Prison Pipeline: How School Suspensions Influence Incarceration During Young Adulthood," *National Institutes of Health, Pub Med Central, National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information*, July 13, 2021, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8277150/#:~:text=This%20pipeline%20refers%20to%20a.concept%20of%20e%20prison%20school>, (accessed 2/4/2025).

teachers must become substitute trainers, teaching their colleagues how to incorporate programs into their classrooms, like Social Emotional Learning<sup>12</sup> or Restorative Justice.<sup>13</sup>

Novato schools have a welcome partner in the Marin County Office of Education (MCOE), which goes beyond its mandate by acquiring grants that help Marin's schools. In the case of the NUSD, the MCOE has provided significant assistance in mental health, which supports safety efforts through counseling and other activities. Mental Health assistance is an area of both improvement and continuing need in schools across the country.<sup>14</sup> The MCOE has also created a tool to help schools with threat assessments.<sup>15</sup> This, coupled with the NUSD's nearly 300-page safety plan, provides a blueprint for responding to the most severe safety threats. The harder safety issues to address are the everyday fights, bullying, and verbal aggression, which are covered by separate NUSD policies.

## **What is Safe?**

The California School Boards Association defines a safe school as:

... one where teaching and learning are not distracted; disruptions are minimized; violence, drugs, bullying and fear are not present; students are not discriminated against; expectations for behavior are clearly communicated; and consequences for infractions are consistently and fairly applied.<sup>16</sup>

The message to school leadership is to let students, parents, and teachers know the rules and stick to them.

Consistency, communication, and training are the elements the Grand Jury found to be both the NUSD's strengths and weaknesses. The good news is the NUSD knows what it needs to do. The bad news is that sometimes it takes a significant failure to move the NUSD needle. An example is the planned beating of two students at Sinaloa Middle school (Sinaloa) in May of 2024. It made the national news and resulted in eight students being arrested on charges of assault and

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<sup>12</sup> Stephanie M. Jones and Emily J. Doolittle, "Social and Emotional Learning: Introducing the Issue," Internet Preview from *The Future of Children*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Social and Emotional Learning, spring 2017, pp. 3-11 (9 pages), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219018>, (accessed 2/5/2025).

<sup>13</sup> Ted Wachtel, "Defining Restorative," *International Institute of Restorative Practices Graduate School*, 2012, [https://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/FGDM\\_conference/A5/A5%20Merging%20FGDM%20Defining-Restorative.pdf](https://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/FGDM_conference/A5/A5%20Merging%20FGDM%20Defining-Restorative.pdf), (accessed 2/11/2025).

<sup>14</sup> CDC Media Relations Release, "CDC Data Show Improvements in Youth Mental Health but Need for Safer and More Supportive Schools," August 6, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2024/p0806-youth-mental-health.html>, (accessed 2/1/2025).

<sup>15</sup> Marin County Office of Education and Marin County Schools Collaborative, "Marin County School Threat Determination Protocol," <https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1718993029/marinschoolsorg/xqt58ytzddvszmqa4i3g/MarinCountySchoolThreatDeterminationProtocol.pdf>, (accessed 1/10/2025).

<sup>16</sup> California School Boards Association, "Governance and Policy Resources: Safe and Supportive School Environment," <https://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/ConditionsOfChildren/SafeSupportiveSchlEnvironment#gsc.tab=0>, (accessed 12/1/2024).

suspicion of conspiracy to commit a crime.<sup>17</sup> Physical injuries were minor, but the aftermath was not. To this day, administrators who were involved and/or saw the fight are still shaken by what the attack meant for the students, the NUSD, and the community.

Some of the questions that surfaced as a result of the fight are the following:

- Did the school and administration use all the available resources to avoid the fight?
- Was discipline consistently applied?
- Did the NUSD have all the policies needed to ensure peace?

## **Use of Resources**

The NUSD contracts with a private firm to help with safety and security. This group of former police officers provides everything from Automated External Defibrillator (AED) training to campus monitoring to truancy visits. North Bay Security Group (NBSG) was not consulted closely about possible prevention steps when the Sinaloa fight started germinating the day before it occurred. Over 300 students had combed the campus looking for the attack. The NUSD acted the next day to station more staff around the school, including NBSG private security personnel.

NUSD schools also have access to a School Resource Officer (SRO) provided by the Novato Police Department. Neither the SRO nor any other law enforcement official was called for advice on the first day. They were not asked to be present the second day, arriving only after the attack began, when they were called by a parent.

School leadership is committed to protecting and building trust with students. Security and police personnel have the same mission, but their perspectives, from experience handling violence more often, make them extraordinarily cautious. The security experts available to the NUSD felt that more precautions, or a uniformed presence, would have been justified based on the heated nature of the first day.

## **To Expel or Not to Expel**

Remembering the goal the NUSD embraces, to break the school-to-prison pipeline, interviewees were surprised that all of the Sinaloa attackers were quickly recommended for expulsion, even those with no prior misconduct. California Education Code Section 48900(v) allows administrators discretion in suspending or expelling students. Students have the right to a hearing before an Expulsion Review Committee (ERC). The NUSD Board can accept or reject the recommendations of the ERC. While the Sinaloa students were preparing with their lawyers for a hearing, the NUSD Board directed leadership to choose other options allowed by law. The students who decided to remain in the NUSD and had been recommended for expulsion agreed to behavior improvement plans, and they were placed in other schools. This level of punishment was more consistent with the NUSD's Discipline Matrix.

The quick expulsion recommendation, then reversal, has prompted members of the community to accuse the NUSD of acting more quickly based on ethnicity. The Grand Jury could not determine if ethnicity had anything to do with the swiftness of reaction and the original decision to

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<sup>17</sup> Keri Brenner, "Novato Police Arrest 8 in School Attack," *Marin Independent Journal*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.marinij.com/2024/05/29/novato-police-arrest-8-in-school-attack/>, (accessed 9/16/2024).

recommend expulsion. Interviewees felt the reaction was to the planning and severity of the attack.

## **Policies for Peace**

What set the Sinaloa attack apart from fights of a decade or more ago was the focus smartphones on campus brought to the incident. Students used smartphones to plan the attack. Students texted each other to find the fight. Other students used smartphone cameras to record the fight and then shared images on social media.

The NUSD has many policies around safety and discipline, like a nearly 300-page comprehensive safety plan and a 66-page discipline matrix. At the time of the fight, the NUSD did not have a consistent cell phone (personal devices) policy across all schools. Students were supposed to keep their cell phones off while on campus and only use them under the supervision of a staff member. Students easily ignored that line in the Sinaloa handbook during the May attack.<sup>18</sup> These actions resulted in consequences for the entire school, not just the perpetrators, including: stricter cell phone rules, additional adult supervision, structured activities indoors and out, and weekly small group circles to discuss security and bullying concerns.

On September 23, 2024, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed the Phone-Free School Act. Assembly Bill 3216<sup>19</sup> requires "... every school district, charter school, and county office of education to add a policy limiting or prohibiting the use of smartphones by July 1, 2026."<sup>20</sup> In addition to stricter cell phone rules at Sinaloa, the NUSD created an administrative team that worked over the summer of 2024 to develop a comprehensive policy for all NUSD schools.

Novato implemented its new personal devices (smartphones, smartwatches, ear buds) policies with the start of the 2024–2025 school year, almost two years earlier than required. Using cell phones in violation of restrictions results in progressive discipline, from confiscation to parent meetings with imposition of a device support plan. Parents are also being urged to follow the Wait Until 8th campaign that delays giving students smartphones and access to social media until the end of eighth grade.

Video of the Sinaloa fight made its way to social media, prompting an onslaught of national coverage of the incident. School districts cannot control how students use social media off campus, but they suffer from the results of social media in and out of the classroom. The NUSD created another summer administrative team to look at ways to blunt the impact of social media in the school environment. The team focused on the education of both students and parents. The NUSD is increasing digital citizenship content in lessons. Social media best practices and information are being included in newsletters and other communications with students and parents.

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<sup>18</sup> Sinaloa Middle School Student Planner, p. 16, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VIURfkyeToa1AmJCG7dm-m\\_Cz3ojdOK/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VIURfkyeToa1AmJCG7dm-m_Cz3ojdOK/view), (accessed 1/05/2025).

<sup>19</sup> California Education Code §48901.7 (a), [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202320240AB3216](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB3216), (accessed 2/10/2025).

<sup>20</sup> Governor Gavin Newsom Signs Legislation to Limit the Use of Smartphones During School Hours, 9/23/2024, <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/09/23/governor-newsom-signs-legislation-to-limit-the-use-of-smartphones-during-school-hours/>, (accessed 2/3/2025).

While no specific event of hate speech or bullying was identified in the Sinaloa fight, at least one parent of students involved complained to the news media that their child was repeatedly subjected to both.<sup>21</sup> Middle school was not the only focus of hate speech. Interviewees identified offensive language used casually on the high school campuses. They likened the usage to how hateful words are used in rap lyrics. While students using the words may have been advised of their inappropriateness, discipline was generally only recommended when such words were used against another student. Another summer administrative team considered hate speech and clarified when discipline will be considered.

Hate speech policies were developed for each level of education (elementary, middle, and high school) with consequences from restorative conversations (accountability and sharing of negative impact of the offense) to out-of-school suspension. This policy defines hate speech as name-calling, curse words, words meant to discriminate based on race, skin color, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or gender/gender identity. Persistent use of hate speech may also trigger harassment/bullying consequences. The new hate speech policy does not distinguish between casual and directed use, other than in the severity of discipline.

### **What is Working?**

NUSD leadership will not be able to fully measure the results of all of their summer actions until the next school climate surveys are administered and published. The CHK surveys are completed every two years and are not scheduled until the 2025–2026 school year. While the YouthTruth surveys were professionally administered annually, the NUSD has opted not to continue using them because of the \$47,000 yearly cost. The NUSD has created its own surveys using the questions currently tracked in the Local Control and Accountability Plan. These parent, student, and staff surveys will be administered on a platform that compiles data using artificial intelligence. The self-administered tests will lose access to YouthTruth's national comparative dataset and predictive analysis and will include fewer questions.

Comparisons of NUSD-collected data for the first three months of the last school year versus the same time period this school year show some progress:

- The number of students fighting was down significantly from 38 to 16 across the system.
- Fewer students engaged in pushing and shoving, 22 students rather than 36 in the same period of the prior year.
- Calls to Novato police or the SRO were down from 78 to 44.
- The NUSD has just begun tracking hate speech. For the first three months, 41 incidents were reported, with six directed at victims.
- No cell phone use data was reported to the NUSD Board prior to preparation of this report.
- Bullying incidents went up from 18 to 23. It is not clear if activity has changed or if increased reporting is the main driver. Reporting is encouraged using an application called StopIt through which students can anonymously engage in a two-way conversation with administrators.

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<sup>21</sup> Ronny Reyes, "Violent middle school brawl leads to 'stampede' on campus, leaving parents outraged," *New York Post* online, 5/24/2024, <https://nypost.com/2024/05/29/us-news/california-middle-school-brawl-leads-to-stampede-on-campus/>, (accessed 9/3/2024).

## Incomplete Training

### Discipline Matrix

The NUSD also took time this summer to come up with one-page distillations of the 66-page Discipline Matrix for each grade group (elementary, middle, high schools). These documents spell out Education Code infractions and the progressive discipline attached to each violation. This should make it easier to discuss discipline with parents and students.

Generally, policy flows from the Superintendent’s office to principals, then from principals to staff. During interviews, it became clear that not all staffers are aware of the discipline available to them.

Responding to the 2023–2024 YouthTruth survey, a small percentage of staff felt their students were safe from bullying at the middle and high school levels:<sup>22</sup>

**Table 1: YouthTruth NUSD Survey Results Table - Safe from Bullying**

School Level	Question	TYPICAL CA		TYPICAL YOUTH	2020-2024
		NOVATO	SCHOOL	TRUTH U.S. SCHOOL	
Elementary	Students are safe from bullying at my school.	68%	54%	57%	
Middle	Students are safe from bullying at my school.	26%	35%	33%	
High	Students are safe from bullying at my school.	25%	48%	45%	

Based on Data from YouthTruth, Novato Unified School District - Elementary, Middle and High Schools - "Staff Surveys" District Reports - February 2024, "School Safety Percent Positives"

Despite extensive documentation of infractions and consequences, NUSD high school staff trailed other benchmark schools in the belief that rules are clear against actions like bullying, hitting or pushing:

**Table 2: YouthTruth NUSD Survey Results Table - Rules are Clear**

Survey Population	School Level	Question	TYPICAL CA		TYPICAL YOUTH	2020-2024
			NOVATO	SCHOOL	TRUTH U.S. SCHOOL	
STAFF	Elementary	During school there are clear rules for students against hurting other people (for example, bullying, hitting or pushing).	89%	80%	80%	
STAFF	Middle	During school there are clear rules for students against hurting other people (for example, bullying, hitting or pushing).	81%	78%	77%	
STAFF	High	During school there are clear rules for students against hurting other people (for example, bullying, hitting or pushing).	68%	77%	76%	

Based on Data from YouthTruth, Novato Unified School District - Elementary, Middle and High Schools - "Staff Surveys" District Reports - February 2024, "School Safety Percent Positives"

If the rules are not clear to staff, how well are they being enforced? Is this a communication or training issue, or both? The Grand Jury believes staff must fully understand the Discipline Matrix and all policies that carry consequences for violations. A teacher may not administer the discipline, but should know the consequences and appropriate reasons for sending a student to the “office.” Students and parents need to fully understand what is required of them by law and policy.

<sup>22</sup> YouthTruth, Novato Unified School District - Elementary Schools - "Staff Survey District Report - February 2024, School Safety Percent Positives,"

<https://youthtruth.surveylresults.org/public/#/reports/77281/sections/2478723>, (accessed 2/1/2025);

<https://youthtruth.surveylresults.org/public/#/reports/77292/sections/2479134>, (accessed 2/1/2025);

<https://youthtruth.surveylresults.org/public/#/reports/77352/sections/2481585>, (accessed 2/1/2025).

This is an opportunity for additional training that encompasses more than distributing a document. Other public entities require employees to annually prove understanding of key policies. For example, many hospitals require personnel who work with bodily fluids to pass an annual online test to show an understanding of bloodborne pathogen handling. Pass/fail is forwarded to each employee's supervisor, and the supervisor is evaluated on compliance.

## **Communication**

### **When Silence is not Golden**

When Grand Jurors watched over a year's worth of recorded NUSD Board meetings, parents' comments about bullying seemed to be ignored. Because public comments are not specific issues on the agenda, the Brown Act prohibits discussion. The Brown Act does *not* prohibit referring issues to staff. The Grand Jury observed only one referral to staff in all the meetings viewed. It was a comment about whether the Pledge of Allegiance was being recited daily. In multiple meetings, parents commented about bullying, including a situation so bad that a mother said she pulled her student out of school. None of these comments were publicly referred to staff.

When the Grand Jury followed up, school officials said they responded to all comments. Before the Grand Jury undertook an investigation, there was no policy reflecting this process in NUSD Board meetings. The lack of referrals or a stated policy gave the impression that the NUSD Board ignored public comments. A more positive impression could be made by referring issues to staff, or stating before each public comment session that concerns will be addressed by staff, followed by a summary of what was handled from the prior meeting, taking into account legal and privacy restrictions.

Starting in 2025, both the President and Superintendent began referring to public comments during the NUSD Board's trustees update section. They also referred to routine follow-up of all public comments within forty-eight hours.

### **Final Thoughts**

Bullying is a critical safety issue in schools. The steps NUSD has taken can reduce the impact of bullying, but no one interviewed felt bullying could be eliminated without families and society discouraging what often gets called "just part of life." One action within schools that can help, according to those interviewed, is for each student to find an adult on campus to trust. Students should find someone to whom they can turn when needed, someone to intercede for them, counsel them, and calm them.

Those attacked in the middle school fight were not the only victims. The students who did *not* run through the school, did *not* lift a hand to anyone, and did *not* take or share pictures of a child being beaten are also victims. Whether or not a whole school is punished, innocent students experience the trauma of witnessing disturbing conduct. They become collateral damage. The Grand Jury applauds the NUSD for implementing 30-minute Social Emotional Learning sessions every week for all Sinaloa students. These sessions are forums to discuss fears and ways to deal with daily safety concerns.

## **CONCLUSION**

The NUSD has done extensive work to reinforce and develop policies to respond to safety concerns. While the NUSD has made a good start, the Grand Jury is asking the NUSD to extend and maintain a clearer focus on consistency and training around discipline, use their security resources more effectively, and improve communication.

As a result of the matters discussed in this report, the Grand Jury makes the following findings and recommendations.

## **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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

## **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.

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

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

The Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees should implement the following by January 1, 2026:

- R4. Add a process for public comment follow-up to the Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees Governance Manual.
- R5. Publicize the process for following up on public comments at every Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees meeting.
- 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).

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses from the following governing bodies:

From the following governing bodies within 90 days:

- Novato Unified School District Board of Trustees. (F1-F4, R1-R6)

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted in accordance with Penal Code section 933 (c) and subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

## **INVITED RESPONSES**

- Superintendent, Novato Unified School District. (F1-F4, R1-R6)

Note: At the time this report was prepared (March 2025) information was available at the websites and within the documents listed.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.