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January 12, 2021

The Honorable Judge Andrew Sweet
Marin County Superior Court
P.O. Box 4988
San Rafael, CA 94913-4988

Ms. Lucy Dilworth
Marin County Civil Grand Jury
3501 Civic Center Drive, Room #275
San Rafael, CA 94903

Dear Judge Sweet and Foreperson Dilworth,

Below is the Novato Unified School District's response to the Grand Jury Report dated October 23, 2020, *Reading, Writing, and Therapy: Mental Health Challenges in Our Schools*.

FINDINGS:

F1: Many mental health issues result from social and cultural factors that lie outside the schools but affect the ability of students to learn and schools to teach. This is a complex problem that the community must help address.

Response: Agree - Schools are only one element within a network of support that is necessary for a comprehensive approach to student wellness. The Novato Unified School District supports the community approach to wellness identified in the Marin County Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan.

F2: Strategy 6 of the Marin County Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan, which includes a promise of support by the county and designates the Marin Schools Wellness Collaborative with responsibility for leading its implementation, presents an especially appropriate opportunity for addressing mental health needs.

Response: Agree - The Marin County Schools Wellness Collaborative is well equipped to effectively support the implementation of Strategy 6 of the Marin County Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan. The expertise of the group, coupled with their shared knowledge and understanding of how school systems operate, will work to enhance student wellness across all of Marin County's schools.

F3: To help provide therapeutic counselors at affordable costs, most districts need assistance from licensed therapists who have the time and skills to recruit, train, and supervise interns from local graduate school programs.

Response: Agree - The need for additional mental health support in schools is clear and one that is even more heightened in the current COVID-19 environment. Utilizing mental health interns can be an effective strategy to bolster mental health staffing, but as noted in the report, the approach does come with additional

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"Reading, Writing, and Therapy: Mental Health Challenges in Our Schools"

responsibilities related to training and supervision. Additionally, the use of interns does not work to meet the permanent staffing needs of a school district, as internships do not typically evolve into a permanent position with the school district. More solutions to this pervasive problem are necessary.

Currently, the Novato Unified School District is examining our existing systems of support to determine where services can be enhanced to reduce the number of students that require direct support from mental health professionals on an ongoing basis through our Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). Having defined this as a critical area of need in 2019, NUSD hired a full time Coordinator of MTSS. This employee is systematically taking inventory of current practices and resources, identifying gaps and redundancies in services, and working with all school leaders to take a more comprehensive approach. By ensuring a high-quality core curriculum and support network in tier 1, the need for direct mental health professionals will decrease.

F4: Most districts need staffing help to identify, arrange, and maintain relationships with community mental health resources.

Response: Agree - While the Novato Unified School District staff could benefit from receiving assistance related to how to best navigate the system of mental health resources and services available within the community, dedicated staffing does not appear necessary to meet this need. The provision of ongoing training and updates from public and/or private agencies, as needed, would be most beneficial to the students and families of the Novato Unified School District.

F5: The Grand Jury recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely strained resources at all levels of government. However, the mental health concerns for students will remain. It is appropriate to expand teacher and staff training and parent education even while funding is sought for more costly programs.

Response: Agree - Now more than ever, the need for proactive and targeted training and education related to wellness is paramount. The Novato Unified School District believes that all students, families and staff can benefit from education and training that focuses on proven strategies to support wellness and increase coping skills and resilience. Please find the attached list of training and education opportunities available to the Novato Unified School District community during the 2020-2021 school year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: Health and Human Services and the Marin County Office of Education should direct the Marin Schools Wellness Collaborative to begin implementation of Strategy 6 of the Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan in the fall of 2020.

Response: Recommendation numbered R1 has been implemented in the Novato Unified School District. In partnership with the Marin County Office of Education, Board Policy and Administrative Regulations 5141.52 have been updated to reflect

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the explicit training of all staff members by district employed mental health professionals in the area of youth suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. In addition, developmentally appropriate, student-centered health education has been implemented to include instruction on the healthy mental, emotional, and social development of students.

Suicide prevention is incorporated into all implemented health education curriculum in the secondary grades.

R2. When funding becomes available, Marin County Office of Education should employ a full-time licensed therapist whose job is to help coordinate wellness services in the schools. Responsibilities would include finding and supervising interns.

Response: Recommendation numbered R2 has not yet been implemented but will be in the future. As funding becomes available at the county level, the local school districts would benefit from a full-time licensed therapist whose job is to help coordinate wellness services in the schools. Novato Unified School District is fortunate to have a strong partnership with North Marin Community Services and Bay Area Community Resources. Both of these organizations support Novato's schools in placing and supervising mental health interns and services.

R3. As soon as possible, Marin County Office of Education should designate staff to connect the schools with community agencies that can provide them with mental health services.

Response: Recommendation numbered R3 has not yet been implemented but will be in the future. As funding becomes available at the county level, Novato Unified School District would benefit from the support of designated staff to connect schools with a broader community of mental health services. With the rapidly increasing need for mental health services for students, there is often a waiting list or long delay in receiving services. The immediate nature of responding to mental health concerns and suicide ideation/attempts requires a larger network than each individual school can employ independently.

R4. Marin County Office of Education should expand teacher and staff training and parent education around mental health issues.

Response: Recommendation numbered R4 has been implemented. In comparing the staff and parent education offered by the Marin County Office of Education in the area of mental health issues from previous years, there is a clear increase in services. Between August and the end of December, twenty-nine sessions have been offered. In addition, the Novato Unified School District has offered parent and staff training and support workshops throughout the summer and fall months. With school closures, all services and education have continued remotely. Many of the training sessions offered focus directly on prevention, intervention, and wellness during the unique pandemic environment.

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Sincerely,

Thank you for your continued attention and support of our public schools and the health and wellness of our county's young people. Please feel free to contact me for further information.



Ross Millerick
President, NUSD Board of Education



Kris Cosca, EdD
Superintendent