

**POPE VALLEY UNION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

6200 Pope Valley Road, Pope Valley, CA 94567

707-965-2402

July 18, 2025

Hon. Scott R.L. Young  
Presiding Judge  
Napa County Superior Court  
825 Brown Street  
Napa, CA 94559

**RECEIVED**

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Napa Superior Court

Dear Judge Young,

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Pope Valley Union Elementary School District (PVUESD), please accept this letter and enclosed responses as our official reply to the 2024–2025 Napa County Civil Grand Jury Final Report titled "Pope Valley Union Elementary School District: Overcoming a Troubled Past." In accordance with California Penal Code §933.05, we respectfully submit our required responses to Findings F1 through F8 and Recommendations R1 through R6.

We acknowledge the thorough and thoughtful nature of the Grand Jury's investigation and appreciate the opportunity to reflect on past challenges while reaffirming our ongoing commitment to improving the school for current and future students under the school's new administration and leadership. The Grand Jury's recognition of recent improvements underscores the importance of sustaining our current trajectory.

As a Board, we stand firmly committed to sustaining the progress set in motion. We are actively driving efforts to strengthen governance, foster a culture of accountability, and create a school environment where every student and family in Pope Valley is supported and empowered to thrive. We look forward to continuing this work in close partnership with our community, stakeholders, and county leaders as we build a stronger future for our district.

In service to our students,



Brian Varner  
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Cc: Foreman, 2024-2025 Napa County Civil Grand Jury

POPE VALLEY UNION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES RESPONSE TO THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE 2024-2025 NAPA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT

*"Pope Valley Union Elementary School District: Overcoming a Troubled Past"*

April 23, 2025

**Grand Jury Findings and Board of Trustees Responses:**

**F1:** *The Pope Valley Union Elementary School District failed to provide a safe learning environment and requisite education for its students.*

**RESPONSE TO F1**

The Board of Trustees disagrees in part. At Pope Valley Union Elementary, student safety and educational wellbeing are paramount. The Board of Trustees acknowledges the significant challenges the District has faced, including the erosion of community trust due to the recent trial and conviction of a former school employee. While the District remains steadfast in its commitment to providing a safe and academically enriching learning environment, we recognize the clear need for improvement.

Since the appointment of our current Superintendent/Principal, the District has taken concrete steps to overcome challenges and address shortfalls. These include implementation of additional safety protocols, adoption of a structured and goal-oriented curriculum, accountability measures for staff, and targeted interventions to improve student achievement. The District has also increased access to bilingual services, improved communication with families, and strengthened special education through the addition of qualified personnel.

We will continue to support the additional systems now in place to ensure the District provides all students with a safe school environment and a quality education. The positive momentum underway reflects a clear break from past practices and a commitment to sustained improvement.

**F2:** *The PVUESD Board of Trustees (School Board) failed to deliver the necessary oversight and direction for PVUESD operations and academic performance. At this time, the School Board appears to be focused on addressing past deficiencies and committed to providing the necessary oversight and direction to improve PVUESD operations and academic performance.*

**RESPONSE TO F2**

The Board of Trustees agrees that the current School Board is focused on addressing past deficiencies and committed to providing the necessary oversight and direction to improve PVUESD operations and academic performance. The current Board of Trustees has limited knowledge of the day-to-day oversight operations provided by former Trustees.

The Board is actively correcting identified deficiencies and is committed to providing the necessary oversight and direction to improve district operations. Since appointing a new Superintendent/Principal, the Board has committed to a new standard of governance grounded in transparency and accountability. We now work with the Superintendent to be informed and review data related to academic

achievement, fiscal health, and operational performance. We have adopted a long-term improvement plan aligned with the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), which outlines measurable goals and benchmarks. Additionally, we have begun working with external resources including the Napa County Office of Education and School and College Legal Services of California to expand our training and improve governance practices. We also acknowledge the importance of restoring community trust. To that end, we have increased communication with families and staff and made Board meetings more accessible with the addition of professional interpretation services.

As we continue this work, the Board is united in its commitment to sustaining oversight practices that are proactive, informed, and driven by the needs of our school community. While we cannot change the past, we are fully focused on ensuring a stable and high-performing future for the Pope Valley Union Elementary School District.

**F3:** *Prior school superintendents/principals failed to ensure student safety, address academic instruction and student performance gaps, or manage the school and staff effectively.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F3**

The Board of Trustees disagree in part with this finding. The current Board of Trustees have limited knowledge of the day-to-day operations of past administration. We believe the lack of clear leadership standards and consistent expectations has had a lasting impact on academic performance and community confidence in the school.

To address these systemic shortcomings, the Board appointed a new Superintendent/Principal in 2023 with a strong background in educational leadership and organizational change. Under her leadership, the District has adopted a rigorous, goal-oriented instructional framework and implemented formal staff performance evaluations. Safety procedures have been put in place, and past gaps in adult supervision and accountability have been corrected. The Superintendent has also strengthened the school's financial reserves and operational procedures.

These improvements represent a significant and necessary shift in how the District operates and are anchored in professionalism, accountability, and a deep commitment to student success and well-being.

**F4:** *The Superintendent/Principal, who held the position during this Civil Grand Jury investigation, implemented policies and procedures to stabilize and build sustainable long-term operations, enforce student safety protocols, and improve academic instruction and student performance.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F4**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding and strongly supports the work of the current Superintendent/Principal. Since her appointment in 2023, the Superintendent has brought stability, professionalism, and vision to a school community that had endured significant disruption, including prior administrative shortcomings, fractured governance, and the deep impacts of a criminal abuse case involving a former employee. In a short time, she has enacted wide-reaching reforms that have improved the District's academic foundation, operations, and climate of safety and trust.

One of the Superintendent's earliest actions was the implementation of a rigorous instructional framework, including clearly defined learning goals, a structured curriculum, and staff performance evaluations tied to student growth. These academic reforms were long overdue and have provided both students and teachers with the consistency and expectations necessary for effective teaching and learning. Teaching assignments were realigned to ensure continuity of instruction, including reducing reliance on long-term substitutes in upper grades.

In parallel, the Superintendent prioritized school safety. Formal safety procedures and campus access protocols were introduced to ensure that students and staff are protected throughout the day. Operational stability has also improved significantly under her leadership. The District's financial reserves have increased for two consecutive years, resulting in positive certifications from the Napa County Office of Education and the California Department of Education. The Superintendent has upgraded internal systems and is working on the adoption of a new student information system to give families real-time access to attendance and academic data. The school website has been modernized and now includes Spanish-language content, board agendas, school reports, and key updates to improve transparency and family access.

To improve support for students with disabilities, the Superintendent hired a credentialed Special Education teacher who holds a Master of Science in Special Education and previously served as a SELPA director. She also launched a Learning Center model to provide hands-on, individualized support to both general and special education students.

These reforms are reinforced by a long-term Revitalize and Rebuild Plan that establishes clear priorities for academic improvement, campus safety, community engagement, and fiscal health. Through her leadership, the District is building an accountable and student-centered future. The Board will continue to support this progress through ongoing oversight, policy alignment, and collaboration with the Superintendent. We are confident that the work now underway provides a strong foundation for lasting improvement.

**F5:** *While the Civil Grand Jury investigation found no evidence of discrimination or unequal treatment by the school administration against Hispanic or Spanish-speaking families, the past lack of bilingual support revealed communication gaps, leaving Spanish-speaking parents and English Second Language learners feeling isolated and disconnected.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F5**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding and appreciates the Grand Jury's clarification that no evidence of discrimination or unequal treatment was found. We understand that past communication practices left some families feeling disconnected from school life. However, it is important to distinguish between those feelings and actual discrimination, which the District does not tolerate under any circumstance.

Since the appointment of the current Superintendent/Principal, the District has taken deliberate and sustained steps to ensure that all families can access timely, accurate, and inclusive information. A bilingual teacher has been added to the staff, professional interpreters are available for meetings and

events, and real-time language support is provided through Language Line. School communications, including the website, newsletters, and notices, are now routinely available in both English and Spanish.

These efforts reflect the District's ongoing commitment to inclusion, transparency, and equitable access. The Board urges all members of the school community to rely on facts and avoid spreading misinformation that distracts from the real progress being made on behalf of all students and families.

**F6:** *Inadequate communication by district and school management following the trial and conviction of a former school employee for student sexual abuse left parents feeling disconnected and frustrated.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F6**

The Board of Trustees respectfully disagrees with this finding. While we acknowledge the gravity of the situation and the emotional toll it placed on our school community, we agreed with the District's response following the trial. We believe that the administration communicated appropriately, promptly, and in accordance with all legal and ethical requirements. Public statements were issued and made available to the school community and picked up by local media. These communications were clear and consistent with guidance from legal counsel. We recognize that in times of crisis, families may want more information than the District is legally able to provide. We appreciate the fact that the Grand Jury Report acknowledges the community remains deeply divided over the recent trial, however, the report does not take into consideration direct community involvement in the trial. This contributed to parent frustration because some community members were privy to more information than the District had at the time or could legally provide during the trial.

Nonetheless, in the wake of the trial, the Superintendent reviewed and strengthened communication protocols to ensure families receive timely, supportive updates during future critical incidents. The Board supports these improvements and remains committed to transparency, lawful communication, and the continued rebuilding of trust within the school community.

**F7:** *School bus transportation service was found to be inadequate to serve the district, with persistent equipment problems undermining reliability.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F7**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding<sup>1</sup>. California school districts are not required to provide school bus transportation, however, PVUESD has elected to provide transportation services to their students to offer safe and reliable access to school.

We recognize that the District's school bus transportation program has not met expectations in recent years due to persistent mechanical issues, limited availability of qualified drivers, and the unreliability of the propane-powered buses previously in use. In response, the Board has worked closely with the Superintendent/Principal to review the District's transportation program and take meaningful corrective

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this finding excludes special education transportation services which were not interrupted by equipment failures. Special Education transportation services are adequate to serve the district's needs.

action. The District has since purchased a new gas-powered minibus to provide more dependable service and ensure compliance with safety standards. It is important to note that swift action to purchase the new gas-powered minibus would not have been possible without the financial stability established under the current Superintendent's leadership, including the rebuilding of District reserves and improved fiscal management.

The Board remains committed to supporting sustainable transportation solutions, pursuing additional funding opportunities, and maintaining clear communication with families while long-term improvements continue to be implemented.

**F8:** *The school community is divided, with one group of parents and teachers supporting changes in the school and another favoring a return to prior practices and personnel.*

#### **RESPONSE TO F8**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this finding. The Board acknowledges that any period of transition, especially one involving long-overdue reforms, can bring about differing views within a small and close-knit community. We respect the right of families and staff to hold a range of perspectives. However, it is important to distinguish between constructive feedback and efforts to undermine progress.

The direction the district is now taking is not only necessary but directly aligns with Recommendation R3 of the Grand Jury's report, which calls for continued implementation of recent improvements to ensure long-term stability and performance. The reforms currently underway address the findings in the Grand Jury Report and focus on improved instruction, strengthened safety protocols, fiscal oversight, and increased transparency.

We also want to make it clear that while we are committed to working with all stakeholders to unite the school community, unity cannot be built on false narratives. We strongly encourage all stakeholders to prioritize factual information and acknowledge the ongoing efforts dedicated to the district's improvement. We stand fully behind the Superintendent/Principal and the changes made to stabilize and improve PVUESD. The Board has no intention of reversing course or compromising on student safety, accountability, or academic performance. By striving for excellence, we hope to help the district achieve its full potential and provide the dynamic and effective learning experiences our students deserve. The Board remains committed to moving forward, and invites all families, staff, and community members to be part of a school culture built on truth, trust, and a shared commitment to student success.

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## **Grand Jury Recommendations and Board of Trustees Responses:**

**R1:** *The School Board develop and implement a long-term strategy for the school district, prioritizing policies and procedures to ensure academic performance and operational effectiveness, and do so by the start of the 2025-2026 academic year.*

### **RESPONSE TO R1**

The board of trustees agrees with this recommendation and confirms that development of a long-term strategy is actively underway. In collaboration with the Superintendent/Principal, the Board has assembled the team to lead this effort. The development of the strategic plan will include opportunities for community input, staff engagement, and student leadership. The goal is to create a student-centered strategy that builds on the foundation of the Revitalize and Rebuild Plan developed by the Superintendent/Principal in her first year and aligns with the District's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). Opportunities to engage in the plan's development will be fully bilingual to ensure that all students and families can meaningfully participate and provide input.

By the start of the 2025–2026 academic year, planning and development of the formal long-term strategic plan will be well underway. The Board recently approved a contract for comprehensive strategic planning and implementation services with DesignEd to provide a phased initiative designed to support PVUESD in the 2025-2026 school year with Foundational Planning & Community Engagement (Phase 1) and Professional Learning & Implementation (Phase 2) strategic planning and program implementation services. This partnership is designed to foster inclusive strategic planning development and ensure a high-quality rollout that aligns with the district vision and long-term goals, as well as meeting multiple grant and district outcomes and deliverables.

The board is committed to taking a thoughtful, inclusive approach to this process. We are not rushing the work; we are building a sustainable vision that reflects shared community values and ensures continued progress for all students.

**R2:** *The School Board ensure that school leadership possesses the necessary qualifications and experience to effectively prioritize student safety and educational excellence and do so by the start of the 2025-2026 academic year.*

### **RESPONSE TO R2**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this recommendation and affirms that current school leadership is highly qualified to lead our District. The current Superintendent/Principal was appointed following a careful search process and brings significant expertise in education, organizational change, and school turnaround leadership. Her experience in educational leadership, organizational change, and school turnaround has already led to major improvements in academic structure, communication, school safety, and fiscal responsibility as acknowledged by Finding F4 of the Grand Jury's Report. We trust in her leadership and believe she has created the stability and vision needed to move Pope Valley forward.

As part of our district's transformation, the Superintendent has assembled a newly structured instructional team for the 2025–2026 school year. This team of highly qualified educators includes a bilingual educator to support our English learners and a teacher specialized training in early childhood education. This marks a significant step toward ensuring all students receive quality instruction.

The Board will continue to uphold rigorous standards for leadership and staffing across the District, and will ensure that all future personnel decisions align with our strategic goals and reflect our commitment to student safety, equity, and academic excellence.

**R3:** *The Superintendent/Principal continue the ongoing improvement process at Pope Valley Union Elementary School and ensure that changes instituted continue should school management change and do so by the 2025–2026 academic year.*

#### **RESPONSE TO R3**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this recommendation and acknowledges the significant progress made under the current Superintendent/Principal's leadership, as recognized in Finding F4 of the Grand Jury Report. The reforms now in place have brought about much needed stability and structure to the District.

To ensure continuity, the Superintendent has integrated these reforms into formal policies, standard operating procedures, and districtwide planning documents. This institutionalization of reforms reflects a deliberate effort to build sustainability into the District's improvement process. The Board fully supports this work and will ensure that future leadership is aligned with the direction now established.

**R4:** *Regular updates by the School Board and Superintendent/Principal to inform the public, rebuild trust, promote inclusivity, and improve transparency in decision-making to strengthen the relationship between the school and the community, and do so by the start of the 2025–2026 academic year.*

#### **RESPONSE TO R4**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this recommendation and has already taken concrete steps to enhance communication with the school community. The Board and Superintendent/Principal are currently implementing this recommendation by providing regular updates through multiple platforms, including newsletters, website posts, and Board meetings. All essential materials, including announcements and agendas, are translated into Spanish, and certified interpretation services are available to ensure access and participation for all families.

Additionally, the Superintendent has implemented more structured outreach to parent groups and advisory councils to encourage two-way communication. These efforts have already resulted in improved engagement and more informed decision-making. By the 2025–2026 academic year, the District will further formalize these practices through updated policies and communication protocols. The Board

remains committed to inclusive and transparent governance and views strong community engagement as essential to building lasting trust and support for students.

**R5:** *The Board of Trustees and Superintendent/Principal develop and execute a permanent solution to provide safe and reliable transportation for students by the start of the 2025–2026 academic year.*

#### **RESPONSE TO R5**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this recommendation and is actively working with the Superintendent/Principal to establish a long-term transportation solution. In response to persistent mechanical issues and service disruptions caused by unreliable propane buses, the District has purchased a new gas-powered minibus. Additional efforts are underway to hire an additional certified driver, cross-train staff, and assess future fleet needs.

The Board is committed to securing implementing a transportation operations plan that ensures consistent, safe, and equitable access to school for all students.

**R6:** *The Board of Trustees and the Superintendent/Principal use the various resources, training, and support opportunities available through the Napa County Office of Education (NCOE), Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT), California School Board Association (CSBA), and other educational and leadership resources and implement plans by the start of 2025–2026 academic year.*

#### **RESPONSE TO R6**

The Board of Trustees agrees with this recommendation and has already begun leveraging external resources to implement this recommendation. The District currently consults with the Napa County Office of Education for guidance on budget planning, governance, and professional development. The Board is also working with the Superintendent to explore support opportunities through California School Board Association (CSBA) and Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) to assist with long-term board development. We recognize that these partnerships enhance the Board's capacity to govern effectively and ensure compliance with state standards.

In addition, Board members recently participated in a Brown Act training conducted through School and College Legal Services of California (SCLS). The Board is committed to continuous learning and will continue to participate in training and technical assistance to ensure the District operates responsibly, transparently, and in service of its students. The District is currently working with SCLS to schedule additional training sessions for the Board throughout the 2025–2026 school year.