July 5, 2012

The Honorable Judge Brian Hill
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
of Santa Barbara County
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Santa Barbara County Grand Jury
1100 Anacapa Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Dear Judge Hill and Members of the Grand Jury:

Subject: Response to the 2010-11 Grand Jury Report: "Reducing Truancy Throughout the
County – A Prudent Investment"

The Grand Jury is to be commended for identifying and responding to the truancy issue in the
school districts in Santa Barbara County, and applauded for its focus on collaborative work
among the County of Santa Barbara, the District Attorney's office, Probation, the Santa Barbara
County Education Office (SBCEO), and the individual school districts countywide. SBCEO
continues to believe that school attendance impacts student achievement, and that truancy
handicaps the likelihood of success for those students who struggle. We continue to agree that
the District Attorney's truancy program, which operated from 2000-08, contributed to getting
students to school, educating parents about mandatory attendance, and providing leverage for
districts to implement measures that helped reduce truancy and impact student behavior. We
also agree that the budget crisis has crippled the county and school districts' ability to deliver a
wide range of critical services, including this important area.

Here are our responses to your findings and recommendations.

Finding 2: Between 2000 and 2008, Santa Barbara County had an effective truancy program
under the direction of the Santa Barbara County Office of the District Attorney. During that time
the truancy rate averaged 20 percent.

*We agree that the truancy program was effective. Because truancy rates can vary dramatically
from district to district, combining the numbers from 20 individual school districts into an
overall county average may not be as useful a number for focus, and it is important to be mindful
that the figure itself varies according to definitions and policies instituted in individual districts.
Still, we are in agreement with the overall finding that the truancy program was effective.*

Finding 3: After the termination of the program, truancy rates increased to a high of 30.76 percent in Santa Barbara County in 2010-11 and exceeded the truancy rate for the State of California for three years in a row.

We agree that Santa Barbara County truancy rates reported by the California Department of Education increased in the year cited and exceeded the state averages as indicated. Again, the figures vary dramatically from district to district and depend upon varying district definitions for truancy.

Finding 4: All agencies consulted agree that the involvement of the Santa Barbara County Office of the District Attorney is necessary for an effective truancy reduction program.

Agree.

Finding 5: Reducing truancy rates at the secondary school level would result in significantly increased revenues to the school districts.

This finding is true for Revenue Limit Districts that receive funding based on Average Daily Attendance. It is not the case for Basic Aid Districts, which keep their property tax allotment and receive no further funding from the state per pupil. Nonetheless it is clear that reducing truancy will reduce the costs associated with crime and increase the vital educational services provided to students.

Recommendation 1: That each secondary school district be responsible for establishing and operating its own truancy reduction program that conforms to the legal requirements of the State of California's Education Code by the beginning of the 2012-13 school year.

Agree.

Recommendation 5: That all secondary school districts estimate the amount of money lost in the 2011-12 school year due to truancy and report this information to their school boards, the Santa Barbara County Education Office, and the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors.

We agree that these figures would be helpful to know. It is important to be mindful that Basic Aid Districts do not receive funding based on Average Daily Attendance. As a result, there would be no figures available for Basic Aid Districts to report because no state revenue would be lost.

Recommendation 6: That all secondary school districts track any reduction in truancy after the implementation of the truancy reduction program and calculate the increase in revenue resulting from such reduction and report this information to their schools boards, the Santa Barbara County Education Office and the Santa Barbara Count Board of Supervisors.

We agree it will be helpful to track any reduction in truancy. Again, it is important to be mindful that for Basic Aid Districts, which do not receive funding based on Average Daily Attendance, there would be no increase in state revenue to report. The financial benefits associated with reduced crime and the increase in vital educational services to students would be significant, but difficult to calculate.

In summary, we appreciate the Grand Jury's attention to the critically important matter of truancy. We continue to believe it is a large and complicated issue that affects young lives and the communities where they live. It has been tragic that in these times of utter austerity, crucial programs like the truancy prevention efforts have fallen to the budget axe. The County Education Office is committed to continuing its collaboration with the County of Santa Barbara, the District Attorney's Office, Probation, the school districts, and the municipalities to craft feasible programs in a time of budget crisis.

Thank you for your time, support, and recommendations.

Sincerely,

William J. Cirone
County Superintendent of Schools

WJC:ph