

## **East County Students: Come As You Are, We Will Meet You There**

### **SUMMARY**

On June 13, 2023, senior leadership from the Grossmont Union High School District (District) presented the District's triennial Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) to the Governing Board, educators, parents, students, and the community. The LCAP is a governance plan, required by the California Department of Education, that establishes goals, identifies metrics to evaluate progress, and allocates resources to improve student outcomes.

Among its stated goals, components, and strategies, the LCAP's narrative recognized that there was an increased need among students for mental health and social-emotional support. This support included school-based counseling and a comprehensive suicide prevention program. These services were essential, especially as students began their academic year. Consequently, on June 15, 2023, the Governing Board unanimously approved the LCAP, including associated mental health services provided by San Diego Youth Services (SDYS), the District's long-time partner.

What happened next stunned many in the community. It attracted significant media attention, and its effects are still reverberating.

After a single three-minute public comment at the July 20, 2023 Board meeting, made by a member of the public who had no mental health training or licensure, and with minimal Board discussion or verification of the speaker's claims, the Board voted to deny renewal of its contract with San Diego Youth Services. This action left students without mental health services for four months, in violation of the Board's own policies, bylaws, and fiduciary responsibilities.

The 2025-2026 San Diego Civil County Grand Jury investigated the circumstances surrounding Grossmont Union High School District's dismissal of San Diego Youth Services. The Grand Jury learned that the District's non-renewal of San Diego Youth Services was not based on performance concerns or misconduct. The decision to

decline renewal to SDYS was based on falsehoods and misrepresentations regarding care provided by SDYS to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identified (LGBTQ+) students. The Governing Board chose to deny renewal of critically important mental health services, without measures to ensure a seamless continuation of services. There was no advance notice to the school site leadership or staff who would bear the practical consequences of the decision.

The investigation also showed that the distrust created by that action persists. This is reflected in disputes over reductions in force, policies regarding religious expression and immigration, and continuing tension between the Governing Board and the community to the detriment of students' well-being.

The Grand Jury sought to understand what happens when a community believes its students' best interests have been compromised by impetuous decision-making and lax governance, and when stakeholders conclude that a governing board is failing in its fiduciary responsibilities.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Grossmont Union High School District (GUHSD) serves more than 21,000 students in nine traditional high schools, two special education schools, one middle college high school, four charter high schools, an adult education program, one school of choice, and one continuation school.<sup>1</sup>

GUHSD's student body is diverse, with over 58% of students reporting their ethnicity as non-white in the 2023–2024 school year. This includes 44% Hispanic students, 6.5% multiracial students, and 5.7% African American students.<sup>2</sup>

GUHSD Student Demographics  
 2023-2024 School Year  
 California Department of Education

Ethnicity	Enrollment	Percent
African American	1,235	5.7%
American Indian or Alaska Native	121	0.6%
Asian	692	3.2%
Filipino	327	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino	9,573	44.1%
Pacific Islander	106	0.5%
White	8,143	37.5%
Two or More Races	1,408	6.5%
Not Reported	92	0.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,697</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Ethnicity is not the only hallmark of GUHSD’s diversity. Students have the option to self-report their sexual orientation and gender identity when participating in the California Healthy Kids Survey. During the 2023–2024 school year, 8,546 students completed the survey and approximately 965 students in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades across the district self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.<sup>3</sup>

2023-2024 California Healthy Kids Survey

Total Respondents: 8,546

***Sexual Orientation***

	Grade 9 %	Grade 10 %	Grade 11 %	Grade 12 %
Straight (not gay)	83	81	81	–
Lesbian or Gay	2	3	3	–
Bisexual	6	7	7	–
Something else	2	2	2	–
Not sure	3	2	2	–
Decline to respond	4	4	4	–

*California Healthy Kids Survey Table A3.3*

*Question: Which of the following best describes you?*

Survey results show that about 171 students in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades across the district self-identified as transgender.<sup>4</sup>

***Gender Identity***

	Grade 9 %	Grade 10 %	Grade 11 %	Grade 12 %
No, I am not transgender	92	93	92	–
Yes, I am transgender	2	2	2	–
I am not sure if I am transgender	2	2	1	–
Decline to respond	4	4	4	–

*California Healthy Kids Survey Table A4*

*Question: Some people describe themselves as transgender when how they think or feel about their gender is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. Are you transgender?*

Additionally, more than half of the student body is directly impacted by District policies to support diversity, equity, and inclusion. For the 2023–2024 school year, the District had 13,500 students of color, 2,356 English language learners, 3,077 students with disabilities, and 13,925 students who qualified for free or reduced lunch.<sup>5</sup>

District Leadership is established by an interconnected system comprising the Governing Board and the District Superintendent. The Superintendent reports directly to the Governing Board. The District's Board Policies and Bylaws clearly outline the Trustees' responsibilities compared to those of the Superintendent.

The Governing Board comprises five publicly elected Board Trustees. As public servants, the five Board Trustees must ensure that their decisions align with the needs and values of those they serve. Students depend on Trustees to set aside personal preferences, politics, and biases to serve public education effectively. Trustees are responsible for making informed decisions by involving staff, seeking their opinions, considering students' needs, honoring collective bargaining agreements, managing within financial limits, and respecting the experiences of stakeholders including parents and community members. They rely on the Superintendent or their designee to provide feedback and information for thoughtful decision-making. District decisions should be based on the knowledge of those closest to the work, while also maintaining fidelity to representative governance.

The Superintendent is the chief executive officer and educational leader and is supported by Assistant Superintendents organized into three subject areas: educational services, human resources, and business services, who offer subject matter expertise. Each school's principal reports to the Superintendent, who oversees the school district's operations. The Superintendent is also accountable for implementing and executing Board decisions.<sup>6</sup>

Public School Board Trustees play a particularly important role in public governance. The Governing Board's main duty is to act in ways that support academic success, make the most of the training and skills of professional educators, and acknowledge that students come from diverse backgrounds with unique needs. High-quality public education recognizes that school governance and leadership should meet students where they are and help them grow academically to become influential community leaders, economic contributors, and engaged citizens and voters.

The San Diego Civil Grand Jury decided to investigate the Grossmont Union High School District Governing Board's July 2023 decision to deny contract renewal of the

district's long-standing professional relationship with San Diego Youth Services, which provided school-based mental health services to thousands of GUHSD students. During public comment at the August and September 2023 Board meetings, students, teachers, service providers, and parents alleged that the Board's decision was rooted in San Diego Youth Services' provision of LGBTQ+ affirming care.

The actions of the Governing Board have received extensive coverage from local news outlets.<sup>7</sup> Current and former Trustees, community members, and alumni have written opinion columns in the San Diego Union-Tribune and East County Magazine expressing disagreement with the Board's actions.<sup>8</sup> As public servants, it matters whether the Board's decisions adhered to District policies, the California Department of Education Code, and their fiduciary duties. Given the community's dissent, as evidenced by public comments at subsequent Board meetings, media coverage, and a grassroots recall effort targeting Trustees, the Grand Jury considered the Grossmont Union High School District's governance practices a matter warranting investigation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Grand Jury research included:

### Grossmont Union High School District Document Reviews

- Board Policies
- Local Control and Accountability Reports
- School Plans for Student Achievement
- California Healthy Kids Survey results
- California Department of Education Dashboard
- Mental Health Services Contracts and Request for Proposals
- Board Meeting Agendas and Minutes
- Board Meeting Videos
- California Department of Education Code
- Responses to Grand Jury Requests for Documents

## Interviews

- Board Trustees
- Mental Health Service Providers
- Educators
- Grossmont Education Association Representatives
- Administrators
- Parents
- Community Stakeholders

The Grand Jury intended to interview the four Board Trustees who were in office in July 2023 and still serving in 2026. One Board Trustee did not respond to multiple requests for an interview. The Grand Jury relied on publicly available meeting videos, minutes, and reports instead of that interview.

The Grand Jury's investigation examined the decision-making process and the consequences of the Board's decisions regarding San Diego Youth Services. The Grand Jury focused on three metrics:

- Grossmont Union High School District Board Policies and Bylaws
- Fiduciary duties and legal and ethical responsibilities for California school boards
- California Department of Education Code regarding requirements for school counseling and suicide prevention programs

## **District Board Policies and Bylaws:**

There are five applicable Board policies and bylaws:

- Board Policy 0410, "Nondiscrimination in District Programs and Activities", states that the Board is dedicated to maintaining district programs and activities that are free from discrimination and accessible to all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or gender expression, or a perception of one or more of these characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

- Board Bylaw 9200, “Board Members”, states that Board Members should not subordinate the education of children to any partisan principle, group interest, or the member’s own personal interests.<sup>10</sup>
- Board Policy 2120, “Superintendent of Schools,” confirms that the Superintendent is the chief executive officer and educational leader of the District and has been granted the power to make decisions regarding district operations.<sup>11</sup>
- Board Bylaw 9005, “Governance Standards,” mandates that Board Trustees refrain from performing management functions that are the responsibility of the Superintendent and staff. It also requires Trustees to foster a positive culture by governing within Board-adopted policies and procedures and ensuring opportunities for the diverse range of views in the community to inform Board discussions and decisions.<sup>12</sup>
- Board Policy 0100, “Philosophy, Goals, Objectives, and Comprehensive Plans”, states that the Governing Board is guided by the beliefs that all students are entitled to equal opportunity and equal benefits of the schools and programs, deserve to be treated fairly and with dignity and respect, and they are entitled to a safe school environment.<sup>13</sup>

## **Fiduciary Duties and Legal Responsibilities**

Elected school Governance Board members have legal fiduciary duties as specified in California State Law, along with responsibilities as elected trustees.<sup>14</sup>

- Duty to Act: Board members must operate within the scope and authority of the law, adhering to the California Department of Education Code, other applicable state and federal laws, and district policies.
- Duty of Care: Board members must act diligently, make informed decisions, review necessary reports and data, and use reasonable judgement.
- Public Trust Doctrine: Board members are expected to govern for the public good, and act with transparency, integrity, and conscientiousness.

- Board members must comply with the Ralph M. Brown Act to ensure the public has an opportunity to participate and the democratic process takes place in full view of the citizenry whenever possible.

## **California Educational Code**

The California Department of Education Code 51925 <sup>15</sup> requires that school districts who provide health education to middle and high school students include instruction regarding mental health. The instruction is expected to include how to seek and find assistance from mental health professionals within the school district, defining signs and symptoms of conditions such as depression and anxiety, and the importance of mental health to overall health and academic success.

California Department of Education Code 215 <sup>16</sup> mandates that districts develop a student suicide prevention policy. The policy is expected to specifically address the needs of LGBTQ+ students, as well be developed in consultation with school based mental health clinicians as well as suicide prevention experts.

## **DISCUSSION**

San Diego Youth Services (SDYS) was founded in 1970 as a shelter for unhoused youth. They provide services related to mental health, housing, food, human trafficking, adoption, foster care, and juvenile justice diversion resources for youth. Additionally, SDYS provides school-based programs to school districts throughout San Diego County. These school-based programs are funded directly by school districts and by state and county funding sources. SDYS operates at more than one hundred locations and has served more than 823,000 students.<sup>17</sup>

SDYS began its professional relationship with Grossmont Union High School District in 1998. Notably, clinicians from SDYS supported students and schools after the gun violence on campus at Santana and Granite Hills High Schools in 2001. Over the decades, SDYS offered a wide range of additional wellness and mental health services to students.

By the summer of 2023, there were six contractual arrangements in force between GUHSD and SDYS for services provided to non-charter high schools in the district. These agreements included two contracts for services paid for directly with District funds, as well as four Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) for programs conducted on District property but funded by other sources. The MOUs allowed for SDYS clinicians to work on GUHSD property and provide services to students, regardless of funding source.

Summary of contracts between Grossmont Union High School District and San Diego Youth Services as of July 20, 2023.

Agreement Type	Service	Funder
Contract	<p><b>School-Based Counseling Services</b>  <i>Individual, family, and group counseling, as well as student interventions and restorative justice.</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 2022</i>  <i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	School District
Contract	<p><b>Family Resource Center</b>  <i>Increases student achievement through integration of school, home, and family support. Provide case management, therapy, crisis management, and targeted referrals. Services are provided on campus, by phone, or in the community.</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 2007</i>  <i>Served Population: El Cajon Valley High School</i></p>	School District

Summary of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between Grossmont Union High School District and San Diego Youth Services as of July 20, 2023.

Agreement Type	Service	Funder
MOU	<p><b>“HERE Now”</b>  <i>Comprehensive, evidence-based suicide prevention curriculum; provided District Wide starting in 2014.</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 2014</i>  <i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	County of San Diego
MOU	<p><b>Community Assessment Team - Juvenile Justice Diversion Program</b>  <i>Assessment, prevention, intervention, and referral services for youth at risk for future involvement in the juvenile justice system.</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 1998</i>  <i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	County Probation Department
MOU	<p><b>East County Behavioral Health Clinic</b>  <i>Onsite, school-based, Trauma-informed outpatient mental health services for low-income or uninsured youth and their families.</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 2000</i>  <i>Served Population: El Cajon Valley, El Capitan, and Monte Vista High Schools</i></p>	Medi-Cal
MOU	<p><b>Anti-Bullying, Intervention, &amp; Advocacy Supports (Anti-BIAS)</b>  <i>Assessment and therapeutic supports for students impacted by bullying;</i></p> <p><i>Start Date: 2017</i>  <i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	California Office of Emergency Services

San Diego Youth Services was well integrated into the Grossmont Union High School District campuses by the end of the 2022–2023 school year. Clinicians were embedded in high school campuses to directly serve students and collaborated with classroom teachers, school counselors, and administrators. As students publicly stated, they had ready access to clinicians and the opportunity to develop relationships based on trust and care.

The Grand Jury learned that students and teachers had every expectation that San Diego Youth Services would continue to provide services in the District during the upcoming school year. The investigation also showed that San Diego Youth Services had no reason to believe that they would not be returning and expected to continue their long-standing relationship with Grossmont Union High School District. The District's Local Control and Accountability Plan, which is their strategic plan, had been approved one month previously and included SDYS' programming.

At the July 20, 2023, Governing Board meeting,<sup>18</sup> the renewal of the SDYS contract for onsite school counseling and the MOU for Suicide Prevention Services were two services included in the meeting's consolidated agenda items, which contained sixty-four items total.<sup>19</sup> The consolidated agenda includes items that can be addressed as a whole and do not require further discussion or review. This is consistent with how the San Diego Youth Services' contracts and MOUs had been placed on the agenda in prior years. There were three other MOUs and one agreement in force between GUHSD and SDYS, however they were not yet due for renewal and therefore not on the agenda.

Four Board Trustees were present. One Board Trustee was absent from the meeting due to a previously planned trip. Consistent with the Brown Act, the Board meeting included time for public comment on agenda items. Given the summer timeframe, the meeting had fewer community attendees than meetings held during the school year. There was only one speaker regarding agenda items, who self-identified as a parent of two students in the District and as a Board member of the Cajon Valley School District.<sup>20</sup> The speaker asked the GUHSD Board to either table the two agenda items related to San Diego Youth Services for reconsideration or reject them outright.

The speaker's comments began at 16:23 of the publicly available video recording of the meeting and ended at 18:59.<sup>21</sup> The speaker asked that the Board either vote to deny the renewal of the SDYS contract for mental health services and the MOU for suicide prevention programming or table the items for further review. The basis of his request was concerns regarding an SDYS program called "Our Safe Place", which is a program available to young adults with Medi-Cal or those who are uninsured, specifically serving the LGBTQ+ community in San Diego County. The speaker's comments were focused on SDYS social media posts about "Our Safe Place" highlighting services for transgender youth and families. He mentioned "top surgery" and "transitioning", characterizing these medical procedures related to gender-affirming care as "radical interventions." San Diego Youth Services did not have an MOU with the Grossmont Union High School District (GUHSD) for the "Our Safe Place" program, so the services the speaker cited as justification for delaying or denying renewal were not provided through a contract with the District.

The speaker also referenced the "HERE Now" program, a countywide school-based suicide prevention initiative provided to GUHSD by SDYS through an MOU. The "HERE Now" program is based on "Signs of Suicide" (SOS), which is a school-based program identified as a "best practice" by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC).<sup>22</sup> The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) identifies the SOS program as evidence-based and includes it on its list of suicide prevention resources.<sup>23</sup> The American Public Health Association has published the results of a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of SOS, stating that SOS "is the first school-based suicide prevention program to demonstrate significant reductions in self-reported suicide attempts."<sup>24</sup> The speaker's allegations claimed the program was not evidence-based. Despite the speaker's passion, the Grand Jury found that the claims about the "HERE Now" program were easily disproven with minimal fact-finding.

After the speaker concluded and the Board reached the consolidated agenda, one Board Trustee asked that the contract and MOU related to San Diego Youth Services be removed from the consolidated agenda so the items could be acted on separately. When asked to clarify which items the Trustee wanted removed, the reply was "just the

part brought up by (speaker).” (Timestamp 51:24)<sup>25</sup>. A second Trustee spoke regarding item T1e, which was the school-based mental health services contract (Timestamp 52:53). The Trustee sought to deny the SDYS renewals and wanted to look for an alternative service provider that “best reflect the East County Values.” The Trustee did not elaborate on what was meant by “East County Values”. The Trustee’s comments included a reference to a fictionalized account of human trafficking in the movie “Sound of Freedom” as the rationale for voting no.<sup>26</sup>

*“We want to support our feeder schools and the other charter schools in our area. And we need to look for alternatives that best reflect the East County Values. And you know, I just saw the movie “Sound of Freedom”, and it tore my heart out to think that this type of stuff is going on and we need to stop that from taking place....and, so that’s why I want to vote no to section e.”*

Following those comments, the Board President addressed the procedure for acting on the items. At three points during the conversation, tabling the item to gather more information and to involve the Superintendent was recommended. These comments occurred at 54:16, 54:34, and 56:00 in the public video of the meeting.

The fourth Board Trustee spoke during this discussion. At 55:12, the Trustee said “I don’t know enough about this to really take a vote on this. I would like to do my research on this if possible. If you guys are ready to vote, you can vote but I’m not ready to vote on this. I don’t like to make uneducated votes.” At 55:35, the Trustee says to the Board President “can we just table it because I think you asked us to table it. So maybe if we table it and then get the research that you did and then vote on it next time. I think that would be better for me.”

Despite these comments and the Board President’s multiple suggestions to postpone the item, one Trustee insisted on having the item voted on immediately. The vote proceeded; three Board Trustees voted to deny renewal of the two SDYS items on the agenda, one trustee voted to renew services, and one trustee was absent and could not vote. Notably, although the Board President suggested three times that the Board postpone the item to allow for an informed decision, the President ultimately voted to deny the renewal of the contract and MOU.

The Board's decision to deny renewal of onsite school counseling services and the program for suicide prevention left the district without these services just thirty-one days before the start of the school year. The start of the school year is a particularly risky time for students to be without these services.<sup>27</sup> Demand for services has historically been higher during the early months of the school year. Some ninth-grade students struggle with the transition to high school, and others find it challenging to readjust to the school routine after summer.

No alternative service provider was identified, nor was there a contingency plan to deliver the services to ensure compliance with the California Department of Education Code.<sup>28</sup> High schools in the Grossmont Union High School District began the year without the comprehensive mental health services provided in previous years. Guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators at these schools started the year without the resources needed to adequately support their students.

The decision to deny renewal of the SDYS contracts was alarming. Service providers, school-based staff, administrators, students, the Superintendent's office, and the community were caught off guard by the Board's vote. While the Board has the authority to approve contracts and MOUs for services, the responsibility for delivering mental health services and support lies with the Superintendent, school principals, and their direct reports. Board decisions are executed by the Superintendent and site staff. The Grand Jury finds that the Board making such a significant decision without involving those most affected was sudden, imprudent, and undermined the ability of the Superintendent to deliver services to students.

In the days after the Board meeting, there were multiple conversations between representatives of San Diego Youth Services and the Superintendent and her staff, as they would bear the brunt of the practicalities of the Board's decision. The Grand Jury learned that SDYS received written affirmations from the Superintendent's office that the District valued the long relationship with SDYS and hoped to find a path forward.

Meetings between the Superintendent's office and SDYS representatives continued into mid-August, with at least one meeting between two Board Trustees and the CEO of SDYS. There were also two email exchanges between the Superintendent's office and

San Diego Youth Services in August 2023 where the District asked SDYS to address the public comment allegations from the July 2023 Board meeting and were asked to answer in writing a specific set of questions to share with the Board Trustees. The only topic the District asked SDYS to address in writing was their provision of care to LGBTQ+ youth.

**GUHSD Superintendent’s Email Request to SDYS for Information**

**All questions pertained to services for LGBTQ+ youth**

<b>GUHSD Question</b>	<b>SDYS Response</b>
Is it possible that a GUHSD student could learn about “Our Safe Place” from an SDYS therapist?	SDYS does not have an MOU in place with GUHSD for “Our Safe Place” services, so these services are not provided to the District. That said, SDYS provides LGBTQ+ resources to students who ask for said resources. Between 2017 and 2023, there have been a total of six students referred to “Our Safe Place”.
Is it possible that a GUHSD student could receive information about “transitioning” or “top surgery” from “Our Safe Place?”	LGBTQ+ affirming supports are only available after receiving parental consent. Once that consent is received, resources are provided to students who ask for said resource.
If a student requested a referral from “Our Safe Place” for “top surgery”, how would that be handled?	After receiving parental consent, resources are provided to students who ask for said resource. If the request is about medical care, the student would be referred to their medical provider.
Is it accurate that SDYS will not advertise or provide talks to GUHSD students about “top surgery” or “transitioning?”	Neither the mental health service contract nor the suicide prevention program includes advertising or providing talks to students regarding either of these.

Please explain what you mean by “gender affirming care.”	Gender affirming care is defined as care that includes incorporating gender into practices such as group support, matching the therapist’s gender to the student, and helping students meet basic hygiene needs specific to their gender.
Please explain what you mean when you say “100% of clients who request gender transition services are connected to an appropriate medical provider.”	Gender transition services are medical services and outside the scope of SDYS’ staff. The statement relates solely to providing referrals to providers who include medical services in their scope.

To reiterate, the Grand Jury found no evidence to suggest that any concerns about SDYS were raised by the Board or their designees, aside from issues related to services provided to LGBTQ+ students. Notably, the Grand Jury learned that the GUHSD Board did not conduct research into the allegations raised during public comment until after it denied SDYS’s renewal.

**2023–2024 School Year:**

Despite ongoing discussions between the District and San Diego Youth Services, the school year began without six licensed school-based mental health clinicians and one clinical supervisor available for students. There was no district-wide suicide prevention program in place. In response to the lack of services, the Superintendent’s office was tasked with quickly identifying alternatives for providing them.

At the August 30, 2023, Board meeting,<sup>29</sup> an agenda item was included to approve a contract amendment with Wellness Together to offer onsite counseling services that were previously provided by SDYS. Wellness Together already had a contract to provide services at three schools in the district, and the amendment aimed to expand their coverage due to the absence of SDYS. No specific suicide prevention program was included in the amendment.

During the August 30<sup>th</sup> Board meeting, several public speakers expressed their opposition to the Board's decision not to renew the SDYS contract and MOU. Two Trustees repeatedly asked for reconsideration of the decision to cancel SDYS. Both Trustees asked their colleagues and the Superintendent for clarity as to why SDYS had been denied renewal. One Board Trustee who voted to sever the relationship with SDYS affirmed that there was no evidence of wrongdoing and no performance concerns.<sup>30</sup> That Trustee explained the vote by saying that "Wellness Together is a superior organization for us to work with" but provided no specifics to support the statement. The amendment for Wellness Together for \$1,069,300 was approved by a vote of 3 – 2. At the next public Board meeting on September 11, 2023, students, teachers, and parents again spoke in opposition to the Board's decision and in support of San Diego Youth Services.

The Wellness Together amendment was executed on September 12, 2023, and the contract stated that Wellness Together would need two months to onboard and train new staff. Services were eventually fully implemented at the beginning of December 2023. Students were without comprehensive mental health services for four months at the start of the school year. The Board decided to significantly and consequentially impact students, yet the Grand Jury learned that they were unaware of how long students went without services. The Grand Jury also learned that the public speaker who originally initiated the Board's decision to terminate SDYS could not specify who the replacement service provider was or when they began service. The speaker's focus on terminating services to students due to misconceptions about care for LGBTQ+ youth was not matched by interest in what happened after the termination.

### **San Diego Youth Services Surviving Contract & MOUs:**

Despite the Board's decision to deny renewal of SDYS's provision of onsite school counseling services or the suicide prevention program, SDYS had one remaining contract and three MOUs in place for the 2023–2024 school year. Although the District eventually provided an alternative service provider for school-based counseling, the Grand Jury learned that SDYS' efforts to provide services under the remaining contracts

were met with a lack of cooperation and communication by the District. Several programs supporting students and families, most offered at no cost to the district, were not made available to students from either SDYS or another provider. After the July 20, 2023, Board meeting, Grossmont Union High School District did not receive any services from SDYS, despite having one active contract and three active MOUs to serve students.

The Grand Jury's investigation revealed that SDYS had been stigmatized and was not welcomed at any campus within the Grossmont Union High School District. San Diego Youth Services' leadership made multiple efforts to schedule the customary planning meetings with administrators at the start of the school year but were met with silence or rejection. GUHSD students who previously benefited from services provided at no cost to the district lost access to that care. As MOUs and the remaining contract neared renewal, none were scheduled for the Board's consideration or review. Investigative interviews indicated that some students and staff felt there were unspoken rules discouraging any references to SDYS. Despite public Board meetings where assurances were made by Trustees that SDYS had fulfilled their obligations and offered quality services, the failure of GUHSD to activate its in-force contracts remains an outstanding issue.

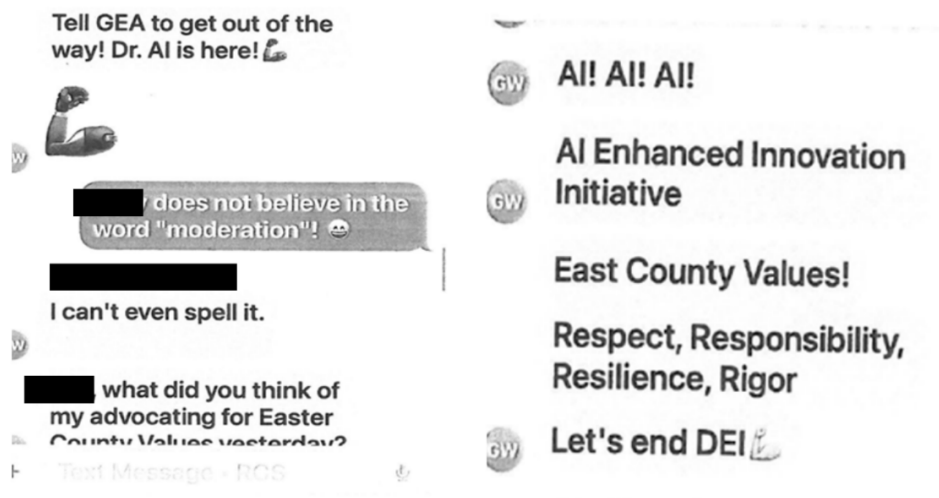
A summary of the agreements between Grossmont Union High School District and San Diego Youth Services after the July 20, 2023 Board meeting vote.

Service / Agreement	Agreement End Date	Status
<p>Anti-Bullying, Intervention, &amp; Advocacy Supports (MOU)</p> <p><i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	<p>December 2023</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District declined to place on the agenda for renewal for the 2023 - 2024 school year.</li> <li>• Students have not received these services since August 2023.</li> <li>• Program was provided at no cost to GUHSD.</li> </ul>
<p>Family Resource Center (Contract)</p> <p><i>Served Population: El Cajon Valley HS</i></p>	<p>June 2024</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SDYS was not given access to campuses to provide these services between August 2023 and June 2024.</li> <li>• District declined to place on the agenda for renewal for the 2024 - 2025 school year.</li> </ul>
<p>Community Assessment Team - Juvenile Justice Diversion Program (MOU)</p> <p><i>Served Population: District Wide</i></p>	<p>June 2025</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SDYS was not given access to campuses to provide these services between August 2023 and June 2025.</li> <li>• District declined to place on the agenda for the 2025 - 2026 school year.</li> <li>• Students have not received these services since August 2023.</li> <li>• Program was provided at no cost to GUHSD.</li> </ul>
<p>East County Behavioral Health Clinic (MOU)</p> <p><i>Served Population: El Cajon Valley, El Capitan, &amp; Monte Vista HS</i></p>	<p>June 2027</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite having an MOU in force for the provision of services, the District has resisted collaboration with SDYS to allow their clinicians on campus.</li> <li>• Program is available at no cost to GUHSD.</li> </ul>

## “East County Values”

During the July 20, 2023, Board meeting,<sup>31</sup> one Trustee expressed a desire to find a partner who best reflected “East County Values.” This comment was immediately a flashpoint among those concerned about the Board’s decision to replace San Diego Youth Services. As school-based mental health services are regulated by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences,<sup>32</sup> there was confusion expressed among the community as to what a new provider would do and how it would better align with “East County Values.”

As part of the investigation, the Grand Jury attempted to better understand the characteristics and metrics of “East County Values” to determine if there was a significant difference between SDYS and other service providers. The first mention the Grand Jury found of a definition of “East County Values” was in news reporting in July 2025 regarding potential Brown Act violations.<sup>33</sup> In a group text message to other Trustees from late January 2025, one Trustee asks another Trustee “What did you think of my advocating for Easter (sic) County Values yesterday?” That same Trustee then added, “East County Values! Respect, Responsibility, Resilience, and Rigor. Let’s end DEI.”



Messages between Board Trustees as obtained by the San Diego Union-Tribune as part of reporting on potential Brown Act violations.

In the first message, the reference to “yesterday” is to the public Board meeting on January 23, 2025.<sup>34</sup> During the Board reports at that meeting, the Trustee stated, “Our community values are respect, responsibility, resilience, and rigor.” The January 2025 Board meeting comments and the text messages are the only references the Grand Jury could find regarding “East County Values.” The relevance to the investigation is the assertion that there could be another service provider who would better embody these ideals, despite there being no public mention of them until 18 months after parting ways with SDYS.

The Trustee did not include “let’s end DEI” in his public comments defining “community values” at the January 23, 2025, Board meeting. While “DEI” has become shorthand and, in some cases, a pejorative term, the policies supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion are well-entrenched in the California Department of Education Code and the District’s policies. The investigation showed that both SDYS and Wellness Together followed the law and maintain internal policies to ensure students had access to services, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, or other characteristics. The Trustee’s stated goal of ending diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of “East County Values” was not shared by the providers working directly with students.

## **Local Control and Accountability Plan**

Under California Department of Education Code Sections 52060 through 52076, the District must develop the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).<sup>35</sup> The LCAP is a three-year plan updated annually. It results from an interdisciplinary process and serves as the strategic framework under which administrators, educators, and the Governing Board agree to operate. The LCAP is designed to guide the Governing Board’s decision making. The California Department of Education highlights several benefits of completing the LCAP.

- Ensures schools are aligned with the State Board of Education
- Articulates how funding is deployed to best benefit students
- Addresses underserved student populations

- Provides an opportunity for engagement and participation by stakeholders
- Encourages continuous improvement
- Centers equity and appropriate allocation of resources

Grossmont Union High School District's LCAP for the 2023–2024 school year was presented by the Superintendent's office to the Board and community on June 13, 2023. The LCAP stated that student survey data demonstrated a need to emphasize student mental health and social-emotional support. Also, San Diego Youth Services' proprietary programming was specifically included in the District's 2023-2024 LCAP to meet the District's goals related to student wellness. The LCAP was approved unanimously by the Board on June 15, 2023.<sup>36</sup> One month later, the Board declined to renew the SDYS service contracts necessary to support goals outlined in the LCAP.

### **School Board Trustees as Public Servants**

Aside from the Board's decision that deprived students of access to comprehensive mental health services and support for the first four months of the school year, the Board has taken other actions that have caused significant dissent and unrest in the school community. Governance can be complex, and it is common and expected for constituents to express displeasure with Board decisions. The GUHSD Board's policies emphasize that Board members should act with dignity and be mindful of the consequences of their behavior and demeanor. The California School Board Association outlines best practices for trustees to effectively represent their constituents when disagreements arise.<sup>37</sup>

During the investigation, Grand Jurors reviewed the publicly available recordings of GUHSD Board meetings from June 2023 through February 2026. Many meetings were contentious, and adjournments were necessary mid-meeting to restore order. Some meetings included a security guard. While passionate sentiments at a public meeting are not unusual, the public comments by two Board Trustees in response are significant to the investigation.

On two occasions, a Board trustee stated that he would not be transparent with his constituents because he found them uncivil, and that he would remain silent and not

participate in discussions about important district matters due to his displeasure with those in attendance. A second trustee referred to constituents in a Board meeting as “acting like a mob” and being “the most disrespectful crowd.”<sup>38</sup>

Besides comments at public Board meetings, another Board Trustee posted comments on his personal yet publicly accessible Facebook page, something the Grand Jury found inconsistent with the role of someone serving students in public education. Social media best practices from the California School Board Association<sup>39</sup> or California Association of Public Information Officials<sup>40</sup> stress the importance of using social media mindfully, including using privacy settings for personal social media accounts.

The Trustee’s public posts included those labeling teachers as “radical leftist(s)” who excuse “their apathy, mediocrity, and low expectations.” There were also posts questioning the value of Title IX, a federal civil rights law, and containing transphobic content. That Trustee also made an accusation against a colleague, claiming participation in election interference, as well as an assertion that a citizen recall effort resulted from fraud allegedly committed by a local reporter and journalism students. Finally, when contacted by local media, the Trustee referred to the recall organizers as socialists and radical extremists. The statement was later retracted; with an admission it should have been more measured.<sup>41</sup>

Although the Grand Jury did not specifically investigate these actions, they are included because they are relevant to the findings and recommendations that follow. While these items may not violate any established policy or law, they reflect the current climate within Grossmont Union High School District’s governance team and the community it serves.

## **Recognitions**

Many individuals have acted to support students by speaking at Board meetings, organizing community involvement, and working to restore mental health services for vulnerable students. The Grand Jury specifically wishes to acknowledge members of the Superintendent’s office, the Grossmont Education Association, classroom teachers and counselors, the San Diego County Office of Education, San Diego Youth Services,

and Wellness Together. Most importantly, the Grand Jury commends GUHSD students who demonstrated their engagement as citizens and advocates, embodying the District's mission statement and core values.

## **FACTS AND FINDINGS:**

**Fact:** The Grossmont Union High School District Governing Board declined to renew the contract and Memorandum of Understanding between Grossmont Union High School District and San Diego Youth Services for school-based mental health services and district-wide suicide prevention program on July 20, 2023.

**Fact:** The Board Trustees cited the public comment from one parent regarding mental health supports for transgender students when voting to deny renewal to San Diego Youth Services.

**Fact:** The Governing Board affirmed during a public Board meeting that San Diego Youth Services had not violated its contract, applicable licensing requirements, or standards of practice.

**Fact:** Perceptions of the quality of San Diego Youth Services' programming and clinicians were overwhelmingly and consistently positive by educators, students, administrators, and other stakeholders.

**Fact:** There is no evidence to support any allegations of wrongdoing on the part of San Diego Youth Services.

**Fact:** San Diego Youth Services' programs were consistent with state licensing requirements and therapeutic best practices.

**Fact:** Two Board Trustees wrote opinion columns for the San Diego Union-Tribune in September 2023 asserting that denying services to LGBTQ+ students was the objective of denying renewal to SDYS.

**Finding 1: The Board denied renewal of the San Diego Youth Services school-based mental health contract solely due to a misrepresentation about referrals for services to transgender students.**

**Finding 2: The Board's decision to deny renewal of the San Diego Youth Services contract for school-based mental health services and the Memorandum of Understanding for the suicide prevention program was not supported by any proven facts.**

**Finding 3: The decision to deny renewal to San Diego Youth Services was based on the objective of restricting or materially amending services to LGBTQ+ youth.**

**Fact:** The denial of renewal to San Diego Youth Services left the District without six school-based mental health clinicians and one clinical supervisor at the start of the 2023 – 2024 school year.

**Fact:** The replacement provider, Wellness Together, was not fully onboarded until the beginning of December 2023.

**Finding 4: The Board’s decision to deny renewal to San Diego Youth Services without identifying a replacement provider was potentially harmful to students.**

**Finding 5: The lack of adequate mental health support during a time traditionally characterized by high demand for services was detrimental to students.**

**Fact:** Despite the non-renewal of the mental health school-based services and suicide prevention programming, San Diego Youth Services continued to have existing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), which were programs provided at no cost to the District.

**Fact:** San Diego Youth Services made multiple attempts at the start of the 2023–2024 school year to provide services for the juvenile justice diversion program and the Family Resource Center as was consistent with their contracts.

**Finding 6: The Board’s decision caused San Diego Youth Services, to be functionally barred from providing services as outlined in approved MOUs.**

**Fact:** One Board Trustee said that he wanted to deny renewal of the San Diego Youth Services contracts to pursue a contract with a company more aligned with “East County Values.”

**Fact:** Between July 2023 and January 2025, the Trustee defines “East County Values” just one time at the January 2025 public Board meeting, although they are referred to as the “community’s values.”

**Fact:** In response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the San Diego Union Tribune, a text message by one Trustee to another from early 2025 stated that “East County Values” was defined as “Respect, Responsibility, Resilience, and Rigor. Let’s end DEI.”

**Fact:** San Diego Youth Services and Wellness Together programs serve diverse student populations, provide equitable access to services, and include students of all abilities.

**Fact:** San Diego Youth Services and Wellness Together both comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and state non-discrimination policies.

**Fact:** The Board Trustee’s expressed desire to “end DEI” is inconsistent with both San Diego Youth Services and Wellness Together programming, as well as incompatible with existing Grossmont Union High School District policies and the California Department of Education.

**Fact:** Grossmont Union High School District’s inclusion, equity, and diversity policies potentially impact as many 13,500 students or 62.5% of the student body.

**Finding 7: “East County Values”, as defined by a Board Trustee as “respect, responsibility, resilience, and rigor” are evident in the services of both San Diego Youth Services and Wellness Together, with both organizations delivering quality services to students with neither being materially more aligned with these characteristics.**

**Finding 8: A Board Trustee using the absence of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs as a qualifier for a replacement mental health service provider is contradictory to the California Department of Education Code.**

**Finding 9: The Board Trustee’s definition of “East County Values” went publicly undefined until January 2025 and was inconsequential in the selection of a replacement service provider.**

**Fact:** The Board approved Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a specific commitment to the school community, County and State Departments of Education, and vendor partners.

**Fact:** The 2023–2024 LCAP stated that there was an increased need for mental health support for students and that survey data showed that there was a need to emphasize student mental health and social emotional support.

**Fact:** The District’s approved LCAP for 2023-2024 included a goal connected to student mental health and social-emotional support.

**Fact:** The 2023–2024 LCAP specifically used San Diego Youth Services’ programming as a metric for achievement in item 2.2A.

**Fact:** The Board approved the LCAP on June 15, 2023, but then denied renewal to SDYS on July 20, 2023.

**Fact:** The approved LCAP goals by the Board relied on continuity of services to students and an ongoing relationship with San Diego Youth Services.

**Fact:** The Superintendent is responsible for executing decisions made by the Board.

**Finding 10: The Board’s decision to deny renewal of San Diego Youth Services was not aligned with the District’s Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).**

**Finding 11: The Board’s decision compromised the Superintendent, administrators, educators, and clinicians’ abilities to achieve the goals outlined in the LCAP.**

**Fact:** The Board’s decision to deny renewal of the San Diego Youth Services’ contract and Memorandum of Understanding was unexpected by service providers, school-based staff, administrators, students, the Superintendent’s office, and the community.

**Fact:** The Board decided to terminate State mandated services without the knowledge or involvement of the Superintendent or their staff, yet they were tasked with repairing and rebuilding services.

**Fact:** The Superintendent is the District's Chief Executive Officer and is ultimately responsible for providing mental health services to students.

**Finding 12: The Board violated its Duty of Care as it did not use care and diligence in its decisions regarding the provision of student services.**

**Finding 13: The Board performed actions which are the responsibility of the Superintendent and staff and did so without their involvement.**

**Fact:** The Board meetings in Fall 2023 were well attended by students, staff, stakeholders, and other community members.

**Fact:** The Board's action to deny renewal of San Diego Youth Services' contract was overwhelmingly opposed by those who attended and spoke at Board meetings in Fall 2023.

**Fact:** The public response to the Board's decisions was overwhelmingly contentious, oppositional, robust, and sustained.

**Finding 14: The Board's decision does not represent the community's best interests.**

**Finding 15: The Board violated the public trust doctrine as it acted in conflict with the best interests of students.**

**Fact:** Collegiality and collaboration between the Governing Board and students, staff, and other stakeholders are strained.

**Fact:** Board meetings between July 2023 and January 2026 continue to be contentious, with recesses called to restore order.

**Fact:** During October, November, and December 2025, three Board Trustees have referenced constituents and members of the school community with denigrating language, such as "disrespectful", "mob-like", and "mediocre".

**Finding 16: Trustees have disparaged the school community during public comments and social media posts which have generated and fueled ongoing distrust and dissension.**

## REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an elected County official (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors. Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
  - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding
  - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.
- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
  - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
  - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
  - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
  - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor. (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected agency or department

head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The 2025/2026 Grand Jury recommends that the Grossmont Union High School District Governing Board:**

**Recommendation 1:** Comply with Board Policy 0410, which guarantees policies and programs are free from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, and gender identity, among others.

**Recommendation 2:** Follow Board Policy 0100 which ensures equal opportunities and benefits for all students.

**Recommendation 3:** Conform to Board Policy 9200, which states that the best interests of students must not be secondary to the personal interests of Board members.

**Recommendation 4:** Ensure the continuity of educational services for students in all Board decisions.

**Recommendation 5:** Collaborate with San Diego Youth Services for their provision of services to the East County Behavioral Health Clinic, which is the one remaining Memorandum of Understanding in-force between Grossmont Union High School District and San Diego Youth Services.

**Recommendation 6:** Align Board decisions with the State Education Code, as well as the Board approved Local Control Accountability Plan.

**Recommendation 7:** Adhere to Board Policy 2120 and Board Bylaw 9005, which clearly define the responsibilities of the Superintendent versus Board Trustees regarding operational decisions.

**Recommendation 8:** Create and consult with Citizen Advisory Committees, as outlined in Board policy 1220, to gather stakeholder input for important decisions and to rebuild community trust and constructive engagement.

**Recommendation 9:** Commit to governing as fiduciaries, following governance standards per Board Policy, and adhering to social media best practices.

**Recommendation 10:** Participate in annual ethics and governance training, as required by AB 2158. Implement mandatory onboarding training for new Board Trustees that covers best practices in ethics, governance, and fiduciary duties.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, “About GUHSD.”

<https://www.guhsd.net/Schools/About-GUHSD/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> California Department of Education, “Data Quest - Grossmont Union High School District”

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<sup>3</sup> California Department of Education, “California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys.”

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<sup>4</sup> California Department of Education, “California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys”.

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<sup>5</sup> California Department of Education, “Data Quest - Grossmont Union High School District”

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<sup>6</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 2120.

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<sup>7</sup> Taketa, Kristen. “Canceled Contracts, Classroom Poster Crackdowns: How San Diego School Districts Are Changing Practices amid Anti-LGBTQ+ Backlash.” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 5, 2023.

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<sup>8</sup> Salinas, Elva. “Grossmont School District’s Change in Student Mental Health Services Was Indefensible.” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 19, 2023.

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<sup>9</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 0410. <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/guhsd/Board.nsf/vpublic?open> Navigate to “Policies” on the top right menu, then section 0000, “Philosophy, Goals, Objectives and Comprehensive Plans,” from the left menu.

<sup>10</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 9200. <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/guhsd/Board.nsf/vpublic?open> Navigate to “Policies on the top right menu, then section 9000, “Board Bylaws,” from the left menu.

<sup>11</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 2120. <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/guhsd/Board.nsf/vpublic?open> Navigate to “Policies” on the top right menu, then section 2000, “Administration,” from the left menu.

<sup>12</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 9005. <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/guhsd/Board.nsf/vpublic?open> Navigate to “Policies” on the top right menu, then section 9000, “Board Bylaws,” from the left menu.

<sup>13</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, District Policies, Policy 0100. <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/guhsd/Board.nsf/vpublic?open> Navigate to “Policies” on the top right menu, then section 0000, “Philosophy, Goals, Objectives and Comprehensive Plans,” from the left menu.

<sup>14</sup> California Institute for Local Government, “Understanding the Basics of Public Service Ethics Laws,” 2016. [https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/ethics\\_booklet\\_full\\_v4.pdf](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/ethics_booklet_full_v4.pdf).

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<sup>15</sup> California Legislative Information, “Education Code 51925, Title 2, Division 4, Part 28, Chapter 5.5. Article 6, Mandatory Mental Health Education.”

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<sup>16</sup> California Legislative Information, “Education Code 215, Title 1, Division 1, Part 1, Chapter 2, Article 2.5, “Pupil and Student Suicide Prevention Policies.

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<sup>17</sup> San Diego Youth Services, Agency Brochure. August 2024.

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<sup>18</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, Governing Board Meeting, July 20, 2023.

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<sup>19</sup> Grossmont Union High School District, Governing Board Agenda, July 20, 2023.

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