

Natomas

Unified School District

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Dr. Robyn Castillo, Ed.D.
Superintendent

On behalf of the Natomas Unified School District Board of Education ("Board" or "District") please accept this response to the 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury Report ("Report") related to the District's special education program dated June 22, 2026.

By way of background, prior to 2019, Natomas Unified School District ("NUSD") was a member of the Sacramento County Special Education Local Plan Area ("SELPA"), a multi-district SELPA including many of the school districts in the region. As a part of reviewing our resources and services, it was determined that Natomas Unified should consider taking action to become its own single-district SELPA. This would allow the District to directly receive all of its state and federal special education funding, which at that time was being filtered through the Sacramento County SELPA. NUSD's request to the state Board of Education to become a single-district SELPA was approved in July 2019, at which point, NUSD exited the Sacramento County SELPA. In making this change to become its own single-district SELPA, NUSD was able to provide a broader range of special education services in-district rather than relying on outside partners in the region to serve our NUSD students, in most cases.

Prior to the Grand Jury's report, the District initiated its own review of the special education program and began making focused investments and program enhancements to better support students with disabilities and their families.

The report reflects challenges we know are real in Natomas Unified and in school districts across California, including the growing need for specialized services, the difficulty of recruiting highly trained staff, and the increasing cost of providing the level of support students deserve.

It is important to note the report underscores how Natomas Unified remains in compliance with state requirements, while also recognizing the dedication of Natomas Unified's special education teachers and support staff, who bring compassion, skill, and commitment to their work every day and care deeply about serving students and families.

Natomas Unified has been taking specific steps to strengthen special education programming. This includes added compensation for our highest need classrooms and caseload sizes to better recruit and retain specialized staff, creating a new parent liaison position, advancing the work of our Community Advisory Committee, and using our role as an independent SELPA to make local decisions that support students.

As a mid-sized district, Natomas Unified is proud to offer a high level of special education programming and support. We are committed to building on that work, listening to families, and continuing to improve services and outcomes for students with disabilities.

The rising cost of special education is one of the most significant budget pressures facing school districts. We were encouraged to see the state make an ongoing investment in special education funding this year, and we will continue advocating for resources that better reflect the actual cost of serving students.

In our view, the Grand Jury report reinforces why Natomas Unified is continuing to invest in special education, support staff, strengthen family engagement, and ensure every student has access to the learning environment they deserve.

RESPONSES TO FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1. Natomas District has received a citation from CDE for significant disproportionality in chronic absenteeism, which adversely affects students because students who are chronically absent miss critical instruction time.

Response to Finding 1.

The District respectfully disagrees with Finding 1. The District did not receive a citation from the California Department of Education ("CDE") for significant disproportionality in chronic absenteeism. In addition, we are not aware that CDE issues citations.

The CDE issues an annual determination letter. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Act ("IDEA") section 616(e) and 34 CFR sections 300.600–300.604, the CDE is required to make an annual determination on the performance of each local educational agency ("LEA"). The CDE makes determinations based on the LEA's compliance, disproportionality, and performance data related to the implementation of IDEA requirements. As a result, every LEA receives one of four possible annual determinations: Meets Requirements, Needs Assistance, Needs Intervention, or Needs Substantial Intervention. NUSD's annual determination letter from CDE does not identify it as significantly disproportionate in chronic absenteeism.

Recommendation 1a. The Grand Jury recommends the District bring the special education community together to address disproportionality by including its critics, students, parents, general education staff and community in the process for developing a plan to address disproportionality. The planning process and finished product should be completed by January 1, 2027.

Response to Recommendation 1a.

Because we disagree that CDE has found the District significantly disproportionate in chronic absenteeism, we respectfully disagree with the recommendation specifically related to that finding. However, the District will continue its established processes for gathering community feedback as we develop District plans for addressing the statewide issue of chronic absenteeism.

Recommendation 1b. The Grand Jury recommends the District ensure transparency and public participation through community meetings, newsletters, reports to the school board and press releases to the media. This should begin by Oct. 1, 2026.

Response to Recommendation 1b.

The District has implemented this recommendation. The District has ensured transparency and public participation through community meetings, newsletters, reports to the school board and press releases to the media. NUSD is continuing its engagement with the community in the following ways (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Community Advisory Committee
- Presentations/Reports at Public Board Meetings
- Parent Trainings with Family Liaison for Special Populations
- Quarterly Special Education Newsletter
- Diverse Conversations
- Parent University
- Publicly presented and posted District Progress Report (two times annually)
- Local Control Accountability Plan ("LCAP") community engagement

Finding 2. The CDE has identified Natomas SELPA as a special education program that overidentifies African American/Black students as emotionally disturbed and that has an excessive number of African American/Black special education students missing school.

Response to Finding 2.

The District respectfully disagrees, in part, with Finding 2. The District has been found significantly disproportionate in the area of identifying African American/Black special education students under the category of eligibility of emotionally disturbed (disabled). The District has not been identified by the state as having an excessive number of specifically African American/Black special education students missing school in relation to other student groups.

Finding 3. The Grand Jury has found, through interviews and data, that African American/Black students tend to receive more severe punishments by suspensions at some Natomas schools. This is problematic as it indicates African American/Black students are missing school at a higher rate than their peers.

Response to Finding 3.

The District respectfully disagrees, in part, with Finding 3. While the African American/Black students have a higher rate of suspension relative to other student groups, there is no clear evidence that African American/Black students are receiving more severe punishments by suspension than other students who engage in the same Education Code violations. In addition, last year, the District created a Behavior and Discipline Matrix to be used to build consistency across school sites. All staff have been trained in the appropriate implementation of this matrix, which focuses on use of other means of correction rather than suspension whenever possible.

Finding 4. The Grand Jury finds that the suspensions and chronic absenteeism issues result in African American/Black students' exclusion from a rigorous public school education.

Response to Finding 4.

The District respectfully disagrees, in part, with Finding 4. While we acknowledge that NUSD is significantly disproportionate in the incidence of African American students on IEPs being suspended over 10 days, we provide below some factual data when reviewing its African American/Black student population as a whole:

- The District's 2025 graduation rate for African American/Black students slightly outpaced the District's overall rate in 2025 at 96%.
- African American/Black student participation rates in the District's Career Technical Education ("CTE") and dual enrollment programs roughly reflect the overall proportional District enrollment of African American/Black students.
- When looking at International Baccalaureate ("IB") enrollment across the District in 2025-26, African American/Black student enrollment is greater proportionally in these programs than District enrollment.

The District provides 10 CTE pathways between our three high schools. In addition, we engage with our elementary and middle school students in career exploration to prepare them for the opportunities they will have access to in high school through our CTE pathways.

Additionally, the District provides opportunities for dual enrollment through our high schools in multiple ways. One of our high schools has a partnership with American River College through an Early College Academy, and each of our high schools also has a partnership with Los Rios Community College District to provide students access to college courses through College and Career Access Pathways ("CCAP"), and a partnership with California State University, Sacramento through the Accelerated College Entrance ("ACE") program.

Related to International Baccalaureate programs, during the 2025-26 school year, the District had two schools provide the Primary Years Programme (TK-6th grade), one TK-8 school provides the Middle Years Programme

(7th/8th grade), and one high school with both the Middle Years Programme (9th/10th grade) and the Diploma Programme (11th/12th grade).

Recommendations 2-4a. The Grand Jury recommends the Natomas SELPA administration address the African American/Black overidentification and suspension issues by holding listening sessions with African American/Black families and leaders by January 1, 2027. Information and feedback from this process should then be incorporated into the plan CDE has ordered resulting from the disproportionality citation.

Response to Recommendation 2-4a.

The District is implementing this recommendation. In addition to several focus groups that were held during the 2025-26 school year, the District is also amending its Compliance and Improvement Monitoring ("CIM") Plan with the state to include focus groups in order to gather input and additional qualitative data from school community members.

Recommendation 2-4b. The Grand Jury recommends the Natomas Unified School District administration implement ethnic, racial, and disabled cultural awareness training to all district employees, classified and certificated, by January 1, 2027.

Response to Recommendation 2-4b.

The District has implemented this recommendation. The District has offered the following trainings in the last four school years (2022-2026) that has been provided to managers, certificated, and classified staff across the District:

- Anti-Racist, Anti-Bias Training
- California State University Social Justice Institute
- Culturally Responsive Classroom Culture and Management
- Culturally Responsive Instructional Practices
- Identifying Implicit Bias in Leadership
- Intro to Anti-Bias Education
- Creating and Fostering Inclusion Opportunities
- Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching & Learning Cultural Behavior Modules:
 - Eye Contact and Proximity
 - Kinesthetic and Collaborative/Cooperative
 - Spontaneous and Pragmatic Language Use
 - Realness and Conversational Patterns
 - Orality and Verbal Expressiveness and Sociocentrism
 - Communalism and Subjectivity
 - Concept of Time and Dynamic Attention Span
 - Field Dependent and Immediacy

Additionally, we are looking into continued training in this area that can be provided to staff on an ongoing basis. There are several training courses we are exploring that also address this recommendation in the areas of preventing bias, preventing disability discrimination, and culturally responsive education.

Finding 5. The Grand Jury finds the District's discipline matrix may delay notification to case managers of a student's behavioral issue until the student is facing possible suspension, resulting in some special education students unnecessarily missing school.

Response to Finding 5.

The District respectfully disagrees with Finding 5. The matrix includes the case manager at all levels, including pre-suspension. In each of the levels of the discipline matrix, one of the actions/interventions listed for addressing student behavior is engaging with the case manager and/or Special Education or Section 504 team for support.

Recommendation 5. The Grand Jury recommends the District modify the discipline matrix by October 1, 2026 to include the case manager earlier in the process to permit teaching of alternative behaviors directly and scheduling of IEP meetings to address behavior before it progresses, and notify all school administrators of the change.

Response to Recommendation 5: The District determined that the recommendation is not warranted because the recommendation has already been implemented. The case managers are already included at every level and school administrators were trained at the leadership institute this summer.

Finding 6. Natomas case managers do not consistently write transition plans as required by federal law, which deprives special education students of opportunities to prepare for life after high school.

Response to Finding 6. The District respectfully disagrees with the finding. The District determined that students who require transition plans have transition plans written by their case managers.

Recommendation 6. The Grand Jury recommends the Natomas SELPA begin monthly, site-based IEP audits by November 1, 2026 to determine trends in IEP errors and implement training at the site level on a consistent basis to ensure transition plans are written and other IEP errors are corrected.

Response to Recommendation 6.

The District will implement the recommendation. The District will audit IEPs monthly to ensure IEP compliance and will continue to provide training to special education staff on transition plans and services.

Finding 7. The 2025-26 SELPA plan does not accurately reflect the provision of transition services to students, which could give the impression the SELPA is doing nothing.

Response to Finding 7.

The District respectfully disagrees with Finding 7. The 2025-26 SELPA plan reflects the specific transition services that were being provided to students at the time the plan was written. All eligible students received the appropriate transition services.

Recommendation 7. The Grand Jury recommends Natomas amend its SELPA plan by October 1, 2026 to include the transition services the District does provide including the WorkAbility I program and referrals to the State Department of Rehabilitation.

Response to Recommendation 7.

The District has implemented Recommendation 7. The 2026–27 SELPA plan, approved on July 22, 2026, reflects the transition services students received when the plan was developed. If a student requires certain services during the course of the 2026-27 school year, they will be provided services according to the IEP regardless of whether or not those services were included in the SELPA plan approved in July 2026. A common practice has been to use the general transition services code on the annual services plan rather than more specific transition services codes. An eligible student's individual transition plan may indicate WorkAbility I and/or Department of Rehabilitation services were being provided, but the code that was reflected in the annual services plan was the general transition services plan code. The District will provide staff training to ensure awareness of all transition services offered to eligible students throughout the SELPA and how to best code those services to be reflected in our annual services plan.

Finding 8. The Grand Jury finds a lack of highly trained special education staff, due to high turnover and low retention, resulting in a shortage of experienced, fully credentialed special education teachers. This is problematic as research clearly shows schools staffed with experienced, fully credentialed teachers tend to produce students with higher academic achievement.

The District agrees with Finding 8. As pointed out in the report, this is a state and national problem. The Grand Jury report states, in pertinent part: *"School districts, including those in Sacramento County, face financial challenges, difficulty hiring enough specialized staff, and, especially since the pandemic, obstacles in getting students to attend school regularly."* And, *"The District, like many other school districts, struggles to maintain a special education program fully staffed by teachers credentialed in special education."*

In addition, the Grand Jury report specifically recognizes Natomas Unified created a future teacher program that attempts to address this statewide and national challenge: *"The District has created a 'Diverse Future Teachers Program' that offers financial incentives and tuition assistance to people who want to become District*

teachers. Natomas graduates, people who live in the District, and those who want to teach difficult-to-fill subject areas, such as moderate- to severe-disability special education classes, receive additional financial incentives.”

Recommendation 8. The Grand Jury recommends the District’s administration consider by January 1, 2027 creating an educational pathway that would train high school students to become classroom instructional aides upon graduation and, possibly, coordinate with the District’s existing teacher preparation program to become credentialed teachers.

Response to Recommendation 8.

This recommendation has been implemented. In 2023, NUSD was awarded a Golden State Pathway Program 3-year Planning Grant to develop an Education CTE pathway at Natomas High School. The proposed pathway was designed to prepare students for careers in education, including Instructional Assistant, Classroom Teacher, and Special Education Teacher roles. Through sequenced coursework, work-based learning experiences, internships, and targeted recruitment activities, students would gain exposure to careers in education and opportunities to pursue future employment with the District.

Following completion of the planning process and a comprehensive evaluation of enrollment projections, the District determined that implementation of the Education CTE pathway at Natomas High School was not feasible at this time due to insufficient projected enrollment to sustain the program. Natomas High School currently offers seven established CTE pathways, and adding an eighth pathway was determined to be unsustainable given current enrollment levels. The District will continue to monitor student interest and workforce needs and will reassess implementation opportunities as enrollment and program conditions warrant.

In addition, the District continues to expand the Diverse Future Teachers Program, which supports aspiring educators in completing bachelor's degrees and progressing toward teaching credentials. We specifically recruit current NUSD classified staff who would like to continue their career as a teacher. NUSD is also strengthening partnerships with institutions of higher education to increase access to dual enrollment opportunities, mentoring, academic support, and financial assistance as well as exploring additional teacher residency programs. Collectively, these efforts aim to develop a sustainable pipeline of highly qualified educators who reflect the community's diversity and support the District's long-term workforce needs.

Finding 8. The Grand Jury finds the District has created an incentive program for people who want to become credentialed teachers with a focus on people who already live in the community, in response to its immediate need to find and retain highly qualified teachers in several subject areas, including moderate- to severe-disability special education classes. The District is commended for this program.

Response to Finding 8.

The District agrees with Finding 8. Since the program's approval in October 2017, our certificated staff demographic has shifted significantly. In 2016-17 our teacher workforce reflected a diversity rate of 26.9%. In 2025-26, our teacher workforce reflected a diversity rate of 41.3%. This is a 15.6% increase in diverse staff in a 10-year period.

In addition, 53 teachers have completed the diverse future teacher program with an additional 12 in progress with their courses. Within this group of 65 candidates, 10 have earned special education credentials, with an additional candidate currently pursuing a special education credential.

Finally, we are proud of all of our diverse future teacher candidates: 15 are former NUSD classified staff, and 16 are NUSD graduates.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide a response to the findings and recommendations. If the Grand Jury has questions or needs further clarification, please contact Christina Huth, Chief of Staff at (916) 567-5401.

Sincerely,



Micah Grant
Governing Board President
Natomas Unified School District