



## **PINER HIGH SCHOOL FAMILY SHOWED UP EN MASSE TO LOBBY BOARD AGAINST SCHOOL CLOSING PLAN**

*By Keriana Singkeo, Eva Escamilla, Elly Somnavong and Isabel Ramirez*

The **Piner High School** Community showed up en masse at a January 8 **Santa Rosa City School Board** meeting, which heard public comments on planned school closings due to declining enrollment and revenue and the loss of federal funding during the Covid years.

More than a dozen current and former students, teachers and counselors spoke eloquently about why the board should spare Piner from possible closure because of its popular and successful programs including the SPARQ Center, STEM Certificate Program, Early College Magnet Program, the Grace Program, the Culinary Arts Program and the Sports Program.

Piner's graduation rate of 90.6% in 2024 was second, after **Maria Carrillo High School**, (92.7%) among Santa Rosa high schools, comparing favorably with **Santa Rosa High School** (89.1%), **Montgomery High School** (82.2%) and **Elsie Allen High School** (76.1%). Piner also is one the only Santa Rosa City high schools without declining enrollment.

In terms of enrollment, Piner and Maria Carrillo are the only two Santa Rosa high schools with increasing enrollment over the past four years. Enrollment at Santa Rosa High School, Montgomery High School and Elsie Allen High School are all down over the last four years.

“Piner has grown in student population each year,” said **Cimberly Case**, a social sciences teacher at Piner, at the public hearing. “Every year we have students from all over the country transferring to our campus. We have so many reasons for this but one in particular is the SPARQ Center.”

### **SPARQ CENTER**

Case described the SPARQ Center as “the gateway to a STEM-focused education with SPITZ SciDome XD Touch System course and the grande dame, a 22 Sirius Observatory. Collectively Piner High School has a classroom like no other. It is uniquely innovative with learning opportunities that are literally out of this world!”

“Piner High School is the best kept secret in Sonoma County,” said **Kristine Erken**, a counselor at Piner in testimony to the board. “It’s time for the public to get in on this secret. Our student population continues to grow. Why do so many students want to come to Piner? It’s no secret to us. We have amazing staff, administrators, parents, students, facilities, and programs.”

### **GRACE PROGRAM**

A big part of Piner’s success in increasing its graduation rate is its Grace Program, which involves a special school within the school for students who have struggled academically. Typically about 55 students occupy spaces every year in the Grace family, which includes its own counselor, teachers, smaller class sizes, a lounge, a club, and activities.

Last year, the Grace Club took a trip to San Francisco’s Alcatraz Prison and the Oakland Zoo. This month the club went to see a one-man theatrical production of “The Great Gatsby” at the Luther Burbank Center.

“The Grace program is a lifeline for students who are credit-deficit and face significant barriers to accessing their education,” said **Johana Perdomo**, the Grace counselor for Piner High School.

“These are students who may not fit into the traditional mold, but at Grace, they find a family. We’re not just a program—we are a support network. Our students volunteer,

encourage each other, and push each other to meet goals they might otherwise think impossible.

Perdomo said for many juniors and seniors in the program, Grace has been the reason they haven't given up on school. Without it, they would likely have walked away from their education entirely.

“At Piner, we strive to provide these students with every opportunity for success, and we work nonstop to support them before ever considering sending them elsewhere. Our school is not just a place for learning; it's a community that understands the challenges our students face and meets them with compassion and commitment.”

## **STEM PROGRAM**

Teachers, counselors, and students said one of the attributes that sets Piner apart among its peers is its Science Technology Engineering and Math Certification, supported by the SPARQ Center, Space Science, GIS, and Health Science programs.

“Piner is the only school with a planetarium, which highlights our site as a STEM-focused school,” said **Jenna Jewel**, an English teacher at Piner in a testimony.

Jewel explained that Piner has a memorandum of understanding with Sonoma State University that supports Piner's STEM Certificate program.

“Students in all grades are invited and encouraged to participate in levels one, two, and three of the STEM Certificate program, which calls upon students to research and present skills, inquiry, curiosity, and the like,” she said.

Completion of the three levels grants students early consideration in coveted slots at SSU after high school graduation, further weaving Piner's positive impact into the community of Santa Rosa and Sonoma County.

## **EARLY COLLEGE MAGNET PROGRAM**

The teachers, counselors, and students also gave the high school the highest marks for its Early College Magnet program, which allows students to take college courses at the Santa Rosa Junior College for graduation credit and college credit. The program funds the courses, provides transportation, and purchases books at no cost to the students.

“I run the Early College Magnet Program which has been growing for 17 years.” said Ms. Erken, one of the 7 counselors at Piner High School.

“This year we have 407 students succeeding in ECM. That's almost a third of our entire student population taking free college courses with support from SRJC personnel and a full-time dedicated Piner counselor.

Erken said ECM differentiates Piner from other schools because Piner students get to work with the dedicated SRJC staff.

Erken noted that last year's senior class included 3 juniors who graduated early due to earning so many college credits in the ECM program.

“Our seniors took a total of 472 classes in their 4 years in the program. Due to free tuition for all high school students, they collectively saved \$55,000. The ECM program paid the approximately \$45,000 they would have had to pay for their books. ECM is only one of the reasons that Piner High School is the best-kept secret in Sonoma County! Please don't close a high school.”

“When I joined the ECM at Piner High School as a freshman I had no idea what I wanted to do for my future,” said **Yesenia Carmona**, a senior at Piner in her testimony. “Throughout my four years in ECM I took advantage of taking classes at the Santa Rosa Junior College. Not only did I take classes for my graduation requirements, I took them for myself to discover what I want to do in the future.”

At the Santa Rosa JC, Carmona said she took various classes such as psychology, Spanish, U.S. History, Art History and several science courses. “And I found my interest lies in environmental science.”

Carmona said she wants other students to be able to benefit from Piner's ECM Program just as she has done.

## **SPORTS PROGRAM**

Student-athletes at Piner said the school's sports program was a big part of why the school was so successful. They said sports taught students valuable lessons about how to work together as a team. The success of this year's Varsity Football team, which played in its first playoff game in 11 years, is a testament to the quality and success of the program.

“I'm a student and athlete at Piner,” said **Lucian Weed**, a senior at Piner. “I am involved in football and wrestling. I love Piner. It's been a big part of my life and helped me avoid some pretty dark paths I could have gone down. Sports especially. I'm also taking advantage of ECM. Without that, I couldn't attend college.”

## **CULINARY ARTS**

Finally, the teachers, counselors, and students also praised Piner's Culinary Arts Program as a hidden gem with more than 250 students enrolled in the three-year program. They learn to make food for themselves and also to build on their skills in the kitchen.

Culinary students learn the basics of baking and pastries and also learn about the hospitality and food service industry, which is one of the largest industries here in Sonoma County. The mission of the culinary program is to make students ready for a career in the hospitality and food service industry right out of high school.

The Culinary Arts program is one of the "hidden gems" of Piner High School, said **Kameron Rose**, one of the teachers in the program.

"Our program is one of the most sought-after classes on campus," he said. "Not only because they are able to make food for themselves but also to build on their skills in the kitchen."

Rose said the program currently has more than 250 students who every year learn about the hospitality and food service industry, which is important because it is one of the largest industries in Sonoma County aided by the local tourism industry.

"In our classes, our mission is to ready our students for a career in the hospitality and food service industry and we do this with our successful three-year program to allow them to not only learn the basics of baking and pastry and culinary arts but also to become work ready right out of high school."

*—with reporting by Adriana Trujillo, Alexander Guzman, Cristian Tobar, Damian Viveros, Eduardo Lojas, Sebastian Witthaus and Marcela Urbina*

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## **Piner Principal and Head Janitor Were Instrumental In Persuading Police to Arrest Burglary Suspect**

*By Sebastian Witthaus, Damian Viveros, Aaron Moreno, Keriana Singkeo*

Piner High School Principal **Andrea Correia** and Head Janitor **Antonio Chavez** played active roles in spurring the **Santa Rosa Police Department** to investigate and solve a string of burglaries at the high school and help bring the suspect into custody.

The Piner High School administration said in a statement that the SRPD arrested an adult male on January 21, 2025, following an investigation that determined he was responsible for stealing property from the high school.

The administration said the alleged suspect gained access to the school during nighttime hours and took several items.

The administration said the alleged suspect took the following items: a red four-wheel hand pull utility trailer, a large REI bag full of science textbooks, four Apple iPads, and one Apple MacBook Air.

The SRPD said in a statement that during the fall of 2024, Piner was the victim of at least three burglaries during nighttime hours.

The department alleged that the suspect tried unlocked doors or forced entry into custodial closets and classrooms to steal tablets, computers, tools, and other items of value.

Using surveillance images, detectives identified a person of interest, the department said. At the time, however, detectives lacked sufficient probable cause for an arrest.

On January 20, 2025, Piner officials reported a new burglary involving stolen laptops, school textbooks, and tablets from a classroom.

Campus surveillance images from the theft were high enough quality to firmly identify the alleged suspect as Daniel Vanzant, a 52-year-old transient from Santa Rosa.

The department said Vanzant was the same person of interest from the previous incidents.

The next day, January 21, 2025, detectives from the SRPD Property Crimes Investigations Team (PCI) shared Vanzant's information with patrol officers, who located him and transported him to SRPD for an interview.

Detectives learned during the interview that Vanzant had been loitering on campus after hours on a daily basis. Detectives also learned the stolen property may have been hidden in and around Youth Community Park (aka, the Skate Park) at 1701 Fulton Road.

Vanzant was arrested and booked into Sonoma County Jail for burglary and vandalism related to three of the reported burglaries.

The next day, January 22, 2025, detectives and officers from the SRPD Downtown Enforcement Team searched the park extensively but were unable to locate the stolen items.

Correia said in an interview that the suspect's involvement with the school dates back to Pandemic times when the school was closed and everyone was involved in distance learning.

"The burglary suspect first got into Mr. Pederson's classroom and lived there for a while until he was discovered," Correia said. "He got in through a roof access point."

Correia said the suspect "has a sister or family member who lives on Guerneville Road so this is his neighborhood. He sometimes sleeps in the RVs near the Pizza Gourmet behind Raley's."

"We knew who he was. He had been squatting in D17."

Correia said a year ago the suspect broke into Mr. William's classroom three or four times.

"He stole a Makita drill and some other equipment. He also stole tools from our head custodian Antonio Chavez."

The suspect broke a window in D9, broke a lock. He took tablets, some computers and other things that could be sold, she said.

"We had multiple videos of him but the Santa Rosa Police Department said they didn't have evidence that he stole anything," Correia said.

"They asked if we had any videos inside the classroom but we don't because we don't as a policy like to spy on our students."

Correia said the next time he broke into Mr. Cecil's classroom.

This time Antonio had really good video of him coming in and out of the classroom. It was in color. There was no question it was him."

Chavez said in an interview that on a Saturday as he was coming in to work at the school, he spotted the suspect on Fulton Road and followed him over to the Raley's Shopping Center and called the police.

"I saw the guy and turned around and followed him," Chavez said. "He realized I was following him and he threatened me. He started walking around my car trying to get me to come out and fight him."

Chavez said the police told him to return to the school, though he remained at the shopping center until the police arrived.

Correia said she expected the police would arrest the suspect, though the police told her they put it down as petty theft and weren't going to take any action.

"I called a friend who is a sergeant with the Santa Rosa Police Department and I shared my frustration that nothing was getting done."

The suspect "was using the school as his personal shopping store," she said she told him.

The suspect caused \$50,000 of damage to Piner, she said.

Although the school filed multiple insurance claims for the thefts, the money was paid to the district and never made it back to Piner.

"When things get taken from Piner, the money doesn't go to the school but to the school district," she said.

Correia said her police sergeant friend promised to send out a technology officer from the SRPD Burglary Department to look into the case.

She said the tech collected all sorts of forensic evidence and based on that the SRPD arrested the suspect later that day.

"It was no longer considered just petty theft. He is in custody."

If the suspect is ever released, the SRPD told Correia that a mark they put on his record would allow the police to arrest him immediately if he ever trespassed on Piner campus again.

Correia expressed great disappointment in people who steal from schools. "I mean really. I think that's awful."

According to Correia, Piner has had multiple break ins over the years.

“The school is wide open, there are no fences, doors are sometimes left open. We have old locks. If a window is left open by mistake or roof access is left open, people can easily get in.”

She added that most people aren't as careful at the school as they are with their home.

“I'm not criticizing people, but I know we have teachers who are not always as careful as they could be.”

Asked if Piner was planning any security upgrades that would reduce the threat of future burglaries, Correia said “I'm not planning to make any upgrades. I'm not in charge of security and it's funded at the district level.”

Correia said the administration has asked for multiple years for a fence around campus, but there's been a disagreement over fencing schools.

“Some people say they don't want kids to feel like they're in a prison. It would make us safer.”

Correia said it would cost more than \$1 million to put up a fence around the school, which is probably too high a cost given budget issues which have caused the district to consider closing schools.

Asked whether she ever thought a student might be involved in the burglaries, she said no.

“I never thought it was a student. They like to put cones and chairs on the roof. They like to be on the roof. It's terrifying to me. I'm terrified of heights.”

She said one her worst fears is for a student to be hurt in such an incident.

She said students like to play pranks like putting a picnic table up on the roof, or putting one of the big tires into the press box on the football stadium.

“Kids aren't trying to steal things. They like to do silly things.”

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## STINKY, AILING CRITTER REMOVED FROM GRACE AREA



*By Damian Viveros, Aaron Moreno, Keriana Singkeo and Romina Ortiz*

An ailing striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), the victim of unintended ingestion of rat poison, was captured and removed from the northwest corner of the Grace area at Piner High School on Friday, Jan. 17, 2025, by **Sonoma Wildlife Rescue**.

Piner staff cordoned off the entrance to the Grace area for about an hour until a representative of an animal rescue service arrived to take the sick animal away. The skunk smell was still noticeable for hours after the animal was removed.

When frightened, challenged or injured skunks may rear up and spray a foul and pungent odor, which is difficult to remove from clothes. The aroma around the Grace area strongly suggested that the skunk was in some distress.

“It’s skunk season,” said **Jordan Gleason**, of **Sonoma Wildlife Rescue**, who captured and removed the animal. “We get a lot of calls this time of year.”

The striped skunk is native to California and typically lives two to four years. Females tend to have a litter of four to six kits a year. Skunks are omnivores, meaning they eat a variety of insects, fruits and vegetables.

Skunk mating season is typically between late Winter to early Summer, though they are most active during February and March.

Skunks can be a nuisance especially when they take up residence near people's residences and places of work. They're most known trait is their strong, unpleasant spray. Skunk spray can last for days and is very difficult to remove from pets, clothing, and even buildings. Skunks can also dig up lawns and gardens causing significant damage. All these factors are reasons why skunks can be a nuisance.

According to the online newsletter *Healthline*, skunk spray has been compared to tear gas, and with good reason.

"Skunk spray and tear gas are both lachrymators — chemical substances designed to irritate the eyes and nose, causing redness, mucus production, and tears," Healthline said. "In some instances, the scent of skunk spray may even cause nausea."

"The skunk's spray was the most horrid scent I've ever smelled," said **Edda Espinosa**, the mother of a Piner junior, who had her smelly skunk experience at a business in Petaluma.

Sadly, Gleason said the skunk was euthanized later on Friday after an examination by the animal care director that found severe symptoms of poisoning.

Gleason said Sonoma Wildlife Rescue recommends "exclusion," rather than poisoning skunks because it's more humane.

Exclusion means hardening an area to prevent a skunk from making its home there. They love to make their nests in cavities and open spaces under porches and houses, some of their favorite places to nest.

Gleason said one of the most efficient ways to exclude skunks is to set up a barn owl box.

Barn owls are known for their exceptional hunting skills, particularly at night. They play a role in controlling rodent populations, which helps in reducing skunk encounters. Installing barn owl boxes attracts these owls to a property, providing them with a safe place to nest. With barn owls, skunks are less likely to make someone's yard their home.

"Barn owls are very effective and also eliminate upwards of 3,000 mice a year," she said.

Skunks are “crepuscular,” meaning they’re only active at dawn and dusk, according to **Eric Cecil**, a life sciences teacher at Piner.

If a person sees one during the day, it probably means it’s sick, Cecil said.

Rabies, a common illness carried by skunks, is fatal to humans, so if a person is ever bitten by a wild animal, such as a skunk, it is essential to get a rabies shot immediately, Cecil said.

Because of the noxiousness of their spray, skunks tend not to have too many predators, Cecil said.

Common predators such as owls, hawks and coyotes have been known to prey on a skunk but not typically because of the animal’s noxious spray, Cecil said.

“They’re very chill animals,” Cecil said. “They don’t mind humans and are happy to live alongside us.”

Indeed, Cecil said a skunk once came within five feet of him and walked by without so much as an acknowledgement. He said his reaction was not to react because he didn’t want to frighten the animal and make it spray.

Cecil said another time he ran into a skunk was out at Pt. Reyes Seashore on a hike and camping trip. He said he remembers a skunk walking into another camper’s tent, sniffing around looking for food and then out again.

The poor camper hid inside a sleeping bag during the skunk’s visit and luckily didn’t get sprayed, he said.

The back of the H building contains many cavities where Max the cat and other stray felines like to hang out. If skunks ever chose to build a nest under the H building, students and teachers there would be treated to a rare aroma.

Piner hasn’t typically had much of a skunk problem before, according to head custodian **Antonio Chavez**.

“Not too often, but they visit the school to leave their fragrance around the buildings and of course inside too,” he said.

On Monday, Jan. 27, Chavez had the pleasure of removing a dead skunk from in front of the high school on Fulton Road.

During skunk season, the animals especially can be a nuisance for pet owners.

Cecil said his black labrador Karmen had several run-ins with skunks and never seemed to have learned his lesson.

If a human or dog is ever sprayed by a skunk, the best way to remove the scent is a mixture of hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, baby shampoo, cleanser and tomato juice, said Cecil.

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## **MOVIE REVIEWS**

### **My review on "Mufasa"**

I really enjoyed this movie. Not only was the animation visually appealing, but I also enjoyed the plot and how the lore all falls into place. Especially if you watch "The Lion King" you can really tell they paid attention to detail. The voice acting just matches every character.

While I liked it overall, a few moments confused me, such as the part where Mufasa's mom, who was presumed dead, comes back at the end of the movie. Yes I like the scene but it doesn't make sense to me.

Plus since this is a sequel and a backstory they went back in time, but the mother isn't in the original "Lion King."

Also Kiara, Simba's daughter had a whole movie and I feel like in "Mufasa" she didn't have enough screen time for us to make a connection with her. had no emotion.

In her own movie, "Simba's Pride," you could really connect with her.

One problem I did have with this movie was trying to tell the characters apart and I don't think I was the only one who struggled. Indeed, my Mom and Dad had the same struggle with understanding the different characters.

The film is animated in 3D, which is a lot more expensive to produce than 2D. While the 3D animation was enjoyable, it made it hard to tell the characters apart. It would have saved a lot of money and I would have preferred to have seen it animated in 2D.

Perhaps the movie's biggest strength is the songs by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is known most famously for writing the music and lyrics of "Hamilton."

Among my favorite of Miranda's cinematic masterpiece songs was "Bye Bye," sung by the actor Mads Mikkelsen.. This song was not originally in the script until Miranda

pitched the idea. The context is the villain, Kiros, a very powerful lion, is closing onto the main pride of lions and is about to kill their bloodline. In the song, Kiros mocks the pride of lions, though they stall him long enough for Mufasa and Taka to escape.

And my other favorite song is "Brother Betrayed" sung by Kelvin Harrison Jr. In the song, Mufasa confesses that he loves Sarabi and a jealous Taka overhears, so he runs away and asks the ancestors why his brother had betrayed him. But after all of this, I really liked watching this movie with my family since we all grew up with the Lion king. And would really recommend it. Rated PG. Prospector Rating 8/10

**-Jo'elle Rose**

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### **My review of "Nosferatu"**

The original "Nosferatu" is a tale as old as time (read: 1929), reported as the earliest surviving film adaptation of Bram Stoker's famous Dracula story.

In 2024, a modern adaptation was released, starring famous actors such as Lily Rose-Depp, Bill Skarsgård, Nicholas Hoult, Willem Dafoe, Emma Corrin, Ralph Ineson, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, and Simon McBurney.

Before getting into the review of the movie, a brief disclaimer, this movie is rated R in the horror/mystery genre, but the review won't go into much detail on aspects of the film that are more adult. Watch at your own risk.

This movie debuted on Christmas Day, making 21.6 million dollars over the traditional weekend, and 40.8 million dollars since its debut.

The movie follows Ellen Hutter and her husband Thomas Hutter as her husband receives word that if he sells an abandoned, old home across from his as a real estate banker, he'd make more money to support them and make a name for himself.

But in order to, he must travel to Transylvania (sound familiar?) to meet with a man, Count Orlok. His wife is left with a close friend Friedrich Harding and his wife Anna, Ellen's childhood friend, and Friedrich and Anna's two girls Clara and Louise.

Thomas is unaware that this man he is meeting after weeks of travel is a monster of a man, and was a creature who'd been preying on Ellen ever since she was a little girl and had called out to anyone for help in her mental struggles. When Count Orlok arrives he brings with him the disease of "Nosferatu."

The movie is gothic and eerie, rich with historical accuracy to the 1830s setting in Wiesburg, Germany, from where the characters try to defeat the impending Nosferatu. It has the occasional gore and blood, with a few jumpscare to get the heart started.

Overall, it is an amazing movie, using its gothic surroundings to its advantage to tell a story of fear, lust, mental struggle, and deeper meanings that leave many disgusted and horrified. I think it tells the story of Nosferatu beautifully, and I could clearly make ties to the Dracula movie(s) as I watched it. I will warn you again if you choose to watch this film. It is adult, it is occasionally gory, it is rated R, basically a classic vampire film. Rated R. Prospector Rating: 9/10

**-Sebastian Witthaus**

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