# Education Coordinating Council

## October 26, 2005

**9:30 a.m.**

St. Anne's Conference Center
155 North Occidental Boulevard, Los Angeles, California

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| Present: | Berisha Black, Vice-Chair |
| | Paisley Pijuan, representing Steve Gocke |
| | Yolie Flores Aguilar |
| | Angela Carter, representing David Sanders |
| | Kathleen Duba |
| | Helen Kleinberg |
| | Miriam Aroni Krinsky |
| | Elizabeth Lem, representing Darline P. Robles |
| | Sharon Harada, representing Paul Higa |
| | Jane Newman, representing Carol Clem |
| | Bruce Saltzer |
| | Sherri Sobel, representing Michael Nash |
| | William Stelzner, representing Patrick D. Leier |
| | Beatriz Olvera Stotzer |
| | Rick Tebbano, representing Christopher Steinhauser |
| | Hector Madrigal, representing Roy Romer |
| | Machelle Wolf |
| Guests: | Jana Cooley, Fifth Supervisorial District |
| | Ressie Roman, Fifth Supervisorial District |
| | Susan Abagnale, Casey Family Programs |

In the absence of Chair José Huizar, Vice-Chair Berisha Black brought the meeting to order at 9:43 a.m. and thanked Michelle Koenig of St. Anne's for arranging the meeting space. Koenig expressed her pleasure at partnering with the ECC, noting that St. Anne's had hosted two of the youth focus groups to be discussed today, and that youth have overwhelmingly expressed their desire to be involved with their own education and to work with professionals who are interested in them.

Black asked council members and the audience to introduce themselves.

## Youth Engagement

In 2003, the Children's Planning Council and the youth council of the city of Los Angeles's Workforce Investment Board established a youth engagement task force, which worked for nearly a year and engaged hundreds of people to produce *Our Voice Is Your Future: Giving L.A.'s Youth Real Voice and Real Power*. Given the discussion at the July ECC meeting around the importance of involving youth in the ECC's decisions, Flores Aguilar was asked to present recommendations from that task force's work for adoption by the ECC.

Youth engagement is defined as youth meaningfully participating in decisions that affect their quality of life. To accomplish this, adults must broaden their thinking, walk the talk, and share power, as well as commit to an overall belief statement—"Youth are assets to our communities and institutions."—and a set of values and principles.

Values:
- Adults have a civic responsibility to make commitments to youth in both policy and practice.
- Youth guide their own self-determination, development, and preservation.
- Youth achieve self-efficacy and power over their own destiny.
- Youth contribute their individual talents, knowledge, skill, and wisdom to social change and excellence in our communities.

Principles:      ⊛  Every young person's life matters equally, including those traditionally excluded.

⊛  All youth must have equitable access and opportunity to achieve their goals.

⊛  Youth are viewed and considered as diverse, self-determining, community-minded individuals.

⊛  All youth must be able to contribute to public consciousness and decision-making.

⊛  Youth analyses of social problems and potential solutions are equal to those of adults.

⊛  Youth must hear sincerity and truth from the institutions, systems, and adults intending to serve them.

⊛  Youth must participate in transforming our institutions to be more inclusive.

Machelle Wolf presented ways the ECC can support these statements (on page 2 of the handout), acknowledging that some of these recommendations already appear in the ECC's Blueprint.

Though all 10,000 printed copies of *Our Voice Is Your Future* have been distributed, Flores Aguilar said that the report is available on the Children's Planning Council's website, http://www.childrensplanningcouncil.org.

**Beatriz Olvera Stotzer moved that the ECC adopt the youth engagement recommendations. Sherri Sobel seconded the motion**, and it went to discussion.

Pragmatic suggestions on achieving youth involvement were solicited, since organizations have experienced challenges in the past. The task force, in fact, met at night and provided transportation for all its youth participants. Combating pervasive media images was also mentioned, as illustrated by a South Los Angeles parent protest over a violent billboard. Miriam Krinsky suggested that members of the ECC provide lists of how their organizations already engage youth in decision-making, and what steps they will be putting into place; with that information,

the ECC can put out a challenge to others. She also advised asking youth what skills they feel they need to effectively participate.

Sherri Sobel wishes this kind of engagement could happen for every child in the system, all of whom have judges, social workers, probation officers, and others mandated to support them. However, she said, "It's the system that is broken." For the first time, the ECC as a group is committing to practical steps for partnering with youth, and a similar commitment is needed from caregivers and parents, who may be struggling with their own issues. Sobel also expressed concerns with the term 'self-esteem,' which she maintains can't be handed to children—they must earn it. "Our kids don't get the opportunity to earn kudos because we're so worried about fixing the family, or getting the kid ready for emancipation if we can't fix the family," she said. Youth connections to community—beyond simply "talking to therapists about their parents using drugs," as Sobel put it—will get them actively involved in their own emancipation.

Miriam Krinsky moved to amend recommendation 3 by adding "*Commit to and* promote" and also suggested adding a seventh recommendation.

1. **Adopt the Youth Engagement Task Force's belief statement, values, and principles.**

2. **Engage, include, and involve youth in designing, implementing, and evaluating ECC-related programs, activities, and events.**

3. ***Commit to and* promote the addition of current and former foster and probation youth to boards, committees, and planning groups responsible for developing and managing academic and enrichment programs for youth.**

4. **Obtain input from youth on major policy decisions that the ECC makes.**

5. **Identify an adult mentor for each youth involved in ECC committees, work groups, or task forces, for those interested in having one.**

6. **Coordinate with others to facilitate training and leadership-development opportunities that will help youth become active and able decision-makers as members of boards, committees, or other work groups.**

7. *Compile a list of how ECC member organizations involve and engage youth in decision-making and what they are planning to do beyond what they are already doing.*

**The amendment was accepted, and the amended motion was unanimously approved.**

## Results of Youth Focus Groups

From September 20 through October 25, consultant Cecilia Sandoval arranged a series of focus groups to listen to foster and probation youth and the people who work with them. She presented a summary of preliminary findings, saying that the formal report—which should include feedback from pending focus groups at two probation camps and the California Youth Connection—will be finalized shortly and shared with all participants.

Nine focus groups involved 118 children, youth, and young adults in transitional housing, residential care (probation and dependency), and the Department of Children and Family Services' Rights of Passage and independent living programs. Fortuitously, exactly half the participants were male and half female. Eighty percent were 14 to 18 years old, 14 percent were emancipated youth aged 18 to 23, and 6 percent were aged 10 to 13. Ethnically, participants were 46 percent African-American, 37 percent Latino, 15 percent White, and 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Most participants have attended many schools and several different kinds of schools, including public, nonpublic, charter, private/religious, continuation, probation camps, juvenile hall, and home schooling. One 14-year-old had been enrolled in 15 schools, and seven probation youth could count 50 schools among them.

Questions asked of these youth included:

- What makes it easier for you to enroll in school and in appropriate classes?

- What barriers to education have you encountered?

- Who helps you with school issues?

- How do you get information about nonschool programs?

- How do you feel about sharing your information with school officials, to get services?

- What two or three things can involved adults (caregivers, parents, foster parents, probation officers, social workers, etc.) do to help you graduate from high school?

Most youth have some family member in their lives, though young adults have fewer. Relatives, school counselors, teachers, probation officers, and social workers were mentioned (in that order) as those who helped students, and adults who helped most were seen as "staff who do more than implement the rules." Foster parents were hardly ever mentioned.

What youth desire most is someone who cares about them, who supports and encourages them, who believes in them, pushes them to do better, and motivates them. They want:

- Teachers who care whether they learn or not

- Adults who keep their word (social workers should check more often to see if foster parents are sending kids to school)

- More interesting programs

- Help with the basics (tutoring and help with schoolwork, exams, and applications for financial support)

- School counselors who can help (counselors were most often named as someone in schools who students can go to, though reactions were divided on how helpful they usually were)

- Better prepared foster parents (mandated training, better credentials; foster parents were rarely identified as resources or advocates)

Barriers they encounter include:

- Lost or delayed paperwork (missing transcripts often mean students are not in the right classes or not getting credit for classes; schools can take 30 to 45 days to send transcripts, and juvenile halls take three to four months)

- Lack of information (none were aware of the education liaisons, and all have to fend for themselves to find out about after-school or off-session programs; they prefer to get information from posters in public places, flyers, bulletin boards, other students, or teachers)

- Access and safety issues, particularly transportation

Youth were evenly split on confidentiality, with those who preferred that information about them *not* be shared with schools—even if that meant they could more easily access services and receive considerable benefits—speaking out passionately. About half the participants felt that no one should know their business unless they themselves volunteer it, while the other half said that disclosure should be permitted, but only with their cooperation and in their presence. Some said they would approach a designated person on campus, though not an administrator. Others have been disappointed so many times, Sandoval said, that they simply don't care.

Three focus groups were also held with a total of 52 adults, and Sandoval thanked the Association of Community Human Service Agencies for its help in arranging two of those groups. The third involved a group in SPA 7 that is trying to coordinate foster parents in that area. Adults expressed their concerns about being held accountable for things over which they have no control, the lack of information that accompanies the children placed with them, and how long it takes to get that information.

Helen Kleinberg recommended similar focus groups for children in relative care, since grandparents often feel alienated from schools and other agencies. "What's the secret for the kids who really make it?" she asked. Regarding how youth view accountability in terms of themselves, Sandoval said that many youth acknowledge that they've made mistakes and now it's time to "straighten out," but that they need help. Other youth don't feel they are accountable to anyone for anything. That's where the challenge lies, Beatriz Olvera Stotzer said, with those youth who

harbor so much mistrust and lack of connection. "The system creates an environment where kids have no dreams," she said. The most disenchanted youth, Sandoval commented, were those who had been moved around the most.

The paperwork issue is part of the Blueprint, Flores Aguilar said, and should be a high-priority item. It has also arisen with a report on the juvenile justice system that the Children's Planning Council is coordinating. The system tends to blame the school districts, but there is also "a huge disconnect and lack of follow-through from the juvenile hall system," according to Flores Aguilar. Sandoval said that much of the linkage problem stems from constant staff turnover in schools and county departments.

## Blueprint Initial Draft Outline

If the ECC agrees today that the draft Blueprint presents the correct framework with the right level of recommendations, lead consultant Sharon Watson said, the next couple of months will be spent filling in the gaps that exist and circulating the document to stakeholder groups for feedback. The ECC will consider the Blueprint's final form and recommendations at its January 2006 meeting, which will necessitate asking the Board of Supervisors for a short extension to the reporting timeframe.

The draft Blueprint builds on the findings of the two education summits in 2003 and 2004 that led to the creation of the ECC, as well as on the efforts of the ECC's four work groups over the last six to eight months. A Blueprint work group, chaired by Helen Kleinberg, has also been working on the document, as has the Planning Group, which hosted a September 14 special meeting with stakeholders, including foster parents, biological parents, holders of educational rights, caseworkers, CASAs, legal experts and school personnel.

Watson acknowledged that the current draft gives short shrift to special education, the early identification of issues, connections to permanency planning, family literacy, and other topics. New ideas will keep emerging, and the ECC will continue to seize opportunities as they arise even if they are not formally included in the Blueprint. Some structural changes will likely be necessary for the ECC as it moves to implementing the plan.

As an example of an emerging action, Carrie Watson reported on her work with an advisory committee appointed by Congress to develop recommendations around youth who are having trouble accessing financial aid. As a result of their discussions, committee staff have agreed to include language on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) to make it easier for foster youth to self-identify, make financial aid available to youth in relative care or guardianship, and develop a joint form for Chafee and FAFSA grants.

Sharon Watson briefly reviewed the various sections of the Blueprint draft, which include introductory material describing the challenges to educational success for foster and probation youth, what is known about the achievement gap, the desired outcomes for these youth, and background information about the formation, composition, and approach of the ECC.

The document then outlines six basic agreements needed to achieve the desired results, along with some examples of practical solutions from each of the work groups: prevention/early childhood education, youth development, data and information-sharing, and school-based support/education liaisons. The plan details what it will take to do better, discussing roles, responsibilities, and challenges for individuals who touch children's lives—biological parents, other caregivers, holders of children's education rights, legal advocates, caseworkers, school personnel, and the judiciary—as well as for the youth themselves (a section to be added). The Blueprint then lays out the accountability for ensuring educational success that lies within the system and within the ECC, concluding with next steps and a restatement of what is being asked of everyone. It will end with acknowledgements and several appendices of supporting information.

The Planning Group will meet in November and December to work on finalizing the recommendations, and a Blueprint drafting group (including representatives from DCFS, Probation, school districts, the legal community, caregivers, and youth) will meet over the next two months to finalize the document itself. A second draft will be widely circulated, and all versions will be distributed to ECC members, who were encouraged to provide input by e-mail or telephone.

Citing the 35 percent of foster and probation youth enrolled in special education, Helen Kleinberg expressed concerns about those services not being addressed in the Blueprint, since serious issues exist about resources and identification of need. She also stressed the addition of a mental health component, since many people dealing with these youth don't understand their behavioral issues, and mentioned similar concerns about children from birth to age three—the Blueprint includes little about caregivers working with young children and their development. Sherri Sobel disagreed that these areas should be a major portion of the Blueprint, maintaining that they would shift perspective and derail a process that should be for *all* foster and probation youth. Sobel acknowledged that the issue could be divisive, and declared herself more than willing to meet with Kleinberg and others to explain her position.

Hector Madrigal agreed that linkages with counselors are imperative for students; he would like to see every school employ an advocate with a counseling perspective and a pupil personnel credential, dedicated to high-risk populations who require additional assistance, such as foster and probation youth and homeless students. Districts are not doing this because of funding constraints, and he asked if that might be addressed legislatively.

Yolie Flores Aguilar applauded the expansion of early childhood education to 'prevention,' but would like to see more overall mention of families, as well as family support and strengthening.

In the What We Know section, Miriam Krinsky suggested including research regarding the educational patterns of youth crossing from the dependency to the delinquency systems, one-quarter of whom are not enrolled in school at all. She also recommended that the first of the six Basic Agreements include a mention of normalcy in extracurricular activities, and that the fourth be expanded to include smooth transitions between schools (timeliness of record transfers, minimizing time out of school, etc.) when school stability cannot be achieved. She further suggested a seventh agreement, committing to no child's leaving the system without graduating from high school and achieving basic literacy skills. In addition, in the Practical Solutions section under data and information-sharing, she recommended that solution 6 be changed to read "*Make policy changes to enforce existing laws, then consider* amendments to Federal, state, and local" regulations permitting the sharing of information. "Others are already sharing this information," she

said, and California state law compels it, though some believe that Federal law constrains state law.

Beatriz Olvera Stotzer hopes that a focus group can be held with youth before the report is finalized so they may evaluate the recommendations as to which will have the most impact on their lives. She also wanted clarification on which proposals are short-term and which long-term in nature, and what can be done now. The city of Los Angeles's Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families is currently working on safety in schools, and is finding that sometimes very simple things—the principal greeting each child at the start of the day, knowing what streets can safely be walked—can add immeasurably to a child's educational experience. Olvera Stotzer also hopes that the Blueprint can focus on opportunities and not on the shortcomings of the system.

Angela Carter appreciated the incorporation of permanency planning with regard to child safety in schools and in transit, acknowledging that all must play a role in partnerships to make that happen.

In the six Basic Agreements, Bruce Saltzer recommended looking at school quality as well as school stability, and at the individualized needs of the student. "One size does not fit all," he cautioned. In the Accountability section of What It Will Take To Do Better, he advised that caregivers need to be involved in developing education plans, not just in implementing them; a major challenge for caregivers continues to be getting enough information. He also counseled laying out how the education case plan relates to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) created by the district.

An audience member urged the ECC to mention gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in the Blueprint, at focus-group discussions, and in the education of foster parents. Charter schools, with their individualized approach, stability, and connections with the community, were viewed as a solution to many problems, and mental health services were seen as a necessity.

**Beatriz Olvera Stotzer moved to approve the draft Blueprint in concept. Helen Kleinberg seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.**

Sharon Watson reviewed the handout detailing the Blueprint development process from this point on, which will necessitate requesting an extension from the Board of Supervisors so that the full ECC can approve the finalized document at its January meeting. Allowing time for final edits, the submission deadline to the Board will be moved to February 15, 2006.

**Yolie Flores Aguilar moved that the timeline for Blueprint development be adopted, and Beatriz Olvera Stotzer seconded the motion. It was unanimously approved.**

## Data/Information-Sharing Update

Judge Michael Nash recently approved a blanket order allowing the Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department to share data with the seven school districts that sit on the ECC (Compton, Lancaster, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Pasadena, Pomona, and the Los Angeles County Office of Education). This order will allow researchers to know in which of the county's 1,500 public schools the largest numbers of foster and probation children are enrolled. Confidentiality is being maintained, with data available only on an aggregate level. Jacquelyn McCroskey expressed particular appreciation to County Counsel Rose Belda for her help on this project, which started with an initial data match with the Los Angeles Unified School District and now will be expanded to other schools districts. Now that ECC's request for this blanket order has been granted, the data and information-sharing work group will be reconvened.

McCroskey called members' attention to two documents in their packets: *A Comparative Analysis of Educational Performance by Students at The Sycamores Non-Public School* by Maura Flaherty and Andrea Zetlin, and a piece by Ron Avi Astor from an education newsletter on public foster care schools, which cites the work of the ECC. A professor at USC, Astor has found that many schools with high rates of on-campus violence also have high rates of foster and probation youth enrollment—not because those youth cause the violence, but because those schools tend to be in violent communities.

## Public Comment

♦ Regarding the Blueprint, audience members advocated the addition of mental health services and assessments, working with the criminal justice system so incarcerated parents may participate in their children's education, and dealing with permanency not just in terms of placement, but in terms of caseworker turnover. Teachers and school administrators need to be educated about the needs of foster and probation youth, and court-appointed attorneys must ensure that judges have all the appropriate information to make good decisions. Early intervention in the schools is important so that behavioral symptoms can be addressed before they worsen, and so that parents and children can be immediately connected to resources. "It's not right for kids to have to go into the probation system to get help," said one parent, telling of her son's experience. "Why didn't the school tell me something was wrong?"

♦ Terri Chew Nishimura, chair of the early childhood work group, said that her group has discussed early intervention recommendations, and she would work with the Blueprint drafting group to incorporate them.

♦ With regard to placement stability, one audience member recommended training, education, and additional supports to help caregivers deal with different behaviors as foster children age. A component that allows for intervention in placement, so that children are not moved when caregivers cannot deal with them, would be ideal.

♦ According to Pamela Lewis from the foster care unit in the Los Angeles Unified School District, many foster and probation youth—particularly those in group homes—go into alternative school settings such as community day schools or charter schools that have extensive referral processes and limited enrollment. "The Blueprint is a great start," she said, "though in a perfect world it would begin with much younger children." A large number of foster and probation youth are so far behind that they can't be placed at the local high school, and it's a serious issue to find places for them.

♦ A company providing alcohol and drug counseling has had its services refused by school districts even though the company would bear the cost. A representative urged a look at how drugs and alcohol, including parents' substance abuse problems, affect the youth population.

The next meeting of the ECC is scheduled for January 25, 2006, at 9:30 a.m., at a location to be announced.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:03 p.m.