



Education Dialogue with School District Superintendents

April 19, 2006

10:30 a.m.

Los Angeles County Office of Education Headquarters
9300 Imperial Highway, Downey, CA

Present:

- Bryan Astrachan, Lynwood Unified School District
- Robert Barnes, LACOE
- Francisco Bustamante, Mountain View School District
- Roberto Casas, Lynwood Unified School District
- William Elkins, LACOE
- Amy Enomoto-Perez, Rosemead School District
- Richard Graves, South Whittier School District
- Jack Gyves, Palmdale School District
- Robert Henke, Montebello Unified School District
- David Holmes, Los Angeles Unified School District
- Maria Hwang De Bravo, Centinela Valley Union High School District
- Pat James, Lynwood Unified School District
- Elizabeth Lem, LACOE
- Pat Levinson, LACOE
- Hector Madrigal, Los Angeles Unified School District
- Richard Martinez, Pomona Unified School District
- Bruce McDaniel, Lennox School District
- Barbara Okushi, Rowland Unified School District
- Phil Page, Gorman School District

- Panel:
- Greg Riccio, Eastside Union School District
 - Barbara Richardson, Rosemead School District
 - Scott Smith, Lancaster School District
 - Bill Stelzner, Pomona Unified School District
 - Steve Tabor, Hawthorne School District
 - Catherine Terry, LACOE
 - Albert Vasquez, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District
 - Reid Wagner, Antelope Valley Union High School District
- Guest:
- Gail Tierney, Education Deputy, Fourth Supervisorial District
 - William Arroyo, Department of Mental Health
 - Jitahadi Imara, Probation Department
 - Hon. Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Juvenile Court
 - Darline Robles, LACOE
 - David Sanders, Department of Children and Family Services
 - Sharon G. Watson, ECC Lead Consultant

Darline Robles welcomed everyone to this first gathering of superintendents and school district staff to participate in a dialogue with county department representatives about children and youth in the county's care. (About a third of the 81 school districts are currently on spring break, which is why some were not in attendance.) She introduced the departmental panel, explaining that director Marv Southard of the Department of Mental Health was unable to be here, and expressing sorrow over the untimely passing of former Chief Probation Officer Paul Higa. She also introduced the ECC support team of lead consultant Sharon Watson, director Carrie Watson, researcher Jacquelyn McCroskey, and facilitator Cecilia Sandoval. She then asked attendees to introduce themselves.

The Education Coordinating Council was created in November 2004 by the Board of Supervisors to bring together the major stakeholders, policy-makers, individuals, and systems who work with foster and probation youth to raise the educational achievement of these children and ensure their academic success. The ECC's 23 members include the departments represented on the panel as

well as seven school districts with large number of foster and probation youth enrolled—LACOE, LAUSD, Lancaster, Long Beach, Compton, Pasadena, and Pomona.

According to Judge Michael Nash, between 27,000 and 28,000 children are currently in the dependency system, with the majority being of school age, and over 20,000 are in the delinquency system, all of whom are of school age. In addition, an informal juvenile and traffic court deals with truancy and other school issues, and is the busiest part of the court system. Last year, it heard 171,000 citations in Los Angeles County, many of them flowing from schools. In all, between 50,000 and 100,000 children every year are touched by the **courts**, which are taking an active role in establishing checklists for educational progress, bringing education specialists into the legal system, and appointing legal advocates to work with schools in meeting children's specialized needs.

What We Know About These Students

Consultant Jacquelyn McCroskey, a professor at USC's School of Social Work, said that although all systems agree that sharing data is critical to working together, each one has different mandates and regulations regarding confidentiality issues. Rather than attempt to resolve every conflict before moving on with the work, the ECC has chosen a piecemeal, simplified approach.

In January 2005, a court order authorized the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to share data with the Los Angeles Unified School District. At the ECC's request, the nearly 7,500 LAUSD students in the child welfare system were compared with all other students enrolled in LAUSD. The analysis was performed by LAUSD's planning, assessment, and research bureau and used aggregate data only.

	DCFS Students	Non-DCFS Students
In special education	28.5%	10.8%
Suspended in 2003–2004	15.9%	5.8%
Identified as gifted/talented	2.2%	7.8%
Proficient/advanced in English Language Arts (elementary)	11.2%	26.3%
Proficient/advanced in English Language Arts (high school)	9.4%	21.4%
Proficient/advanced in math (elementary)	19.3%	40.4%
Proficient/advanced in math (high school)	2.2%	7.9%

Similar distressing patterns existed in the data for middle school students.

LACOE data from November 2005 was also used to analyze information about Probation youth. A discussion paper that McCroskey distributed discusses the study in depth and describes the specific LACOE programs in which the youth were enrolled.

	Number of youth	Percent in regular education	Percent in special education
Juvenile halls	2,047	79%	21%
Camps	2,064	80%	20%
Community day schools	676	87%	13%

The Star Advantage test is administered to students upon their entry into juvenile hall; the majority of those taking the test are between 15 and 17 years old.

		Reading grade level	Math grade level
Juvenile halls	Regular education students	4.9	5.7
	Special education students	3.8	6.0
Camp schools	Regular education students	5.3	5.5
	Special education students	4.0	4.4
Community day schools	Regular education students	7.0	9.0
	Special education students	4.1	4.6

As can be seen, the academic performance of foster and probation youth is severely compromised, and it will take all of the relevant systems working together, McCroskey said, to resolve the multiple issues that hinder achievement. Additional data matches are planned with the school districts sitting on the ECC; all districts in attendance were also asked to consider participating.

Hector Madrigal urged a comparison of dropout and graduation rates between the foster and probation youth population and the regular population, and McCroskey said that a second LAUSD data match would look at those elements. Darline Robles mentioned anecdotal evidence from youth in probation camps indicating that many haven't been to regular school since the fifth or sixth grade. She would like to capture the points at which children are sent to alternative settings. Madrigal agreed, citing the frustrations that many districts experience in looking for alternative programs in which to place youngsters with behavioral problems that may be precursors of involvement with the delinquency system. Districts often jump to the conclusion that these youth "don't belong in regular school," a phrase he believes needs examination, and system bias transfers them disproportionately to alternative schools.

Another data issue is the mobility of students. Is there a critical period of time during which they need to be in a given district, exposed to its instructional strategies, to see success? Staff development was also mentioned, since teachers often don't have the training to deal with troubled students, and few universities offer specialist credentials in working with at-risk populations.

The data makes clear that some children in some environments do better than others. Can an analysis of variables determine discrete points of benefit that can improve academic performance? Such a study would admittedly be complicated, but could help filter out programs and approaches that are not effective, and nurture those that make a positive difference. The possible impact of schools' zero-tolerance policies against alcohol and drugs should also be explored.

Expecting More: A Blueprint for Raising the Educational Achievement of Foster and Probation Youth

Copies of the Blueprint were mailed to all superintendents prior to this meeting, and the report is available at the ECC's website, <http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org>. Also available for

download is a report on a series of focus groups held with foster and probation youth and their caregivers, *Through Their Eyes*. Sharon Watson found heartening the frequency with which youth identified the most important person in their educational lives as their school counselor.

The ECC adopted the Blueprint in January and the Board of Supervisors did so in February 2006. It is meant to be a starting point and a work in progress, acknowledging the shared responsibility of players in multiple systems to develop the “how-to’s” of a detailed operational plan. The document addresses critical gaps in four key areas: early childhood education, youth development, data and information-sharing, and school-based support. The agreements it requires are:

- The central importance of education
- High expectations for children and youth involved in the foster and probation systems
- A strong investment in prevention
- That any factor affecting educational success must be paid attention to and addressed early on
- School stability
- The involvement of parents and caregivers
- A shared understanding of educational responsibility

The twelve Blueprint recommendations are:

1. Higher numbers enrolled in high-quality early intervention, care, and education programs
2. Increased support and resources to parents, relative caregivers, and foster parents
3. Higher numbers enrolled in skill-building and enrichment programs with non-system children
4. Involving youth in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs, activities, and events
5. Paying greater attention to preparing children and youth for life transitions and for transfers between schools
6. Participating in and working to align local efforts to create safer schools and safe passages

7. Assuring the enhanced sharing of information among school districts, county departments, the juvenile courts, and counsel for children by:
 - Resolving differing views about what Federal law and California law allow
 - Establishing a clear understanding of confidentiality laws
 - Pursuing amendments to FERPA, if needed
8. Ensuring the development of an electronically based information system with individual records
9. Providing information to educational liaisons and school-based staff
10. Training school-based staff on the educational and emotional needs of foster and probation youth
11. Cross-training major stakeholder groups on their collective and individual responsibilities for ensuring a solid education for youth
12. Being accountable for the educational success of youth:
 - DCFS and Probation caseworkers (through multidisciplinary team decision-making and case conferences)
 - Caregivers and others (implementing educational plans)
 - Courts (monitoring the creation and progress of plans, and holding parties accountable)

Along with about eight Blueprint pages outlining the roles and responsibilities of individuals and systems in improving educational results for foster and probation youth, the ECC as a whole has committed to:

- Championing the Blueprint agreements
- Promoting partnerships
- Developing and coordinating ideas
- Tracking indicators of success
- Monitoring and reporting progress
- Intervening and problem-solving
- Holding its members accountable for achieving the Blueprint vision and goals

At the group's quarterly meetings, one of which is scheduled for next week, ECC members will report on what they have done so far to accomplish Blueprint goals, what their plans are, and what partnerships are needed.

Making the Blueprint a Reality

Many different dynamics affect the way a child is educated, said Judge Nash, and the point of today's dialogue is not to lay that burden solely at the feet of the schools. Though the system is far from perfect, foster and probation youth actually have assets that most children do not: a designated caregiver, an attorney to communicate their needs to the court, a judge looking out for their best interests, a social worker or probation officer working directly with them and their families, and service providers for mental health and other needs. Together with the schools, these advocates can guarantee a decent level of achievement, but efforts must be coordinated.

In a single year, **DCFS** director David Sanders reported, about 160,000 instances of possible abuse and neglect are investigated in Los Angeles County—approximately 5 percent of all children—and 30 percent of those come from the schools. The number of children placed in out-of-home care has fallen from 47,000 seven years ago to between 20,000 and 30,000 today, and there has been a 15 to 20 percent reduction of children placed in group homes. However, more children are remaining with their families with an open child protection case than in the past.

DCFS is taking or has taken several steps in terms of education:

- It has co-located educational specialists in its 18 regional offices to bring expertise to its 3,000 social workers countywide.
- It is interested in co-locating social workers in schools in an effort similar to its agreement with the Los Angeles Police Department to bring DCFS staff into police precincts.
- Performance expectations tied to academic goals—enrollment, staying in school, academic achievement, and graduation—are already built in to group home contracts and are being included in contracts with foster family agencies.

- In foster family agency contracts, performance measures are also being included that attempt to ensure that children stay in the same school both when they are removed from their families and if they are moved again while in foster care.
- Access to early Head Start and other early childhood programs is being increased for the 30 percent of children in out-of-home care who are age five and under.
- The department is looking at reducing the number of formal plans that social workers must complete, concentrating instead on including relevant information on one or two forms, where the education information being promoted by the ECC would be included.

Greg Riccio applauded the idea of co-locating social work staff, saying that the Antelope Valley would welcome that concept. In the Pomona Unified School District, already a contractor to provide family preservation services, co-location of DCFS staff could also increase effectiveness, and Hector Madrigal said that LAUSD was open to that dialogue as well. Judge Nash mentioned the out-stationing of school district representatives at some court locations (though funding issues have caused some positions to be eliminated), and noted that a clearer sense of their roles and responsibilities could make that effort more meaningful.

Jitahadi Imara from the **Probation Department** echoed the sorrow already expressed at the death of Paul Higa, and announced that the Board of Supervisors had yesterday appointed Robert Taylor to become Chief Probation Officer as of May 3. One of Higa's passions, Imara continued, was for probation youth to have first-class services and opportunities, and the department remains committed to that goal. Focusing on bureaucracies rather than on a systemic therapeutic approach to helping individuals will only marginalize youth from both the probation and child welfare systems. Dealing with youth in isolation has brought problematic results; the key point of intervention is the family. What should it look like? What is its relationship to the school and the community? When youth return home, what outcomes are really desired? A single approach to outcomes, no matter where a youth is housed, is vital.

The probation approach must undergo a sea change for deputies to become true advocates for youth, and the department must scrutinize practices such as housing high-risk and low-risk youth together. At the core of any educational strategy must be literacy, and Imara praised Operation Read, begun

by Supervisor Don Knabe five years ago. “We must be intolerant of systems not sharing academic data,” Imara said, and he challenged Judge Nash and Supervisor Knabe’s office to ensure that this barrier is eliminated. “We’re asking youth to do things that place them at tremendous risk,” he said, “such as breaking gang ties and crossing gang boundaries. It is unconscionable for us not to do the same.”

The No Child Left Behind Act has been, in the words of one attendee, “a disaster,” hammering students with academics and basic-skills requirements without interesting them in practical applications such as construction and electronics that might help them see an economic point to their classes. Educators need to anticipate the swing of the pendulum that is bound to occur when legislators realize this approach doesn’t work.

The communication of test results is indispensable between probation camps, schools, and caregivers, and knowing the reason a youth is in camp or juvenile hall also helps a district make an appropriate alternative placement if that is needed. Nash said that the courts are required to provide educational information to school districts—he will find out why that process is not working and fix it. With regard to FERPA and confidentiality, he reported that numerous other jurisdictions have resolved conflicts through memoranda of understanding, and he is at a loss to explain why Los Angeles County has not done likewise. A blanket order proposed by his office—with a resolution expected next month—deals only with districts providing educational records to the courts, but he acknowledged that information also needs to flow the other way, from the courts to the schools.

Young people who have moved from child welfare into the probation system, Darline Robles said, often have no idea where they will be living once they are released from incarceration. She recommended co-locating not only offices but responsibility, giving youth one person to help them navigate what happens next in their lives. Sanders acknowledged that dual-system cases are complicated, but recent legislation gives jurisdictions the opportunity to change where the line between delinquency and dependency has historically been drawn. The Child Welfare League of America is consulting with departments to look at how a possible team approach would work with DCFS, Probation, and the courts. Imara reiterated his emphasis on accountability, suggesting that certain systems become collectively responsible for outcomes.

Bill Arroyo from the **Department of Mental Health** worked with classrooms of emotionally disturbed students for LAUSD, served as DCFS medical director, and has also worked in probation camps. He told of recently asking a young camp resident what his plans were for school upon his release, and being challenged about education's relevance. "Why do I want to go to school?" the boy asked him. "How much did you have to pay for your education? I don't have that kind of money. I look at my parents—they work ten or twelve hours a day and they don't make anything. Why would I work behind that ugly desk when I can sell drugs for an hour a day and make twice what you make?"

A number of recent DMH initiatives have stemmed from lawsuits, ballot initiatives, and other mandates, though they don't always function together as smoothly as might be hoped. Mental health services are being co-located at probation camps and DCFS regional offices, and are provided by contractors in 79 of the county's school districts. Director Marv Southard would like to see services in all 81.

In 2004, the Mental Health Services Act was passed by California voters, and Los Angeles County is anticipating \$160 million in new MHSA funding this year. A bidders conference was held yesterday with potential contractors, and it is hoped that programs will be up and running this summer. A good portion of these funds—\$25 million—is earmarked for young people from birth to age 24, to provide in-home services, family support, temporary housing, respite care, and drop-in centers for homeless and runaway youth, and to target youth who have both mental health and substance abuse issues. Services with a tested scientific basis supporting their effectiveness are being considered, and the department's partnership with DCFS is healthy. About \$1.5 million will be used to expand mental health services at probation camps.

Despite this new tax-based funding, DMH is facing a budget shortfall of \$45 million, since MHSA dollars cannot be used to fill budget gaps. The preliminary plan to deal with the shortfall is a curtailment of \$6 million in mental health services for children and youth, though this has not yet been approved by the Board of Supervisors.

What Is Being Done? What Should Be Planned?

- LACOE's Foster Youth Services section provides assistance to children in group homes and helps other foster and probation youth to enroll in school and straighten out their credits, which are often confused if they enter a district in mid-semester. Pat Levinson suggested that districts accept the mobility of system youth as a fact and make efforts to better prepare teaching staff and attendance office staff for this kind of turnover. The impact on the child of moving must be minimized, whether by making information on class credits more readily available or by ensuring that medications are continued in the next placement.
- A multiagency approach would be ideal in applying for state and Federal grants to assist students, and LACOE could take the lead in Los Angeles County's applying as an entity.
- The hub of services model should be promoted for all districts, with those experiencing declining enrollments providing office space for co-located services. Again, LACOE could take the lead in taking this effort to scale countywide.
- Jitahadi Imara emphasized the importance of research on the multiple determinants for delinquency (family, school, peers, community) and on using a strength-based model of strong parental and community involvement in schools. What supports the basic functioning of families and schools and makes them successful?
- A positive school climate can be generated by staff development opportunities that give teachers knowledge about the emotional realities of foster and probation youth and a repertoire of techniques to handle them beyond school removal or suspension. The prevention of misconduct—solving problems prior to an escalation in behavior—should be stressed.
- School facilities (particularly middle schools) should be used for after-school programs in music, art, academic enrichment, sports, and other supervised activities run jointly with other agencies.
- Districts should agree on the minimum documentation that students or caregivers must have ready in order to enroll. Currently, every district has different paperwork requirements and foster parents often cannot get children into school because documents are missing.

- Darline Robles asked that all districts present commit to instructing their records sections to give priority to foster and probation children, making the extra effort to fax transcripts or make phone calls requesting them within 24 hours.
- The law says that records should be available in two days, but the reality is that they often aren't. If records aren't available, children may languish in group homes or on the street when they would be much better off in the school environment. They should be enrolled even without records, as the law requires.
- Numerical goals should be set for numbers of foster and probation youth enrolled in school.

Closing

David Sanders thanked Cecilia Sandoval for facilitating the discussion, and expressed appreciation to Darline Robles for hosting the meeting and providing the delicious lunch. The consensus of the group was that these educational dialogues are important and should take place more than once a year; another will be scheduled sometime in the fall. Robles suggested that the Department of Health Services also be asked to participate.