



Education Dialogue with School District Superintendents

November 2, 2007

10:00 a.m.

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

Present:

- Michelle Barritt, ECC
- Diane Bladen, El Monte-Rosemead School District
- Maria Bravo, Centinela Valley Union School District
- Joe Buenavista, Compton Unified School District
- Dean Conklin, Duarte Unified School District
- Zeff Dena, Rowland Unified School District
- Barbara Falconer, Walnut Valley Unified School District
- Ron Grider, Lynwood Unified School District
- Jennifer Hottenroth, Department of Children and Family Services
- Jitahadi Imara, Probation Department
- Patricia James, Lynwood Unified School District
- Joshua Kim, Eastside Union School District
- Patricia Levinson, LACOE
- Laurie Love, Torrance Unified School District
- Lillian Maldonado French, Los Nietos School District
- Richard Martinez, Pomona Unified School District
- Eric Marts, Department of Children and Family Services
- Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana, Pomona Unified School District
- Carrie Miller, ECC
- Christopher Moton, Norwalk La Mirada Unified School District
- Hon. Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Juvenile Court
- Robert Nero, Compton Unified School District
- Cecilia Ornelas, Bassett Unified School District
- Louis Pappas, Covina Valley Unified School District
- Ginny Peterson, Garvey School District
- Darline Robles, LACOE
- Cecilia Sandoval, ECC
- Doug Sears, Temple City Unified School District
- Mary Sieu, ABC Unified School District
- Cynthia Simms, Walnut Valley Unified School District
- Norma Sturgis, Los Angeles Unified School District

Present Rick Tebbano, Long Beach Unified School District
(continued): Gail Tierney, Fourth Supervisorial District
Rebecca Turrentine, Probation Department
Reid Wagner, Antelope Valley Union High School District
Sharon G. Watson, ECC Lead Consultant

Darline Robles welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for attending this third dialogue between school district leadership and county departments, sponsored by the Education Coordinating Council, to discuss issues pertaining to students under the supervision of the court. The ECC was created by the Board of Supervisors in November 2004 to raise the educational achievement of those students, and its 24 members include the Los Angeles County Office of Education and six school districts with large numbers of foster and probation youth—Los Angeles, Lancaster, Long Beach, Compton, Pasadena, and Pomona. Robles introduced ECC staff and county department representatives, and asked other attendees to introduce themselves.

The purpose of these dialogues is to focus on system-wide efforts to better support foster and probation youth. In the past, the group has addressed delays experienced by the juvenile court and county departments in obtaining student records from school districts. That issue has been satisfactorily resolved, and the majority of today's agenda will be devoted, in turn, to what school districts need from the court and county departments.

Los Angeles County has 20 full-time dependency courts—19 at Edelman Children's Court and one satellite court in Lancaster—that see about 28,000 abused and neglected children each year. In addition, 28 full-time delinquency courts in 10 locations deal annually with about 20,000 youth in the probation system. Judge Michael Nash passed around a 'bench book for education issues' he created for judicial officers that contains checklists and protocols for court personnel, attorneys, social workers, and probation officers. His goal is to raise everyone's awareness level about keeping close tabs on children's progress in school and helping children and families navigate the educational system. A program that appoints educational advocates to resolve specific issues (317e Panel) has been very successful in the dependency court, and training in the delinquency court is now underway that should be completed in January.

These efforts are part of Nash's long-term plan to increase the court's knowledge of education issues and have it do a better job of advocating for services to improve children's educational outcomes. "This is a sea change for us, no question," he said. "We're doing a little better, but we're nowhere near where we need to be." He is very interested in hearing from school districts what they need from the courts and what the courts can do to enhance districts' abilities to work more effectively with students. "We have extra responsibility for these kids in our system—we have to step into the shoes of their parents. We know most kids in the system have deficits and need some extra effort. How can we better work together to compensate for that?"

Blueprint Implementation

The ECC Blueprint for raising foster and probation youth's educational achievement was adopted by the Board of Supervisors in February 2006, and included recommended actions in four areas: early childhood education, youth development, data and information-sharing, and

school-based support. The ECC's August 2007 progress report on implementing the Blueprint recommendations was distributed; full implementation is planned for June 2009.

Follow-up from Previous Meeting

- As requested, Carrie Miller distributed **contact information for the Department of Children and Family Services'** education section, as well as for service bureau deputy directors and regional administrators in all DCFS offices. DCFS has jurisdiction over foster youth in the dependency system, and its education section is dedicated to working with school districts and others with regard to foster youth education. Division chief Jennifer Hottenroth and her staff can probably answer most questions, and districts interested in involving DCFS staff in local efforts may contact the regional offices.
- Since February, many school districts have adopted the '**AB 490 letter**,' which outlines applicable law and what rules school administrators must follow when enrolling foster youth in the public school system. Foster youth asked for this tool, and it has proved extremely helpful for caregivers and office staff alike. Sample letters from various districts are available on the ECC's website, <http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org>, under Tools & Links. School districts that would like to review a sample letter were encouraged to sign up with Miller today; once approved, the text can be put on school district letterhead, signed by the superintendent, and posted on the ECC website for immediate access. "This seems so simple," Sharon Watson said, "but it's made a big difference, and we'd like to see as many school districts as possible be a part of this."

What School Districts Need from the Juvenile Court

- Reid Wagner spoke of the need for transcripts and IEPs to be included in the packets of **youth transitioning from probation camps**, so districts can make appropriate class assignments immediately instead of waiting the two to three weeks it can take to get those documents. (CAHSEE results are also often missing, Robert Nero added.) Although Probation staff creates those packets, Darline Robles said, LACOE has that information in its database and it can easily be printed out. Judge Nash admitted that the court can do a better job of ensuring that educational documents are accumulated and communicated.

One issue the court has recently emphasized, Nash continued, is Probation's responsibility to begin transition planning the very moment youth enter camp, rather than waiting until just before their release. A process was created a few years ago requiring Probation to report on those plans at regular intervals during the youth's incarceration, and judicial officers have tried to make sure that occurs. However, Nash said, "We have not focused on this issue sufficiently, and I've been very dissatisfied with the transition process. Many, many things need to be resolved before kids leave camp, to get them back in school right away."

The Probation Department's Jitahadi Imara concurred with Nash about the goal, but said that issues of resources and ineffective communication sometimes prevent it from being reached at the line level. "If we can solve this for Lancaster," Imara said (where Wagner's district is located), "then we can solve it for every district. We need to manage the details." For example, moving large numbers of records can be daunting; in one district, four workers had to manage

16,000 transcripts. Imara suggested a committee to look at the process, “from what we want to who makes it happen.” Earlier notification to schools where transitioning youth will be enrolled would also be helpful, Norma Sturgis added, as well as making records immediately available.

The transition plan is a major piece of Probation’s recent camp redesign, Rebecca Turrentine said, and it should begin at the intake assessment. The case manager should backward-map the case plan to the date of the youth’s release, and the target school district should be contacted long before that. Chief Probation Officer Robert Taylor is very concerned about the well-being of probation students, Turrentine said, and well understands the education piece. His educational reform task force is studying steps that will ensure that all students leave with a plan for their next chapter, whether that is a comprehensive high school, some kind of vocational education, or another alternative that best meets their needs.

Joe Buenavista was reminded of his experience in San Francisco, where the courts and human services agencies formed a placement committee to handle transitions from camps and juvenile halls. “It’s not easy getting documents together,” he said. The overall discussion has reaffirmed what Nash has long thought, and he will communicate school districts’ concerns to his judicial officers.

- Buenavista brought up **youth with incarcerated parents** who are staying with relatives without necessarily having gone through a formal process of placement with DCFS. Particularly if the relative lives in another school district, difficulties can arise if no legal guardianship has been established and a signature is required for an IEP or assessment, for instance. With DCFS children, initial hearings are held within two or three days of detainment, Nash said, and the court immediately identifies the holder of educational rights—someone in a position to advocate for the child’s proper education. If a parent is in jail, the court assigns those rights to someone else. With informal arrangements, however, incarcerated parents can transfer those rights in writing without the juvenile court’s being involved, or the relative caregiver can petition the probate court for legal guardianship. In any case, Robles agreed that schools need to be alerted when a parent is incarcerated.

According to Eric Marts, a new state law mandates a protocol, now being developed jointly with law enforcement, for officers arresting parents to ensure that any children are in a safe place, and to notify DCFS if they are not. Can the criminal courts, Nero inquired, routinely establish guardians for the children of incarcerated adults while those parents are in jail? A youth’s initial delinquency often occurs following a parent’s incarceration, as he or she begins to act out.

- Rick Tebbano related a major disruption in a Long Beach high school when a group home sent a foster youth there who had an opposing gang affiliation, resulting in the student’s hospitalization. Can social workers provide that kind of detailed information on a child prior to enrollment? **How does information from the court get to school districts?** Can the court proactively ensure that districts have the full ability to educate and care for children? If a child has been in the foster care system for some time, Eric Marts said, social workers will have some idea of gang affiliations and other issues that may affect school placement, but if youth are new to the system, that information may not be available.

- If youth are transferred because of **violent school behavior**, especially toward a teacher, that information is seldom shared with a new school, Dean Conklin said; the urgency to get students re-placed can violate the rights of teachers in those new schools to be aware of those issues. Also, Nero commented, parents returning a child from camp or juvenile hall may not have a copy of the judge's decision in their paperwork. Without that, schools have no way of knowing the reason a youth was incarcerated. "If we don't get that information from the court," Nero said, "it doesn't come from anyone else."
- Wagner asked if **group homes** were routinely named as holders of education rights for foster children placed there, and if not, what their obligations were to let school districts know that information. Group homes are *not* normally named as holders of education rights, Nash said, but they certainly should know who is. If they do not, they should tell districts the name of the child's social worker. "If the social worker doesn't have that information," Nash said, "then we're starting to get shaky," but social workers should definitely have the name of the attorney representing the child, who will know.

Unfortunately, Wagner reported, group homes in his area routinely send foster and probation children for school enrollment without transcripts, paperwork, or any other information. "It's a real problem," he said. Departments should be sending that data to placements, Nash said, and Marts volunteered to look into the issue personally. If foster homes do not have this difficulty, as Wagner says they do not, this could be a systemic issue or one having to do with specific group homes. Given these concerns and those raised by Conklin, all of which have surfaced in the Antelope Valley, Imara suggested that DCFS and Probation representatives sit down with the school districts and group homes in the area for a dialogue.

- Schools have myriad opportunities to observe caregiver interactions with foster children and their educational issues. If caregivers have deficits in meeting the needs of these children, Nash asked, **how can schools get that information to the court?** He promised to discuss the management of that mechanism with court personnel.
- Joshua Kim asked **how social workers consider educational needs in placement decisions;** in his experience, severely emotionally disturbed or autistic students are sometimes placed where local educational agencies do not have the resources to serve them well. Also, are special education students given any unique guidance, training, or preference when they transition to local districts?

Marts explained DCFS's placement priorities—that children live with relatives if at all possible, and that they stay in their original communities when they can to maintain ties with schools, friends, and churches. Permanent homes for children are a major push for the department, and it does everything it can to reunify families. If that isn't possible, permanent legal options such as adoption or legal guardianship are sought. That said, Marts agreed that social workers should be very much involved in getting children enrolled in school.

Special education students in foster care, LACOE's Pat Levinson said, receive no preferential treatment. As Marts noted, placing children with relatives is often the best option for them, even if it takes them out of their districts of origin. Between 35 and 40 percent of the foster

care population is identified as needing special education services, she added, as compared to about 10 percent of non-system children, indicating some overidentifying.

- If **probation youth are transferred** to a different region, a lag often occurs before they are assigned a new probation officer by the court.
- Also, when youth transfer to continuation or alternative schools, single **credits** are usually accepted. Regular comprehensive schools, though, won't accept fewer than five credits.
- In many cases, the first time school districts become aware of a **student's arrest** is when they receive a faxed request from the court system asking for the youth's transcript. The court sends the school district superintendent a copy of the minute order sending the youth to juvenile hall, but that may not always trickle down to the individual school. If the child's parents don't make the call to inform the school, it has no idea of the child's whereabouts.
- Cecilia Ornelas related concerns about the placement of foster children, and materials given to foster parents. Last month, she tried to retrieve information from the Los Angeles Unified School District, and was told by three different staff members that they do not send **cumulative records** to other districts, only within LAUSD. Sturgis said that, though getting records to foster parents is another issue, the district does not have the option to refuse to send them outside LAUSD. "It's my job to make that happen," Sturgis said. "Please direct those calls to me." Robles will also follow up on the issue and talk to Superintendent David Brewer.
- LACOE's head of foster youth services, Pat Levinson, characterized the social justice, child welfare, and probation fields as "three systems that are avoiding each other. We're all good people and we all want the best for these kids, but our language isn't meeting their needs, what with the terms of art used in each system."

AB 490 affirms the right of all children to be enrolled in school, with or without accompanying paperwork. The formal holder of education rights need not be known, and caregivers can sign **affidavits** affirming their responsibility for the child. If children enroll by themselves, or if schools know that the adults with them are not family, then they are considered 'homeless' children and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act kicks in.

If students arrive from camp or juvenile hall without their transcripts, that information can be obtained through a faxed request to **LACOE's student file center** (e-mailed requests cannot be honored because of confidentiality concerns). The **fax number** there is **(562) 803-3063**. The head of that office is Evelyn Contreras, and she can be reached by phone at (562) 803-6252. The student file center compiles records and credits from court schools, alternative education, and MacLaren Children's Center, and can usually make that information available in two days or less. Transcripts from other public school districts will have to be sent for separately, but this is, at least, a start.

It's not that systems aren't in place, Levinson said. DCFS is supposed to issue 1399 enrollment forms for foster children, just as the courts are supposed to issue JV-535 forms and school districts return JV-536 forms to confirm children's enrollment to the court. In practice, however, these forms are never used. Likewise, every formal caregiver is told that

departing children should be disenrolled from school, yet that is often not done. School districts also know that after three attempts to locate a foster child's holder of educational rights, they may identify an advocate for the child themselves. Because of staff turnover, group homes are seldom identified as holders of educational rights, but foster parents often do have that responsibility. Determining an appropriate holder of educational rights should be a different process than that of identifying a caregiver, Levinson believes. "Systems are doing their best," she advised district representatives, "but don't wait. If you don't know the holder of educational rights, call the student's social worker."

Nash expressed his delight at hearing these "nuts and bolts" issues from school districts, and suggested a fuller discussion at an ECC meeting where other key players, including the public defender and children's attorneys, are also present. In the interim, Nash will use the ECC office as a conduit for answers and any further questions that may come up, and Robles will make sure that e-mail communication is maintained. "Funnel everything through Sharon [Watson]," Nash recommended. "Some of this we can do piecemeal, but this is the best dialogue we've had, and it needs to continue at the fuller ECC meeting." In January, Watson promised to float issues that need the coordination of the larger body.

Partial/Full Course Credit Determination

"The rumor is," Darline Robles began, "that comprehensive high schools don't have to accept partial credits. That rumor is false." High schools must accept them, but how the process works, especially with nonstandardized course descriptions and content, is the challenge. LACOE's Bob Tyra has been working with some of the larger districts to design an online questionnaire that will compile both the difficulties surrounding this topic, and best practices that districts have developed. Especially with foster and probation youth's mobility within the system, this issue arises again and again, and can be very harmful to students' ability to graduate. Through this survey and the subsequent work group that is planned, the ECC hopes to develop uniform procedures across Los Angeles County's 81 school districts. Districts will be notified when the questionnaire is ready for them to complete.

Early Childhood Education Data Report

The report and recommendations on early childhood education, presented in full at last week's ECC meeting, were included in attendee packets. Over 20,000 children age five and under come through DCFS every year, and the ECC believes that their participation in high-quality early childhood programs can prepare them for school and adult success. Recent research indicates that not only do children benefit from these programs, but their participation and that of their families can prevent child maltreatment and other negative outcomes.

Nearly all the school districts in attendance provide some kind of pre-kindergarten programs—usually a combination of contracted and district-run efforts—with students then feeding into the district's elementary schools. The Pomona Unified School District, for example, has a \$55 million budget for child development services, and the need for those programs is still not met. State preschool programs are not fully funded, Darline Robles explained, and school districts—whose funded mandate includes only kindergarten through grade 12—must decide what portion of their

general funds make up that shortfall. In Diane Bladen's district, the high schools have Los Angeles Universal Preschool programs for child care. They are funded with adult education dollars, Bladen said, "but it's a nightmare."

One component of the early childhood data report is a recent survey done by the Probation Department that found almost 500 pregnant and parenting teens under its supervision (not including those in probation camps). As part of Blueprint implementation efforts in the early childhood arena, the ECC last year obtained a commitment for priority enrollment and a fee waiver from Los Angeles Universal Preschool for foster youth and the children of foster and probation youth. Would a special outreach to high-risk youth be possible, prioritizing their children for enrollment in districts' early childhood programs? The language of AB 490 doesn't include preschool programs, but Pat James said that the Lynwood district, for one, immediately finds a place for foster children. "Our districts are experiencing declining enrollment," Dean Conklin said. "We're looking for kids." That being the case, Sharon Watson said, referrals from DCFS and Probation need to be ensured.

Two maps were also distributed, showing DCFS placements of children from birth to age two and ages three to five throughout the county. Eventually, those will be overlaid with maps of early childhood programs and family day care homes, although the mismatch between resources and where children live is already evident.

A work group is being established to discuss increasing the numbers of foster and probation youth, and their children, who are enrolled in early childhood education programs, and all school districts are invited to participate. The group will meet only a couple of times between now and April, when its recommendations will be presented to the ECC. Anyone interested in participating was asked to contact Carrie Miller at the ECC office.

Closing Comments

Judge Nash again thanked attendees for their input with regard to ways that the court and school districts can work together. "We can do better," he said, "and we want to do better." Darline Robles thanked everyone for attending, saying that the next dialogue would be scheduled for late April or early May, and the date would be announced soon.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:50 a.m.