



## **Education Dialogue with School District Superintendents**

**November 1, 2010**

**10:00 a.m.**

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

Present:

- Jessica Ancona, Rosemead Unified School District
- William Arroyo, Department of Mental Health
- Lisa Azevedo, Bellflower Unified School District
- Carol Bakken, LACOE
- Yvette Bess, Maryvale
- Donald Blevins, Chief Probation Officer
- Helen Chavez, ECC
- Michael G. Cobarrubias, Montebello Unified School District
- Dean Conklin, Duarte Unified School District
- Maryam Fatemi, Department of Children and Family Services
- Jewel Forbes, Compton Unified School District
- Marilyn Freedman, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District
- Terry Gendreau, Bellflower Unified School District
- René Gonzalez, Los Angeles Unified School District
- Jon R. Gundry, LACOE
- Robert G. “Beau” Henke, Montebello Unified School District
- Cari Ignarra, Bellflower Unified School District
- John Lovato, Rosemead Unified School District
- Mark Marshall, Eastside Union School District
- Richard Martinez, Pomona Unified School District
- Will Max, Maryvale
- Ted McNevin, Covina Valley Unified School District
- Carrie Miller, ECC
- Hon. Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Juvenile Court
- Dolores Preciado, Garvey Unified School District
- Nick Salerno, El Monte Union High School District
- Melissa Smith, Rowland Unified School District
- Toby Spainhower, Mountain View School District
- Catherine Terry, LACOE
- Virginia Ward-Roberts, Compton Unified School District
- Sharon G. Watson, ECC

Los Angeles County Interim Superintendent of Schools Jon R. Gundry welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for coming. He has been in his new position at the Los Angeles County Office of Education for two months, after having served as a deputy superintendent for the previous three years, so he is very familiar with the county's school districts and their work. LACOE is intimately involved in the education of foster and probation youth, especially those under the supervision of the Probation Department. "We recognize the challenges we face—some serious fiscal issues among them—but are working diligently to provide high-quality programs to youth under the county's care," Gundry said. "We have a close and excellent professional collaboration with Probation, and with the help of everyone, we hope to make our programs everything they can be." He then asked attendees to introduce themselves.

### **Issues and Concerns of Participants**

Judge Michel Nash, presiding judge of the juvenile court, explained that the Education Coordinating Council sponsors a regular series of dialogues like today's to provide opportunities for school districts, county departments, and the courts to share their perspectives about working with foster and probation youth.

- Approximately 24,500 young people are involved with the dependency court because they are victims of abuse or neglect, and another 20,000 youth are involved with the delinquency court because they have committed crimes. Youth in delinquency court may be sent to juvenile hall, probation camp, or 'suitable placement' (group or foster homes), but about 75 percent live at home with their families while on probation.

Children who start out on the dependency side typically have issues that place them at risk for involvement with juvenile justice. In the past, between 100 and 120 youngsters per month 'crossed over' from the dependency to the delinquency court. As numbers in the system have decreased, these figures have also lessened, but **'crossover' youth** are still a significant issue. "Our systems need to talk to each other," Nash said, "assess those kids, and determine which system is better suited to deal with them. We've recently improved our assessments by adding in the education piece, which was missing for many years." The Department of Children and Family Services education liaison unit now takes the lead in documenting where youngsters are educationally and incorporating that information into the overall case plan.

- Students in the juvenile halls and probation camps often achieve improvements in reading and math levels simply because they are attending school more regularly while incarcerated than they may ever have before. However, they are in custody for only limited periods of time. When they return home, the overwhelming majority must go back to school, and efficient **transitions to appropriate school placements** continue to be of concern. "This has an impact on all of us," Nash told attendees. "Your schools, LACOE that has control of education in the halls and camps, the Probation Department that has custody of the kids, the courts, the lawyers—everybody needs to do a better job with transitions. Delays in getting kids back into school are just a prescription for trouble."

Nick Salerno mentioned timing concerns. "When a student arrives in the middle of a semester at a comprehensive high school," he said, "that can also be a recipe for disaster—we're setting them up to fail. There's also the question of getting records on students in a timely manner so we can make a proper placement. Otherwise, we're hindered in our ability to do our jobs."

Nash acknowledged that efficient transitions place a significant burden on LACOE and the Probation Department; he recommended starting the process earlier than is now the practice. “The worst-case scenario is when kids are not in school,” he said. “Coming in mid-semester isn’t an excuse. It’s the same situation as with kids who move. When I was twelve, my parents moved on very short notice from New York City to Los Angeles. We flew to L.A. on Saturday, and on Monday, my brothers and I were in school. It happens all the time. What we see today, though—and it’s significant enough to notice—is that school districts would just as soon not deal with these kids. They’re the ‘bad kids’ coming from juvenile justice institutions, and there are lots of excuses not to deal with them. We can all do better about that.”

Since Donald Blevins’s appointment six months ago as the county’s Chief Probation Officer, he has had many conversations about improving educational services for youth, and he believes that progress is being made. In his previous position with Alameda County, he created a transition center for youth returning to the community, but he admitted that this was considerably easier in a county with only one juvenile hall and one probation camp. He promised to begin focusing on starting the transition process earlier to identify appropriate programs for transitioning youngsters—including alternative education and home study—and to work with LACOE to facilitate hand-offs even if they take place mid-semester. “Some of these kids haven’t been in school for a long time, and they’ve had some stability in camp,” he said. “We need to take that momentum and keep them going in the right direction.”

A reporting process has been in place for some years through which the Probation Department provides regular progress updates to the court on youth in the camps. That process was recently revised, Nash reported, and instructions were distributed last week to request much more specific information. He believes the new method will hold both LACOE and Probation more accountable, and also allow the courts to follow up if roadblocks are encountered with school districts. The ECC office will forward the memorandum to attendees, who were encouraged to comment. “Are we asking the right questions?” Nash queried. “Is something missing? What needs to be done while the youth is still in camp? Whatever it is, we’ll change it, and we’d be very interested to hear your perspective.”

What truly hampers a school district’s ability to help youngsters, Marilyn Freedman commented, is when students arrive with no paperwork—no transcripts, no Individual Education Plan (IEP), no information on what offenses caused them to be on probation in the first place. “We have multiple programs to support students,” Freedman said, “but if they don’t come to us with enough information, we can’t access those supports.” Nash noted that the new process requires transcripts to be given to youth as they leave camp.

Most students transitioning into the Montebello Unified School District, Beau Henke said, have been there before, struggling with high-risk behavior such as drug use or gang involvement. “Comprehensive high school might be the best place for that kid,” he said, “but only with the right support system. Otherwise, they’re going to regress back into their troubled behavior. We need a written transition plan that mandates proper support—mental health services, counseling, the probation officer visiting the home every week, whatever it takes.”

Schools oftentimes have no contact with probation officers, Toby Spainhower said, and may not even know who is assigned to a given student. Blevins recommended working through his office, if necessary, to make those connections. Many probation officers are proactive

about helping families maneuver through the system, Blevins said. “It is a requirement. I don’t know how we can do our job without communicating with the schools. The courts want to know how these kids are doing.”

Henke speculated that budget reductions could be a factor, remembering that, in the past, an ‘exit’ probation officer worked with school districts to get information. “One guy in particular was very helpful in giving students leaving the court system and camps the best chance possible,” Henke said. “He did soup to nuts—psych evaluations, transcripts, everything. We should consider reinstating that kind of thing, maybe with school districts chipping in. Someone who knows these kids would guarantee they get their best shot.”

Youngsters are sometimes assigned a transition probation officer and another probation officer for the long term. “Kids aren’t sure who their P.O. is,” Michael Cobarrubias said. “That needs to be put in writing.” Lisa Azevedo agreed, saying that school districts sometimes also don’t know into whose custody students have been released. “We’re confused about who’s in charge,” she said. “Kids may be in the formal custody of one person, but staying with someone else. It’s just one more piece of instability for that kid.”

- All administration of **psychotropic medication** to youngsters in the care of the juvenile court must be approved by the court, and a unit of the Department of Mental Health is stationed at the Children’s Court to screen requests and inform judges as to whether or not a recommended medication is appropriate for a child’s symptoms and diagnosis. Judges in turn ensure that the information that DMH relies on in making those decisions is accurate.

“I started in the juvenile court in 1990,” Nash said, “and for the first seventeen or eighteen years, we repeatedly tried to improve this approval process, with the underlying assumption that once a medication was approved, all players in the system monitored the impact of the meds on the kid. Unfortunately, that’s an inaccurate assumption—not only here in L.A., but everywhere. In the last few years, we’ve been developing protocols to do a better job of monitoring the effect of these medications. We started on the child welfare side and then turned to probation, developing a protocol for kids in camp and suitable placement to maintain the continuity of medication when they leave. The last piece was that of kids in juvenile hall, which is when we discovered that Probation didn’t have a consistent, formalized discharge process for kids going home from the halls.

“Obviously, this affects more than just psychotropic medication,” Nash continued. “It’s about school records, the kids’ belongings, a lot of things. We sat down with Probation and worked out a complete discharge process that encompasses all the necessary pieces. That draft process is going to a committee later today for review and evaluation, and we hope to have something formal in place shortly.”

- Maryam Fatemi called attendees’ attention to the two meeting handouts—one listing contact names, numbers, and e-mail addresses for education-related questions about foster and probation youth, and one listing **contact information** for everyone in the Department of Children and Family Services education unit. “If you can’t get hold of a student’s social worker,” Fatemi told school district representatives, “please call us.”

### **Countywide Self-Sufficiency Initiative: Maryam Fatemi**

Every year, about 1,500 youth ‘emancipate’ from county supervision when they turn 18. Many emerge from years of multiple out-of-home placements without being safely reunified with their birth families, without an alternative ‘forever’ family, and without any lifelong connection to a committed, caring adult. Many end up homeless, lacking mental health services, or pregnant and parenting at far too young an age. In response to this dismal situation, Fifth District Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich led a Board of Supervisors vote in February 2010 to establish a county-wide goal of self-sufficiency. The Board’s approval of this motion directed:

- The realignment of existing revenues and expenditures across county departments to support innovative strategies to improve youth self-sufficiency, including housing, education, employment, and well-being
- The centralization of concurrent youth development planning services
- The integration of youth-centered self-sufficiency services across various county departments to create seamless service delivery, plus the establishment of youth self-sufficiency MAPP (Management Appraisal and Performance Plan) goals for responsible managers within those departments
- The creation of an evaluation mechanism to establish baseline data and annually measure improvements around this goal

Since February, county managers and their child welfare partners have met every two weeks to brainstorm innovations and pilots to achieve these directives. When Antonovich takes office as the chair of the Board of Supervisors on December 7, he will announce the self-sufficiency goal and introduce a motion to implement the work group’s recommendations. Because of the importance of starting early with these youngsters, these recommendations target four key areas of self-sufficiency for youth from birth to age 21:

- Permanency
- Social and emotional well-being
- Education
- Workforce development

Judge Nash objects strongly to the use of ‘emancipation’ to describe ageing out of the system. “I’ve started a nationwide campaign to eliminate that word from our vocabulary,” he said. “Kids leaving the system at eighteen aren’t ‘emancipated.’ Emancipation has a positive connotation, and what happens to these kids is not positive. They were in the system because they were victims of abuse and neglect, and they’re leaving solely because of their age. Virtually every youth exiting then reflects a failure of the system to develop a permanent option—a lasting, safe, healthy home environment, whether with their original family or with another through adoption or legal guardianship. To the extent we haven’t found them that option, the system has failed them.

“The underlying assumption that kids of eighteen can go out into the world and take care of themselves,” Nash continued, “is simply a legal fiction. It’s fiction in general—statistics tell us that even non-foster care youth now become independent at an average age of twenty-six, and in this current economy, that may be even older. And that’s *with* the support of an existing family.

Kids coming from the foster care system haven't had that foundation under them, and to assume that they can go out and make it on their own is ridiculous. You may hear about foster youth who've done great, but we celebrate that because it's so rare."

Pending Federal legislation recognizes these realities, extending the age that youth can remain under the aegis of the courts until 21, when studies show they may do better. "Even that isn't ideal," Nash said. "In L.A., we encourage the courts to hold onto kids as long as we can—eighteen isn't some magic age. We shouldn't let kids leave the system unless they have a high school diploma or a GED, a plan for the future and a mechanism to implement that plan, or if they're in college and have the wherewithal to finish. We need to focus on supporting these kids and making a strong effort to develop permanent situations for them, so they have a family in their corner."

ECC consultant Sharon Watson called attendees' attention to the Self-Sufficiency Milestones handout in meeting packets, asking for input on the education column.

- Bill Arroyo felt that the categories for early childhood (birth to age five) needed massaging, suggesting that *physical maturation* be added to social and emotional well-being, perhaps under 'growth and development.'
- Yvette Bess mentioned that many system youth don't do well in community college, often scoring as English-language learners when they are not. They can need multiple classes to graduate, and it may take them four years to get a two-year degree. "College is not for all of them," she said. "It's hard to think about school when you don't have a job and food—it's about survival."
- Marilyn Freedman suggested more of an educational emphasis on life skills, such as preparing for job interviews, which system youth aren't learning in their foster-family or group-home settings. "That's the education they need," she said. "It's not realistic for them to do a traditional course if their academics are lacking."
- Jon Gundry remembers a program that used to be run by the U.S. Navy called Seaborne Academy, which was a year-long residential program for young people at risk of dropping out of high school. It assessed their interests, skills, and abilities, and focused on transitioning them to life after high school—preparing some for college and providing others with hands-on vocational training for specific jobs. Richard Martinez recalls a similar program run locally by the National Guard, the Sunburst Youth Challenge Academy.
- Michael Cobarrubias spoke of the Montebello district's collaboration with the Department of Children and Family Services through the Gloria Molina Foster Youth Education Program, which houses two social workers in the district to work individually with between 70 and 75 DCFS high-schoolers. "They developed a great support plan for every one of those kids," Cobarrubias said, "comparable to an IEP. Caregivers, holders of education rights, primary social workers, school personnel—everyone was at the table, and it really paid dividends. I'd like to see the same kind of thing done with probation kids, too. It's like a team decision-making process, where key players develop a comprehensive plan to support the kid. It's not a one-time document—it's regularly revisited. Supervisor Molina supported this program, and it's actually saving money by helping these kids. It's a great investment." The Molina program is also active in the Pomona and El Monte school districts and is being expanded to others.

- With regard to team decision-making conferences, Department of Children and Family policy is to convene them around all permanency planning for foster youth, Fatemi noted. The child attends as well, if age-appropriate, as do parents, caregivers, and professionals involved in the child's case. "It's extremely helpful to us if an education representative is at the table, too," Fatemi said, "to develop an education case plan if the youth is behind in school, getting them ready to earn their high school diploma."
- The Pomona Unified School District has a historically strong relationship with DCFS, with social workers and interns working directly with students. "Our people internally have a different mindset about foster youth based on that relationship between our two agencies," Richard Martinez said. "There's more sensitivity, more awareness of what makes that kid tick. We haven't had that same opportunity with Probation for the kids coming out of the camps, but we'd like to. Our board of education has seen the value of the DCFS relationship, and wants to hire a consultant to be a formal liaison, working toward true seamless transitions for these kids." Pomona already houses co-located Probation staff who are working on consolidated case plans to maximize resources.

Jewel Forbes noted that the Compton Unified School District co-located two children's social workers this year, and likewise wants to do the same with Probation. "We'd love that team effort," she said. "It would help a lot to identify students and get support. [LACOE's] Foster Youth Services offers many resources."

Even with the annual data match that identifies foster and probation students in the Montebello district, Cobarrubias said, "kids still slip through the cracks." He feels that a probation officer assigned to the district would be helpful, to monitor youth and be more involved in planning for educational success. "If a kid is successful in school and can connect with an adult, his chances of success increase."

- Will Max from Maryvale was pleased to hear about increased collaboration, and encouraged the inclusion of group homes and other agencies where youth are residing. "We often suffer from lack of information," he said, "and it's critical that DCFS, Probation, and the Department of Mental Health hear from the people who are actually providing services to these kids about the barriers they're experiencing. Our relationship with school districts can be difficult. With emergency placements, we give them what information we have and we contact the children's attorneys to find out what we can disclose. But kids can be in school for weeks, with the schools experiencing certain behaviors from them, before we really know what's going on." Fatemi stated that where DCFS has co-located staff, it does bring group-home caregivers to the table, and hopes to do that everywhere in time.

ECC director Carrie Miller thanked attendees for their comments, and said that the revised self-sufficiency plan would be shared at the next superintendents' dialogue.

### **Educational Data-Sharing Update: Carrie Miller**

In 2006, Judge Nash issued a blanket order to facilitate the sharing of educational records across school districts and county departments. This year, Carrie Miller reported, another step has been taken to ensure that those records can be shared electronically, and language to that effect (included in member packets) is now inserted into every minute order issued in dependency

court. Discussions are also ongoing at the state level about creating a state database, and Los Angeles County is looking at a successful model in Alameda County for a countywide database that would share education information without violating confidentiality. Is this something attendees would be interested in participating in or facilitating?

In Nash's opinion, addressing confidentiality issues through a simple memorandum of understanding has always been possible, but when the issue was raised five years ago, attorneys for several players objected. "In lots of jurisdictions, they've been able to sit down and work out a cooperative way for information-sharing that meets everyone's needs," Nash said. "Here in Los Angeles County, as least so far, we've had to do it the hard way. My focus has been getting information that the courts, the juvenile justice system, and the child welfare system need from the educational system, but it's been like pulling teeth. Even with the blanket order, I had to threaten contempt to get it complied with. We spent months monkeying around with the minute-order language, and we haven't even encompassed the delinquency side yet. The lawyers have gotten in the way of this—we don't seem to be able to sit down and have a discussion. It's very frustrating." He encouraged Jon Gundry, as the new head of the Los Angeles Office of Education, to think about ways in which lines of communication could be established.

Gundry believes that a common student information database would be very valuable; unfortunately, though, with 80 school districts and LACOE in Los Angeles County, each collecting their own data, many technological roadblocks exist. Creating a separate database with its own data-entry demands raises issues of time and personnel. Probation youth in particular move through the system quickly, and data entry would need to be virtually instantaneous to be of any use. "We're involved in conversations with the Los Angeles Unified School District about this, since they're the biggest district," Gundry said. "This isn't about unwillingness—it's a great idea. I'd have to lay its failure to date at the feet of the people in Sacramento, who can't put together something statewide." (Cal-PASS, the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success, incorporates some information, but is far from comprehensive.)

René Gonzalez believes that the key will be not creating a new database but instead developing an interface to allow communication between existing databases, which is how Alameda County has been successful. He also suggested studying efforts in other states.

Nick Salerno recommended a pilot with a few school districts to work out the kinks, and volunteered the El Monte Union High School District. Representatives from the Montebello and Pomona districts also chimed in, and Donald Blevins suggested memorializing the effort with an MOU that outlines the information involved very clearly.

### **Truancy/Dropout Prevention Efforts: Judge Michael Nash**

A recently convened truancy task force brings together key players in Los Angeles County to look at truancy issues and at making effective use of the court system in that regard. All three branches of the juvenile court—dependency, delinquency, and the informal juvenile and traffic courts—deal with truancy in one form or another. Of the approximately 180,000 citations issued to youth every year, about 30 percent are for 'daytime loitering,' or truancy, and the informal juvenile and traffic courts see about 30,000 youth annually. The task force's goal is to develop a comprehensive program to keep truancy out of the court system, and it began by gathering truancy program information from school districts. (A draft matrix was included in meeting packets.)

The task force's September planning meeting included representatives from the juvenile court, law enforcement, county departments, schools, community organizations, and others. Everyone agreed that the criminalization of truancy is not working, and that schools must be a major player in improving efforts to prevent it. "There need to be different approaches for different groups of kids," Sharon Watson said, "since kids are truant for a variety of reasons." She asked attendees' help in updating the draft matrix so it is comprehensive and accurate, and requested that district truancy numbers and other program information be sent to her at [SharonLA12@aol.com](mailto:SharonLA12@aol.com).

- In addition to tools such as the School Attendance Review Team (SART) and School Attendance Review Board (SARB), the Montebello district has added the Montebello Alternative Center, where truant students are brought by school police to be cited and await pick-up by their parents. "It gets them off the streets," Michael Cobarrubias said, "and we use it in lieu of suspensions, too. Students do individual class work and remediation. It's a kind of structured study hall. Some kids like it better—lots don't want to leave—but we do try to connect them back to their schools."

Truancy centers such as Montebello's and Compton's—along with the Los Angeles Unified School District's, opening its doors today—appeal to Nash, who believes they can divert students who are presently being cited and sent to court. "All that process means is that the family wastes a day in court and has to pay a fine," he said. "That's not helpful." Centers also have the potential to provide services to families that could ameliorate the problems students are experiencing, and Nash is curious about their long-term impact.

Districts served by the Sheriff's Department may encounter resistance to the concept of a center from deputies who don't wish to be "taxi drivers" transporting students, and districts large enough to encompass multiple law enforcement agencies may have jurisdictional issues with a center in a single location. The Montebello center, for example, has arrangements with several surrounding cities for police officers to transport students, and also accepts youth from other districts. "We take all comers," Cobarrubias said. "It's never made any sense to me to suspend a kid for being truant. If the point is to provide a consequence or punishment for an action—well, they don't want to be in school, but here at the center they have to spend the whole day in school."

- Richard Martinez suggested studying the Saturday School offered by the Rialto Unified School District, which is an enrichment program for students who are not necessarily truant, but who are absent for legitimate reasons such as sickness or medical appointments. This helps the district recoup lost ADA (Average Daily Attendance) monies for absent students, and participating school sites receive half those ADA proceeds, which acts as an incentive for them to offer the program. "And this isn't pulling gum off the floor for the kids, either," Martinez said. "They get science classes, visual and performing arts, all that. For kids who are legitimately sick, the district recoups money they've lost anyway, and the kid gets that perfect attendance record they're after."

## **Closing**

Jon Gundry thanked everyone for attending, and said that another dialogue would likely be scheduled in the spring. The meeting was adjourned at 11:46 a.m.