

We are *very grateful* to the:

Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
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Casey Family Programs

for enabling the Education Coordinating Council to listen to what youth and caregivers had to say in their own words and in their own communities.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
Introduction.....	1
Purpose of Focus Groups	1
Youth Participant Profile	2
Youth Focus Groups.....	3
What Youth Desire and Need	3
➤ Caring adults	3
➤ Teachers who push them to learn but provide assistance when necessary	4
➤ Adults who keep their word and understand what youth are experiencing	5
➤ Help with “the basics”	5
➤ School counselors who understand the dependency and probation systems and have a desire to help youth.....	5
➤ Better prepared foster parents	5
➤ To remain in one school—if it’s a good school.....	6
Big Issues	6
➤ Lost or delayed paperwork.....	6
➤ A general lack of information about available programs and services.....	7
➤ Transportation to and from school and programs	8
➤ Confidentiality	8
Feedback from Adults	10
Major Themes	10
➤ The education crisis is getting worse.....	10
➤ No one is talking about poverty.....	10
➤ A good school is more important than a youth’s ‘school of origin’	10
➤ The educational involvement of parents or relatives is low.	10
➤ Agencies are motivated to get kids enrolled in school, but lack the tools.....	11
➤ Schools are overwhelmed and cannot produce Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in a timely manner.	12
➤ Biases against foster and probation youth must be challenged.....	12
➤ Agencies are being held accountable for results over which they have little control.	13
➤ Young people are not receiving all the education-related services available to them.....	13
Some Suggestions	14
➤ Transitions.....	14
➤ Information-sharing and confidentiality	14
Acknowledgements	16

Introduction

Purpose of Focus Groups

The Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council (ECC) believes that all young people have the right to an education that will help prepare them to live productive and fulfilling lives. But many of the 62,361 children and adolescents currently in the county dependency and delinquency systems face a different and often threatening world. They need added support if they are to succeed.

As indicated in the April 2005 literature review prepared for the ECC, “little is known about the specific educational experiences of these . . . children and youth.” To better understand that experience and to inform the ECC as it develops policies and initiatives within and across systems to improve educational opportunities for this population, we asked current and former foster and probation youth to speak with us—in their own words—about their lived experience.

From September 20 through November 22, 2005, we conducted twelve focus groups with a total of 145 youth currently or formerly under the care of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and Probation Department. Youth were invited to share their concerns and identify the difficulties and barriers affecting their ability to do well academically. The focus of the discussions was the public school environment and school-related individuals and activities. In four additional focus groups, we asked 66 adult caregivers, teachers, professionals, parents, and advocates to identify the factors contributing to the significant education achievement gap for youth in out-of-home care.

Whenever possible, youth focus groups were conducted in conjunction with an established class or activity to minimize the disruption of established routines. Every group of participants was asked the same questions, adjusted for the age group, to explore:

- The factors that facilitate youth enrollment in school and in appropriate classes
- The most important obstacles foster and probation youth face in their education
- Who is available to help them with school-related issues, and whether family members remain involved with their education
- Non-school programs with which youth are familiar, and how they get that information
- How youth feel about personal information being shared with school officials to ensure that students receive services
- What adults can do to help youth graduate from high school

Youth Participant Profile

Our goal in this exploratory process was to reach a representative group of young people in a variety of placement settings and living-skills training programs. The 145 children, adolescents, and young adults who participated in the focus groups range in age from 10 to 23 years, from fourth-graders to college students.

Youth Focus Group Participants	
36	Emancipated young mothers in transitional housing and teen moms in residence at St. Anne's maternity home in Los Angeles
22	Middle and high school youth at The Sycamores in Altadena
25	Youth enrolled in the Rites of Passage Program at the National Family Life & Education Center in South Los Angeles
18	Youth enrolled in the DCFS independent living program conducted by the Community College Foundation at Mt. San Antonio College, Walnut
18	Probation youth at Camp Scott (females) and Camp Scudder (males) in Santa Clarita
17	Youth referred by the Probation Department to Helpline Youth Counseling's learning center in Norwalk and Boys Republic in Chino Hills
9	Former foster youth, members of the California Youth Connection in Los Angeles

Youth who participated in the focus groups were equally split: 73 male, 72 female.	
110 (76%) were of high school age (14 to 17 years)	43% were African-American
28 (19%) were emancipated youth of college age (18 to 23 years)	40% were Latino
7 (5%) were of middle school age (10 to 13 years)	15% were White
	2% were Asian/Pacific Islanders

Youth Focus Groups

The vast majority of these young people reported attending numerous schools, and several kinds of schools: public and non-public, continuation, charter, private and religious, probation camp and juvenile hall, vocational schools, skills centers, adult schools, and community colleges. Some had also experienced home schooling.

One 14 year old boy reported attending 15 schools. "I've lost count."

Seven high school-aged probation youth counted 50 schools attended among them.

Agency representatives in the adult dialogues spoke with urgency about the current crisis with growing numbers of young people not succeeding in public school. They and other participants were concerned about the continued focus on these youth as 'problems,' and a decrease in positive supports for what has become a life in motion for many of these young people.

An overarching theme in the youth dialogues is that **family matters, especially in the early years**, although there seems to be a change in those relationships over time. Some youth reported having no family contact, but most stated that they had at least one parent or family member in their lives, especially through middle school.

"They encouraged me to stay in school." "When I had problems in class they told me to forget about what happened and keep going." "They told me to succeed and be ready for life."

Grandmothers, mothers, siblings, aunts, or cousins were most often mentioned. As a group, though, young adults (18 to 23 years of age) who have been through the dependency or delinquency systems stated that they had few if any family contacts.

Relatives were most often mentioned as resource persons for youth who felt they had support, followed by (in priority order) school counselors, teachers, probation officers, and social workers. Staff at group homes, residences, and special schools or programs who "do more than implement the rules"—who demonstrate some flexibility while doing their jobs—were often identified as the persons whom students appreciate and look to for support.

What Youth Desire and Need

As youth discussed their experiences with the adults in their lives and what would make it easier for them to do better in school, an overwhelming number of participants identified the following as things they most desire or need:

➤ **Caring adults**

The most repeated theme among all age groups was the expressed desire to have someone in their lives who cares about their welfare and who can encourage them.

“Someone to support and encourage me.” “Someone who cares.” “Someone who will stay on me.” “Don’t tell us we are bad. Push us to do better.” “Believe in me.” “Motivate me.”

“Don’t excuse us. Understand that we have problems, but not for our whole life.” “Have patience and keep us on track.” “I didn’t have nobody from my family who even cared if I was in school.” “Take us out sometimes so we can have fun and be comfortable.” “Help us not be so depressed.”

Program staff, social workers, and probation officers who were perceived as genuinely caring about the youth they assist were mentioned as being important resources, even when they were strict in fulfilling their roles. However, county social workers were also singled out by older youth for not believing what youth said about their placements in foster homes or school situations.

➤ **Teachers who push them to learn but provide assistance when necessary**

Older youth were especially vocal about their experiences with “good teachers”—those from whom they learned—and those whom they perceived as not caring. Students were highly critical of teachers who “do not teach,” who distribute class work without explaining it, who don’t inquire why a student is having difficulty in class, or who pass them when they should fail a class. Young people spoke often about fairness and the need to reward youth when they do well, not simply punish them when they do badly. Former foster youth spoke of the need to monitor their educational progress on a quarterly basis to ensure that their goals are being met. And almost every group of high school youth mentioned being taught to “pass an exam” rather than being given practical knowledge.

“We need teachers who care whether we learn or not.” “Their heart has to be in it.” “Make sure we understand. If we don’t do well on a quiz, find out why.” “I should have failed a class, but I was shoved on.” “Pay attention to us when we’re acting out, ’cause it’s for a reason.” “Some teachers are so smart that they can’t teach us.” “They teach different than how we learn.” “Some teachers should be teaching younger kids.”

Probation youth were very vocal about school principals being ready to “kick them out” of school for what they believed were slight offenses, about not being “liked” by teachers, or about not being accepted back into a school. Although the focus of discussion was on public schools, probation youth were especially critical of the lack of learning in juvenile hall. They explained that youth at various grade levels (eighth through twelfth) are put into one class. As new students join, teachers “catch people up,” repeating the material. Many felt that time in the juvenile hall classroom was time lost: students get credit for being in class, not for how well they learn.

“You can write whatever on paper and still get credit if you sit in class and not fight.” “Work done in the halls doesn’t count for anything.” “In juvenile hall, it’s up to you to ask for your credits.” “Teachers are fed up after trying so hard with us.”

➤ **Adults who keep their word and understand what youth are experiencing**

Another underlying theme in most of the focus groups was youth's familiarity with broken promises. They stated that they sought people in schools and in programs who have been through the foster and dependency systems themselves and understand what they are going through. Although probation officers and social workers were acknowledged by youth for the assistance they provide, probation youth often spoke of the desire to receive recognition from their probation officers when they achieve something—like improved grades.

“Be a positive role model for me.” “We want social workers that check in more often with foster youth—and check that foster parents are sending kids to school.” “Someone should get in trouble when stuff goes wrong.” “It’s my own responsibility. If I have something to motivate me, then I’ll go to school.” “It would be good for people to acknowledge that I am trying.”

➤ **Help with “the basics”**

Tutoring, help with schoolwork, and help with the exit exam were most often cited as supports that would aid young people do better in school—especially with math subjects. One-on-one assistance was mentioned often as the best way to learn. Older youth stated that help with applications, exit exams, job options, and financial support are a priority for them, as well as receiving more timely information about the Independent Living Program and other support programs.

“I feel stupid if I can’t do the work and no one is there to help.” “Do a better job of assessing the needs of youth before their senior year . . . [when] it’s too late.” “We need more mentors in the school.” “It took me one year to learn how to apply for financial aid at [community college].” “I can talk with my tutor about my situation.” “People will help you get loans, not scholarships.”

➤ **School counselors who understand the dependency and probation systems and have a desire to help youth**

School counselors were most often named as someone in the school that youth can “safely” approach, although youth were split in their opinion about how helpful counselors actually are. The youthfulness of some school counselors was identified by some students as a positive factor, while others considered it a sign of inexperience.

“There should be a person at every school who makes sure foster kids get settled in.” “School counselors should listen to youth and believe them when they say what classes they need when they don’t have their transcripts.” “Counselors need to know what they are doing, help kids get the right classes to graduate.” “Get me help so I won’t get so frustrated.” “Some people don’t have the right connections or tone.” “You can’t do nothing if you don’t have your head right.”

➤ **Better prepared foster parents**

Foster parents were rarely identified by youth as a resource or advocate whom youth turn to. When questioned about the role of foster parents, youth recounted both positive and harmful experiences in their placements, and referenced money as a motivator for some adults who

took them in. The majority of youth were not negative about foster parents, but neither were they enthusiastic in their comments. Older participants spoke of the need to better screen and train foster parents, especially regarding their obligations and how school systems function.

“Encourage me to go to school. Take me and pick me up; don’t designate that to someone else.” “Check more often on foster parents and that kids are going to school.” “They should check our homework every day.” “I tried to talk to my foster parents and they told me to talk to my social worker.” “Mandate training for parents and foster parents.” “Foster parents should provide emotional support.”

➤ **To remain in one school—if it’s a good school**

Most of the youth expressed a desire to remain in one school, depending on the school environment. That is, students prefer to remain in a familiar environment, but would rather be transferred than remain in failing, overcrowded schools. They described the unsafe environment in several public high schools that, in their eyes, are failing their students. The issue of crowded classrooms was identified by high school youth as a major barrier to learning. However, the most often-repeated theme related to schools was about having to attend “boring classes” and about a lack of interesting classes for students to choose, like art, music, or wood shop.

“I was in five junior highs. Don’t move us around so much.” “Trust is a real issue, especially with all the moves.” “Class size matters. How can we learn in a class with 30 or 40 people?” “People ditch school if they don’t find anything interesting. Make it more fun.” “Teach us things that are practical, that we can use.” “Focus on the individual and what they are learning.” “I want to stay in one school, but not the high school I was attending.” “Will you tell them about the schools that are bad?”

Some probation youth asked why schools think that suspending a student is a punishment. *“What’s the point of being suspended from school when I don’t want to go to school?”*

Big Issues

Youth were very quick to identify those things that present the biggest challenges to their success in school. Although some probation youth took personal responsibility for their academic struggles, the following were the most typical responses to our inquiries with respect to:

- What can be done to make it easier to enroll in school and in appropriate classes
- The most important after-school or off-session programs and how students get information about them
- How personal information should be shared with teachers or school officials for the purpose of getting more services

➤ **Lost or delayed paperwork**

Because of their continuous movement from school to school, an overwhelming number of students have experienced problems with transcripts and delays in enrollment. Several youth we met were not in school because they were waiting for records to be transferred. Youth

stated that it was very common for them to be assigned to the wrong grade level, to repeat or miss classes, and to not get credit for classes attended. Youth (and providers in their discussions) confirmed that schools typically take 30 to 45 days to send transcripts, and that juvenile hall can take three to four months to do so. Older youth expressed frustration that school officials would not accept information from them directly about their prior school and class experience.

“I passed algebra and geometry but I am still in algebra class.” “I asked to be changed from a class. After two months, I am still in the same class.”
“Social workers should make sure that when they move a child they have a copy of their transcripts in hand.” “Every effort should be made to accommodate the special education needs of youth when they move schools.”

➤ **A general lack of information about available programs and services**

Most youth in the focus groups we talked to did not know about after-school and off-session programs. They were not generally aware that programs and services were available to them, and very few have participated in such programs. Youth who were aware stated that they did not participate because the programs are boring and because they do not want to attend alone. They agreed, however, that although it would be important for youth to help design these programs, they need not be run by young people. They often repeated that program staff should “relate to our experience—not talk down to us.”

“I didn’t really know about nothing when I was in care.” “I think the biggest barrier is not even knowing that stuff is out there.” “My group home staff said tutoring costs too much.” “I heard about some stuff from the park by my house.” “I needed help with math and stuff and I never got none so I failed and lost levels ’cause of my grades and I couldn’t do no better.” “If services are for foster youth only, some kids might be embarrassed to attend.”

A number of teens named tutoring and summer school as programs they attended. Among the few programs foster and probation youth could identify were job preparation programs at continuation schools, L.A. Bridges, Educational Opportunity Program services, church-based projects, and computer classes at group homes.

Participants said that youth usually fend for themselves to find information about available support. Flyers and posters—especially in parks and public spaces and on bulletin boards at school or courthouses—were the most popular sources of information. Other resources most frequently mentioned were other teenagers, school counselors, announcements made by teachers, the Internet, social workers, and newsletters, in that order.

“They should have a bulletin board at court with resources ’cause everybody gotta go to court.” “They should offer more educational help at libraries and parks so that everybody can use it.” “It should be somebody’s job to tell kids about this stuff.” “Maybe youth who know about stuff should go around to placements and tell other youth.” “Find out from the smart kids, the nerds.”

➤ **Transportation to and from school and programs**

Another reason given for missed classes and lack of participation in programs is the lack of reliable, affordable, and safe transportation. This was described by youth as a major access and safety issue, especially in certain communities.

“Even if I knew about programs I probably couldn’t go ‘cause I wouldn’t have a ride.” “Pick us up at one location to bring us to programs.” “It’s not safe to go certain places.”

➤ **Confidentiality**

When questioned about sharing personal information with school administrators for the purpose of receiving services, focus group participants were split in their opinion. About half of the youth were adamant that no one should “know their business” unless they share it, even if it meant forgoing scholarships for higher education. And half of the youth did not object to personal information being shared if they receive assistance as a result—and are involved in the conversations.

It was very clear from the responses that many trust and status issues are involved, especially because of students’ being moved continuously. Most youth do not want to be identified as foster or probation youth, but said that they would approach the right person on campus for help if they were not forced to do so. Both middle school and high school youth explained that their status within the school population is at stake. Middle school children were particularly concerned about being set apart and ridiculed by others.

Probation youth shared their frustration about being identified in class by teachers or principals. They shared the belief that once a teacher knows they have been in the delinquency system, they will be pushed out of the school or reported to their probation officer for slight offenses. There was general agreement that once other students are aware, they take advantage of the situation by harassing probationers, since they can’t fight back without being reported.

“They shouldn’t bring your personal problems into the school. If you are doing good in school, that’s all there is to it.” “The information about us is already in the school application.” “We are afraid to have our business shared.” “I don’t want to be singled out, pitied.” “You tell one person and they tell everybody else.” “The regular kids tease us and are mean.” “Principals look at probation kids as trouble and send us to continuation school.” “Only certain people should know—not the details, just the basics.” “Information should go through our social workers.” “Ask me.” “Youth should know what’s being said.” “We should have to give our permission every time our information is shared.” “It depends on who is asking and what for.” “If you don’t tell someone, you won’t get services.”

A solution to the confidentiality issue was proposed by a student in an early focus group and then shared with other groups to solicit their opinions. She suggested that a single individual in the school—not an administrator—be identified to be the contact person for all students, so that any student can ask for information or be referred to a program when he or she needs it. But that contact person should not be “in charge” of foster and probation youth. That way, students might be contacting that person for college information or special counseling, but other students would not make judgments. Many—but not all—young people supported this idea. Those who did not preferred not to share any information about themselves.

Although many more experiences were shared in the focus groups, we have summarized above those that were most often mentioned, across all groups, that related directly to education.

Feedback from Adults (Caregivers, Providers, and Advocates)

In October and early November, ECC consultants met with the SPA 7 Foster Families Committee and the DCFS, Probation, and Foster Family Agency Strategic Planning Policy committees of the Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA). Each of these sessions was a very rich discussion about these adults' perceptions and/or experience with the educational system and the courts with respect to children and youth in the dependency and probation systems.

Of the 66 participants, 77 percent were affiliated with private agencies that care for these children and youth, and 23 percent were parents, teachers, program directors, advocates, and professionals within the county departments of Mental Health, Children and Family Services, Probation, and Public Social Services. All participants were asked to discuss the same subjects presented to the youth focus groups.

Major Themes

➤ **The education crisis is getting worse.**

Most private providers described the education of foster and probation youth as a crisis, with growing numbers of adolescents failing in public schools and no one having an answer to the problem. They stated that, based on their experience, the situation has worsened in the last six months. They hoped that action will be taken quickly, especially for disturbed and abused children ('Level 12' youth). Agency managers expressed frustration at being "stuck" between the Department of Children and Family Services and the schools. They explained that some agencies have called upon attorneys through the dependency court as a way to get services for families. Some agencies reported putting youth in home schooling just to keep them safe, although organizations are not equipped to play that role.

➤ **No one is talking about poverty.**

Another observation made by agency representatives is that adults involved with this issue are not really talking about poverty—the deficits in families as well as the extreme poverty of these children in comparison with other youth. (*"Agencies and DCFS are trying to pull a rabbit out of a hat!"*) It was suggested that agencies and groups like the ECC examine how Los Angeles youth are doing in comparison with other youth at similar poverty levels.

➤ **A good school is more important than a youth's 'school of origin.'**

The emphasis on school of origin was criticized by agencies and parents as being a "blind strategy" because *"keeping poor kids in poor schools is not where kids should be."* There was enthusiastic agreement that this concept, although well intentioned, must be tempered by considerations about what is best for each child.

➤ **The educational involvement of parents or relatives is low.**

That youth and adults see things differently was evident in the responses to the question about family involvement. Where many youth stated that they have at least one family member in their lives, adults responded that family involvement varies from family to family but

averages only 10 to 20 percent of families overall. They cited issues of distance as one reason (“a parent living in Compton can’t get to see a child placed in Lancaster”). County policies that discourage family involvement, and the fact that parents may not hold educational rights, were also mentioned. Participants did confirm, however, that at the elementary level, relatives—especially grandparents—are usually involved with the child when parents are missing.

“When they are involved, parents hit a brick wall because they are discouraged from ‘making a fuss’ about their child; no one is making it easy for them—especially if they don’t have educational rights. It’s an overwhelming process for them.”

“What children need is stability—give parents support so they don’t give up on the kids; the school may serve as an ‘anchor’ but the child needs family structure, bonding.”

Respondents reported that school systems are so unaware of these relationships that they often allow foster parents or social workers to sign documents that parents are supposed to sign. It was suggested that a position is needed in each school with the responsibility—and the time—to work with and support parents.

➤ **Agencies are motivated to get kids enrolled in school, but lack the tools.**

Three major issues that prevent agencies from being effective advocates for the child were identified.

- Little or no **information** is received with an incoming child to help the agency work with the school to make appropriate placements.

“We can’t advocate for placement nor types of services a child needs because we don’t have information.”

Records exist, but agencies cannot access them until there is a problem. Agencies face the same barriers as parents do in this regard—either they don’t get records or the records they do get are inaccurate (although DCFS or the placing agency should have accurate records). As a result, youngsters end up a number of grade levels behind in their work because the school looks at age as a criterion. Neither schools nor agencies have the support systems in place to help bring these students up to their grade level.

“Kids want to learn but don’t go to school because they are embarrassed.”

It was further noted that agencies often hold report cards for children who move out of care. They provide information to DCFS in quarterly reports, but are rarely asked for report cards by social workers.

“It would be nice to have an ‘education passport’ to pass on information for these children.”

Obtaining transcripts from juvenile hall was identified as one of the most difficult challenges, taking three to four months. The high turnover of county staff was identified as part of the problem.

- No **educational assessments** are done once a child is in school.

“Children are placed according to age and set up for failure.” “There may be no school record because a child has missed so much school, but no basic assessments are done.”

Agencies noted that no assessments are done in schools for learning disabilities, mental issues, or ability, and that only after a lot of pressure on the school will youth be assessed. They stated that emotional and psychological tests are needed once a problematic child is recognized as not requiring special-education services.

- Complications that arise about who holds **educational rights** for the child. Agencies rarely know, since that information is not in the minute order received from the court.

➤ **Schools are overwhelmed and cannot produce Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in a timely manner.**

Agencies describe this as a crisis since *“the school is the ultimate gatekeeper and their process is broken.”* Agencies believe that there is no apparent room for negotiation with schools. If a child’s attorney is proactive—writes to foster parents and schools—things happen. Agencies stated that schools are now saying that they cannot have an IEP without a Student Study Team (SST) meeting. *“No one objects to SSTs, but it is another delay for the child.”* It was noted that children in middle school and later years have to be treated differently because delays are more significant.

“Schools are overwhelmed and need more staff to expedite this work, especially if a school has several students with IEPs. So we wait.”
“Schools have 50 days to schedule an assessment, but it is three months if we are lucky because they won’t conduct it until they have an SST meeting.”

“It is probably much harder for foster youth in relative care to get IEPs because foster parents are not trained in the process.” “Group homes and Foster Family Agencies (FFAs) are more likely to get IEPs; others need a powerful advocate.”

“IEPs are too routine in language; they are not really addressing the needs of the individual child.”

➤ **Biases against foster and probation youth must be challenged.**

Participants stated that teens are turned off by school, especially as they get older, because they have experienced so much failure. Educators and school personnel need to change their attitudes and show greater sensitivity to these youth before the current situation can improve (for example, *“not make public announcements at school that the social worker is waiting for a student”*).

- Agencies and parents were of the opinion that schools don't want to look at the causes of truancy or negative behavior, and are quick to move toward discipline and transfers.
- It was suggested that children living in out-of-home care and children in relative care do not have the same support, and that there is a great need to educate parents about systems and how they can be involved. Participants suggested that the ECC and the county find ways to 'parent the parents' and make more resources available to parents.

"Find a connection with the children—a consistent relationship—because people come in and out of their lives."

- Good foster parents will push the kids. Some are very committed to getting resources for the youth under their care but some have a 'fix the kid' attitude and don't have time to be involved with schools or agencies. It was suggested that more support, education, and resources be created for foster parents.
- Schools and juvenile halls should pay attention to report cards.

"No one is paying attention to why these kids are failing every class, every quarter. So we have a 17-year-old who can't read but is referred to adult school."

➤ **Agencies are being held accountable for results over which they have little control.**

Agencies explained that their contracts' performance measures include enrolling kids in school within three school days of placement, and increasing the number of youth graduating from high school or earning GEDs. But agencies have little control over the educational system.

"Some agencies face the problem of having several homes in a school district that won't accept foster or probation youth. This creates a problem for the youth and the agency."

"Schools that are used repeatedly become resistant and often develop a bias against children coming from placement."

➤ **Young people are not receiving all the education-related services available to them.**

Most participants believe that youth are not receiving the services available to them and that much depends on the advocate they have. A point made by one director received strong support from agency representatives: *"The fact that a child is in the system should establish the presumption that the services recommended by the social worker are necessary—put it on the school district to prove that the child doesn't need the services."*

- Deadlines imposed by school districts to register for programs and the lack of flexibility for these youth were identified as barriers for students who come into the school at different times of the year. The challenges of accessing 'on track' and 'off track' programs were also noted. County social workers need resource manuals and training about the many programs and services available.

“For Level 12 kids, the damage is done by the time we get them as teenagers because they have missed so much school that they can’t catch up. Probation youth are especially impacted by the time spent in juvenile hall before they come to us, because there is little or no attention to education.”

“Kids don’t qualify for Title I—young adult programs—because they keep moving so they are always off-track when programs begin. There is no chance to come in after the deadline.”

“Districts need to do a better job of communicating the many programs available under efforts like LAUSD’s Beyond the Bell.”

“DCFS provides legal documentation for children and youth once the court orders permanent placement services. Social workers don’t know this.”

- Agencies noted that AB 408 requires mentors, but the problem is getting agencies to do a better job of finding and keeping them. Groups are paying individuals to do academic and interest-based mentoring. The challenges seem to be the commitment level of mentors, getting background checks (how to get them done and how to pay for them), liability issues, and how to measure the success of mentoring (*“Can you grade relationships?”*).

Some Suggestions

➤ Transitions

The following suggestions were made in response to a question about what would help children transition from one educational phase to another:

- For young children (birth to age three) with special needs, the transition from the regional center to school at age three is rarely smooth because the institutions have different goals. Regional centers are being held responsible for early child development and must be at the table when talking about education.
- Programs for four-year olds who would not normally be exposed to them, access to records, and conducting developmental assessments and screenings would make transitions easier.
- Especially in high schools, having peer supports in place composed of other foster youth in the school would help the transition of a newly arriving youth to a school. Creating a peer counseling system available for kids who want to self-identify and reach out for help is also a possibility.

➤ Information-sharing and confidentiality

Respondents noted that current policies are based on a deficit model—the case must be made that the child is *not* capable in order to get services. It was suggested that youngsters who can do so be allowed to review their records and make corrections, if necessary (similar to adults dealing with credit reports).

Schools want to know the psycho-social background of a child coming into the school, but DCFS policy is to not share *any* information with schools. Schools need only obtain the child's prior school and related class and performance records.

A proposed solution to resolve the inappropriate disclosure of confidential information might be to extend the limitations and penalties for disclosure to the IEP process itself, where there are clear sanctions even at the federal level. That is, consider the IEP as a treatment planning process to get a greater awareness of the importance of confidentiality: all participants sign that they are aware they are part of a confidential planning process. This would hold privilege at the right level.

Participants in the adult focus groups proposed several action strategies that were forwarded to the ECC Planning Group for consideration. A number of these suggestions have been incorporated into the ECC Blueprint currently being developed.

Acknowledgements

This report reflects the voices we heard in various settings throughout the county over a period of eight weeks. It is intended to provide a brief glimpse into the lived school experience of thousands of children, youth, and young adults who come under the supervision of public systems in Los Angeles County.

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