

Truancy Task Force Meeting Summary
Children's Court
December 1, 2010

Attendees:

Juvenile Court: Michael Nash, Margaret Henry, Jack Furay, Sherri Sobel

Law Enforcement: Earl Paysinger, Timothy Anderson, George Sandoval, Lydia Bodin,
Kristen Byrdsong

Legal: Nancy Theberge, Carol Richardson, David Sapp, Laura Faer

County Youth Departments: Michael Gray, Jeremy Nichols

City of LA: Tony Cardenas, Michael de la Rocha, Liz Trawick, Irvin Fragoso

Schools: Debra Duardo, Rick Tebbano, Maria Espinoza, Marynell Masciel, Catherine
Terry

Community/Advocacy: Miller Sylvan, Eugenia Wilson, Edenia Jones, Michelle Newell

Education Coordinating Council: Carrie Miller, Sharon Watson, Helen Chavez

Welcome and Opening Remarks:

Chair Judge Nash welcomed Task Force members and expressed his appreciation for their commitment to tackling such an important and difficult-to-solve issue. He emphasized that the task force should move slowly and take the time to do things right if it is to come up with solutions that really work for our youth. However, to make as much progress as possible, the TTF will meet at least monthly from now on.

Local Law Enforcement Community Approaches:

- Earl Paysinger, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Assistant Chief and Director of Operations, began his presentation by declaring that “truancy is not a crime.” However, teens commit 25% of the 86,000 property crimes committed annually and approximately 36% of these are committed during school hours. Paysinger doesn’t believe that citations, fines, or jail prevent truancy, as truancy is caused, in large part, by social and economic conditions and such factors as family structure. As “it is not a law enforcement problem,” LAPD is partnering with Public Counsel and others to find alternatives that decriminalize truancy.

Some promising ideas for the TTF to consider include:

- Media marketing campaigns that deliver positive messages about staying in school. Ideally, these should include using social networking sites and their messaging capability to remind youth about attending school.
- Incentivizing school attendance through, for example, students being able to earn prizes such as Apple nanos or have special ringtones/wallpaper on their cell phones
- Providing incentives within schools
- Taking truant students to school-based or community resource centers

- Tim Anderson, Interim Chief of Police for the Los Angeles School Police Department (LASPD), agreed with the concepts Chief Paysinger presented noting that, at the present time, we have a “limited tool belt” to deal with truancy. Anderson favors alternatives to current practice, especially having more diversionary centers and programs available for truant students. Just taking them back to school isn’t working and, as Anderson pointed out, “the easy answer isn’t always the right answer.”
- Lydia Bodin, Deputy-In-Charge for the Los Angeles County District Attorney (DA), began by stating that she doesn’t believe in decriminalizing truancy, as we need to hold the parents of young children (in particular), accountable to their children being in school. Bodin explained the DA’s Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) parental responsibility program that she oversees and the continuum of progressive interventions that ACT uses, from large parent meetings to SARTs, SARBs, truancy mediation, criminal filing and prosecution. Her office works closely with school districts that elect to use the ACT program, attending parent nights and school functions, and takes truants on tours of juvenile halls as a deterrent. ACT focuses on the parents of elementary-age as well as some middle school students, and is reducing truancy by more than 50% according to a study by the RAND Corporation. When asked by Judge Nash about the success of parent prosecution, Bodin noted that these (only 3 cases reached this step last year) were not effective.
- Kristen Byrdsong, Attorney-in-Charge for the L.A. City Attorney, explained that her office educates parents of middle school youth about their legal responsibility to ensure their kids are in school and “provides a wake-up call” through parent assemblies, SARB, hearings and prosecution. Since creating its Truancy Prevention Program in 2002, the City Attorney’s Office has educated nearly 250,000 families about the importance of attending school, directed over 70,000 families to general assemblies, referred 4,000 of these families for further intervention and, as a last resort, prosecuted 75 of them. There is no data, at the present time, as to whether these prosecutions are successful in reducing truancy. What is working, however, is requiring parents to accompany their kids to school, because of the resulting positive connections that are formed between parents and school personnel.

Following these presentations, TF members engaged in a lively discussion about what seems to be working well with these approaches and what’s not. Councilman Cardenas emphasized that Chiefs Paysinger and Anderson observations that citations, fines and jail are not effectively reducing truancy are very important and need to be clearly communicated to school board, city and county policymakers. In addition, members agreed that truancy reduction resources need to be identified, programs “tiered out” to target the various reasons for truancy, systems navigators/advocates looked at as a potential tool to connect families to service providers, agencies with resources should be brought together to determine what each is willing to do to combat truancy and program outcome data needs to be collected.

Future Meeting Agendas and Schedule:

TF members agreed that having theme-based meetings was helpful, and that subsequent meetings of the TTF should focus on school-based approaches, community-based programs, and collaborative groups addressing truancy. A special meeting should focus on what county departments are doing to successfully deal with homeless youth. Following this look at approaches within Los Angeles County, the group will consider what's working elsewhere—in California and across the country—and then decide how to incorporate at least some of the best ideas for countywide implementation.