

Truancy Task Force Meeting Summary

Children's Court

February 7, 2011

Attendees:

Juvenile Court: Michael Nash, Donna Groman, Margaret Henry, Jack Furay

Law Enforcement: Jorge Villegas, Lydia Bodin, Kristen Byrdsong

Legal: Jane Newman, Carol Richardson, Michael Smith

LA County Chief Executive Office: Trish Ploehn, Vincent Holmes

LA County Youth Departments: Jeremy Nichols, Jennifer Hottenroth

City of LA: Michael de la Rocha

Schools: Elmer Roldan, Debra Duardo, Rick Tebbano, Ray Vincent, Laurel Bear,
Belinda Walker

Community/Advocacy: Miller Sylvan, Michelle Newell, James Huettig, Zoe Rawson,
Barbara Lott-Holland, Keith ("Sarge") Gibbs

Education Coordinating Council: Sharon Watson

Welcome and Opening Remarks:

Chair Judge Nash welcomed Task Force members and expressed his confidence that, despite the difficulty and complexity of what the group is tackling, we can make a difference. He urged members to think about, in particular, how we can use the court more effectively.

School District Approaches:

- Debra Duardo, Director of Pupil Services for the Los Angeles Unified School District, reported that, during the last school year ending in June 2010, 184,000 students were identified as truant, using the legal definition of 3 or more unexcused absences. Referring to the handout she provided that displayed monthly attendance data for the District broken down by grade and local school district, she noted that 9th grade students have the highest number of absences.

LAUSD is using a 3-tiered approach to improving school attendance that provides different sets of interventions matched to the level of student truancy. At the first tier—or "universal level"—providing a positive school climate/culture is key, as are attendance expectations and school-wide incentives for achieving those expectations. It is also important to also have alternative education programs in place such as the District's Frida Kahlo High School, which is modeled after the national Big Picture Learning approach. The District has also launched a media campaign to market improved attendance for its students, with a component that makes parents more aware of the detrimental effect of truancy on their children's well-being.

A question was raised about the current use of LAPD truancy sweeps for truant LAUSD students and Jorge Villegas, assistant to LAPD Chief Earl Paysinger, reported that an internal directive will be issued in the next week that instructs officers not to cite students for curfew violations within the first hour of school. It also directs them to take students to their home school, if they are not involved in a criminal activity, or to the nearest Attendance Improvement Center. A copy of this directive will be sent to TTF members as soon as it is available. A discussion followed about how probation youth are dealt with, and Jorge responded that they are brought to the police station and their probation officer is contacted. Jeremy Nichols will let the task force know who in the Probation Department police should call, the frequency of these calls and what Probation does with the youth after these calls. Vincent Holmes suggested that, if the youth attends a school with an outstationed DPO on campus, the youth should be brought directly to that school instead of to a police station.

- Rick Tebbano, District-Wide Administrator for Child Welfare and Attendance for the Long Beach Unified School District, stated that LBUSD's Truancy Counseling Center (TCC) program has been in existence for over 15 years. The purpose of the program is to deter truancy and suspensions, serve as an alternative for the suspension of students to their homes, and provide a service for parents, students and school staff. Recognizing that truancy is a symptom of other issues, efforts are made to engage parents when they come to pick up their youth and then enroll them in parenting classes, counseling and other services. Last year, \$5000 in ADA funds was generated through the participation of 175 students in the TCCs, making the program self-sustaining. Since LBUSD doesn't have its own police, the District works closely with the Long Beach Police Department, which issues truancy citations that almost always result in fines or community service ordered by the traffic court.

TCCs are divided into elementary, middle and high school levels, with teachers assigned to each Center. Students stay at these Centers all day and are expected to do class work or read books, as well as reflect on why they are there.

The TCCs serve students from all over the County, so they also work with other school districts. If a youth is on probation, his/her DPO is contacted, as LBUSD has DPOs outstationed on all high school and some middle school campuses. If a youth is in foster care, his/her CSW is contacted. At the request of Judge Nash, Rick will provide data to the TTF on the number of LBUSD truant students in the probation or DCFS systems.

In the 2008-09 school year, LBUSD had 663 truants, with 379 in 2009-10 and 116, so far, in 2010-11. This dramatic drop is due, in part, to reduced school enrollment but, hopefully, it's also a result of the District's various interventions, which include a host of other services in addition to TTCs. Outcome data is being gathered to determine the effectiveness of these various efforts.

The District is currently working with the Long Beach City Prosecutor to implement SB 1317. With respect to 270.1 filings, they are using a middle school “test case” to work through the process.

- Laurel Bear, Director of Pupil Services for the Alhambra Unified School District, explained that a 2008 federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant (\$7 million over 4 years) is providing the funding for the District’s Gateway to Success program, which links District students with counselors or other health and wellness resources to help them with challenges that interfere with their academic, personal or social adjustment. A management team that includes the chief of police, city attorney, DCFS, Probation, DMH, SARB and others, oversees the program, and Parent and Student Advisory Committees play key roles. As a result, a host of reforms has been achieved, including an established consistency for truancy sweeps (which are done quarterly); a policy that merchants are not to serve students during school hours; a safety net of intervention services available to students when they return to school; a central process for all referrals (whether the students are truant, need mental health services, etc.); and the addition of university interns, including clinically-trained psychologists, on every school campus. An innovative Parent University holds monthly workshops, which parents need to complete if their students are to improve. Among other things, this University helps parents understand how to navigate the school system, what their students need to succeed, how to prevent power struggles with their children and includes an LGBTQ curriculum. In addition, a local evaluation team is in place that is measuring the effects of a range of efforts, including anti-bullying campaigns, internet safety promotion, alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention, violence prevention, mental health services for different ethnic groups, etc.

The Alhambra USD has about 18,500 students who are mostly Latino or API. 1600 students are now receiving mental health services through the Gateway to Success program, which starts at the pre-school level and extends through the 12th grade. There is a strong focus on ethnic disproportionality in Alhambra schools and there is an extensive, “school-, court- and probation-friendly” data-tracking system in place that compares how students are doing when they come into the district to how they are doing when they leave. This data system, which took years to develop, can be easily replicated by other school districts.

Laurel was asked to return to the TTF’s March meeting to address additional questions, and she invited task force members to join Gateway staff on “ride alongs” and/or spend a day with her participating in partnership and collaborative meetings to really see the program in action.

Next Meeting Agenda:

As agreed at the December meeting, as part of the task force’s data-gathering process, the next meeting will highlight some community-based approaches to reducing truancy.