

Truancy Task Force Meeting Summary
Children's Court
May 2, 2011

Attendees:

Courts: Michael Nash, Donna Groman, Margaret Henry, Jack Furay, Sherri Sobel
Law Enforcement: Lydia Bodin, Kristen Byrdsong
Legal: Laura Faer, Jane Newman, Carol Richardson
LA County Chief Executive Office: Trish Ploehn, Vincent Holmes
LA County Youth Departments: Jennifer Hottenroth, Stan Ricketts, Greg McCovey
City of LA: Michael de la Rocha
Schools: Elmer Roldan, Debra Duardo, Ray Vincent, Maria Espinoza, Belinda Walker, Andy Bogen, Kari Thierer
Community/Advocacy: Miller Sylvan, Michelle Newell, Keith Gibbs, James Huettig, Zoe Rawson, Barbara Lott-Holland, Eugenia Wilson
Education Coordinating Council: Sharon Watson

City of Los Angeles April 18th Public Safety Committee Hearing on Truancy:

Michael de la Rocha, Legislative Deputy to City Councilman Tony Cardenas, reported that over 100 people participated in this Hearing, which focused primarily on the new LAPD directive that prescribes a more positive approach to dealing with truant students. The Committee will now look at the municipal code to see if it needs to be amended. The many students and parents in attendance were very appreciative of the opportunity to share with Committee members their experiences with the City, law enforcement and schools and were hopeful that their testimony will lead to a community meeting during which parents, teachers and students can talk together about possible solutions and eliminating practices that are not working. Judge Nash noted his strong support for the Public Safety Committee Hearing and its recognition of our work, as well as LAPD's new truancy directive, and expressed his pleasure that our Task Force is already having some impact on public policy.

School-Based Approach:

Big Picture Learning: Kari Thierer, National Director of School and Network Support explained that the Big Picture approach is currently being used in over 60 schools in 15 states (including 7 in California) and in a growing number of countries around the world. This program can be adapted to fit specific school districts and communities and can be put into any kind of school. Its largest school, so far, is a 450-student school within a large high school in the Bronx, and they are doing an increasing number of these "schools within schools" or operating in one or more school classrooms.

Big Picture Learning doesn't start by asking a student "where are you in Algebra?" Instead, it asks "where are your gaps" and "what are your strengths" and starts from there, even when the gap is social/emotional rather than academic. In this way, Big Picture "helps kids know themselves" and develop their own school curriculum. It is not workbook or chapter-focused, but based on what a youth needs to know and what that youth already knows. Big Picture focuses heavily on probation youth, and believes in educating one youth at a time and getting them out into the real world twice weekly through internships tied into each student's academic program. Transition planning is key, especially in and out of camps.

Teachers are "advisors" and generalists who guide the same group of students (usually 15 to 18 per group) throughout their high school years. As a result, youth are part of a community and bring their whole selves to their group meetings. Each student also has a mentor outside of school and these mentors, as well as parents, are actively engaged as resources to the Big Picture Learning community. In short, "*Big Picture takes care of truancy because, at their sites, kids want to go to school.*"

In response to Nash's question about what Big Picture has to offer bench officers, Kari suggested their taking the time to dig deeper into why a student is truant. She proposed some key questions that they should ask youth who are truant, such as: why they are not in school, what are they doing when they are not in school, what they are interested in, and what they want to do in the future. She also suggested that school district representatives be present in court to provide detailed data on youth trancies, such as how many trancies are always for a full day versus the number that are only part of a day or just during specific classes. This way, schools can support youth more effectively on their way back.

In response to Nash's question about what's next, Kari proposed getting the youth, parent, teacher and bench officer, as well as key players in the youth's life (including the youth's ally or "someone who cares"), together in a *non-threatening, youth-centered conference*. Together, this group works with the youth to figure out a plan, as is being done, to various degrees, in SSTs, the Gloria Molina FYEP, with school-based DPOs, etc. and youth should be steered to compatible, supportive schools. Laura Faer stressed that these conferences must not focus on "the problem," and conference participants need to be trained on Big Picture values. Nash very much likes this idea and would like to pilot it in a courtroom in a discrete geographical area with nearby schools. There was a lot of enthusiasm for trying out this idea and Dependency Court Referee Sobel suggested a subcommittee be formed to design the pilot.

Belinda Walker reported that the New Village Charter School, which serves foster and probation girls as well as other at-risk girls, is now in its fifth year of implementing the Big Picture Learning approach. 22 or 23 students will be graduating this year, of which 7 will be attending 4-year colleges/universities.

Probation Department: Stan Ricketts, Director of the Camp Community Transition Program, reported that Probation currently has three initiatives addressing school truancy:

(1) Working with bus/MTA/Metro companies to align transportation pick-up times with school start times, and working with safety collaboratives to establish Safe School Zones designed to ensure safe passages to and from school. Pick-up and school start times have been successfully aligned and more safety collaboratives are now in place because, where they exist, crime has been reduced by 17%.

(2) Establishing increased penalties for crimes committed within 1000 feet of a school or within 500 feet of a bus stop;

(3) Working with neighborhood vendors whose businesses are making youth tardy.

There is often a 4 to 5 week delay in enrolling youth exiting camps into community-based schools, prompting the Department to focus more intensely on camp to community transitions. A pilot has been created involving 9 school districts, in which receiving districts are brought to the planning table 60 days before a camp youth is to be discharged.

Unfortunately, Probation's \$34m JJCPA grant—which, among other things, helps fund school-based probation officers—has just been reduced by \$9m, putting this important resource in jeopardy. Lydia Bodin questioned whether these DPOs will, in reality, even exist beyond June, as their funding is also tied to State vehicle license fees (as is that of ACT, Inside Out and a large number of after-school programs), which may be significantly reduced at the end of this fiscal year. Bodin and Kristen Byrdsong stressed that there needs to be joint training of staff from various agencies to bring the perspectives of different systems together and ensure that all are working towards the same goal, albeit with different roles. These staff should be asking youth the same questions (such as those proposed by Big Picture Learning). As a first step, Lydia and Kristen will ask their staff attorneys to begin using Kari's suggested Big Picture questions with their youth.

Next Meeting Agenda:

The June 6 meeting of the task force will offer its members the opportunity to question bench officers from all three juvenile courts—delinquency, dependency and informal juvenile/traffic—about what's working and what's not from their point of view and to suggest ideas for improving results.