

School Attendance Task Force Meeting Summary

Children's Court
November 27, 2012

Attendees

Courts: Michael Nash

Law enforcement: Lydia Bodin, John Gutierrez

Legal: Ruth Cusick, Paige Fern

Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office: Trish Ploehn

Los Angeles County Youth Departments: Hellen Carter, Patty Armani

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health: Lauren Gase, Tony Kuo

City of Los Angeles: Michael de la Rocha

Schools: Tom Steele, Jewel Forbes, Jennifer Gomeztrejo, Vicente Bravo, Emily Hernandez,
Laurel Bear, Lorena Martinez-Vargas, Virginia Ward Roberts

Community/Advocacy: Zoë Rawson, Barbara Lott-Holland, Kim McGill, Julio Marquez,
Michelle Newell, Angelica Salazar, Kaile Shilling, Danielle LaFayette, Verna Paul, Josef
Sanchez, Julie Matsumoto, J. Cesar Rivas

Education Coordinating Council: Sharon Watson, Evelyn Hughes

Welcome and Introductions

Judge Michael Nash welcomed everyone and asked for self-introductions.

SATF Presentation to the Education Coordinating Council on October 18

Sharon Watson reported that the School Attendance Task Force presentation to the ECC in October was very well received, and she thanked those involved. Work group chairs spoke of their accomplishments, and ECC members were amazed at how much had been done since February. A representative of Garfield High School, which recently focused on successfully reducing suspensions during the school year (from 613 a few years ago to a single incidence in 2010–11 and again in 2011–2012) inspired attendees with his explanation of that community-wide effort. Minutes of the meeting are available on the ECC website, at educationcoordinatingcouncil.org.

Exclusionary School Discipline Work Group Report

- Zoë Rawson explained that the work group's overall goal is to broaden awareness of issues around suspension, expulsion, and school-based policing, and to encourage the use of positive approaches that keep students in school. In the group's initial brainstorming phase, members reviewed *A Model Code on Education and Dignity* developed by the **Dignity in Schools Campaign**—an executive summary and a PowerPoint printout were included in meeting materials—which they hope to formally present to school districts and other partners in the coming year to consider as a guide for possible policy reform.

As Julio Marquez explained, the Dignity in Schools Campaign was formed to challenge the systemic problem of pushout and to advocate for the human right of every young person to a

high-quality education and to be treated with dignity. The national campaign involves more than 50 organizations from 19 states, representing youth, parents, legal and advocacy services, teachers, educators, and researchers. The Los Angeles chapter consists of a symbiotic alliance of advocacy and community groups, including CADRE, the Youth Justice Coalition, the Community Rights Campaign of the Labor/Community Strategy Center, the Children's Defense Fund, the ACLU of Southern California, and Public Counsel Law Center.

At a summit in 2009, the national organization developed a draft model code, which it spent the following 18 months presenting to various communities, helping the document to evolve. The latest draft was released in August 2012 and is now undergoing a community engagement process for feedback from elected officials, school district staff, and others. The model code is meant as a series of policies for schools, districts, and legislators to address school pushout and to create safe and positive climates for learning. It is based on research, best practices, and the on-the-ground experience of students, parents, and educators, and is rooted in fundamental human-rights principles. The five chapters of the model code are:

- **Education**—Providing resources and facilities to support every child in reaching his or her full potential
 - **Participation**—Ensuring that students, parents, and all stakeholders participate in decision-making (helping to guarantee that parents and guardians have time off from work to attend their children's disciplinary hearings, for instance)
 - **Dignity**—Shifting discipline from a 'punishment' approach to one of nurturing young people's academic, social, and emotional development (for example, removing barriers to re-enrollment when students return from lockup, and discouraging returnees' on-campus segregation from others)
 - **Freedom from discrimination**—Eliminating discrimination, harassment, and disparate outcomes in education
 - **Monitoring and accountability**—Recognizing the rights of communities to access information/data and to monitor school systems
- The work group is also considering, Rawson said, the possibility of partnering with the **Violence Prevention Coalition** on its annual convening in May 2013, which this year focuses on gang prevention. The group plans on presenting ideas for tracks on exclusionary school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline to the task force at a future meeting, and to further discuss assisting with the convening.

Work group meetings are open to all, with the next gathering scheduled for December 3 at 12:30 p.m. at the Salvation Army across from the Kenyon Juvenile Justice Center.

In the ensuing discussion, Judge Nash asked how the word might be spread about Garfield High School's culture change and virtual elimination of suspensions. Should the task force ask that the ECC adopt a resolution recommending that all schools and school districts implement a similar approach, with that resolution to be passed on to the Board of Supervisors, the Los Angeles City Council, and other municipalities and school districts?

Rawson agreed that the work group might flesh out such a resolution, perhaps presenting policy statement language to the task force in January, prior to the ECC's next meeting in February. She expressed hesitation, however, about lifting up a single school as an exemplar and not the process it employed. Laurel Bear concurred, recognizing that a number of districts use tiered interventions with students and emphasizing that maintaining a consistent effort and positive outcomes beyond any initial period is critical. Kim McGill also mentioned a training last spring with eight Los Angeles Unified School District schools that work with students being pushed out of the district. At that event, it was evident that school competitiveness and other issues can generate significant resistance to adopting the Garfield model. McGill also advised standardizing the processes used at Garfield and lifting them up, rather than lauding the school itself.

In addition, McGill cautioned that massive reductions in suspensions can often mean moving students out by other means. This sparked a discussion of safety-threatening offenses such as weapons on campus, or being high in class. Understanding what successful schools actually do in response to these infractions—what tiered sets of consequences are imposed—is important. Lydia Bodin agreed that weapons on campus are a symptom of concerns with the larger school community, not just individual students, but was firm on the concept that some offenses do indeed warrant suspension. Documenting how Garfield handles these cases could provide a matrix for response. One approach, McGill said, has been Garfield's training of parent volunteers to act as 'peace builders,' welcoming and checking in students as they arrive at school—eliminating weapons at the front door, so to speak—and engaging with students in a personal way rather than just shunting them through a wall of metal detectors.

Free Metro Passes for Students Work Group Report

Kim McGill thanked members for their contributions to the work group's preliminary report, copies of which were included in meeting materials. Goals for the Free Metro Pass Campaign are short-term, mid-term, and long-term in nature.

- Short-term***
 - Conduct outreach to build a powerful coalition for free student transportation.
 - Educate communities and public officials throughout the county on transportation barriers and their impact on student attendance and achievement.
 - Address current bureaucratic and structural challenges for schools and districts in accessing Metro cards.
 - Release a comprehensive report on the work group's findings and recommendations.
- Mid-term***
 - Pilot a free transportation program in one or two communities to demonstrate impact; identify possible funds to implement such a program.
 - Ensure free Metro passes for all students returning home from lock-up.
- Long-term*** Obtain free Metro passes for all students from kindergarten through college.

Preliminary data from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department documents 7,622 citations issued by that agency to youth under the age of 18 on the Metro system in 2011, along with 4,696 citations to date in 2012. The most common citation is for fare evasion, but tickets are also issued for eating, smoking, noise, littering, vandalism, and possession of vandalism tools. The Youth Justice Coalition has asked for a breakdown of these citations by age and other demographic information as well as by location and time of issuance, but the Sheriff's Department claims it does not keep that information and a computer program to track it would require funding.

Judge Nash suggested cutting to the chase and approaching the issue directly. In his opinion, the task force should ask the Education Coordinating Council to adopt a resolution—based on the ECC's belief that free transportation would facilitate school attendance for many youngsters, as it does in other cities—requesting that the Board of Supervisors and the Los Angeles City Council recommend that the MTA issue free Metro passes to all students. "We can ask an MTA representative to come to the next ECC meeting and give us the counterpoint as to why this would not be a good idea," Nash said. "We'll listen, and then we can vote to make the recommendation or not. Why shouldn't kids have the transportation they need? If it's only a matter of cost, let's throw it in someone else's lap and let them say 'no'—then justify that to the community. Let's not beat around the bush with this. Let's charge forward." Sharon Watson agreed to contact someone in the MTA (perhaps CEO Art Leahy) about making the presentation in February.

According to Kim McGill, LAUSD spends over \$500,000 a year for Metro passes for its homeless students. She suggested that other districts let the work group know what they spend on pupil transportation as well, to compile an aggregate financial baseline.

Community/School Connections Work Group Report

This work group is developing *A Guide to School-Community Best Practices*, Michelle Newell reported, a draft of which was included in meeting materials. The guide came out of the group's research into schools, districts, and community-based organizations that have created effective partnerships. Members then synthesized that information into a short "best practices" policy guide and are now gathering successful strategies, examples, resources, websites, and contact individuals to provide a detailed framework for those wishing to replicate or adapt those policies.

The guide currently includes sections on:

- Comprehensive needs assessment/community mapping
- Community schools
- Building parent leadership

Ruth Cusick encouraged those who know anyone engaged in these types of work to ask if they would be willing to be listed in the guide as a key contact. Once the document is sufficiently revised, Sharon Watson will distribute an electronic version for responses and comment.

Data and Information-Sharing Work Group Report

When young people are involved in the juvenile justice system, Lydia Bodin explained, bench officers need current and complete information—often about educational issues—to make good decisions for those youngsters. With each of the 81 school districts in Los Angeles County using a different attendance-tracking system, however, getting even that much data to bench officers is a huge practical obstacle. Bodin believes that the focus of this work group should be on solving this problem for the long term.

Instituting any electronic data-sharing system requires a tremendous amount of work, money, and staff commitment over a period of at least three years before it is fully implemented and institutionalized. In addition to reviewing and assessing systems used in Riverside County and San Diego, the work group is very supportive of the “good small solution,” as Bodin put it, of the information-sharing pilot between the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Department of Children and Family Services now being implemented.

The pilot is developing a web-based system through which partners can view and share agreed-upon education data for foster youth in LAUSD schools whose cases include the minute-order data-sharing directive—potentially as many as 8,000 students. Integrating the three systems involved (LAUSD’s, the court’s, and DCFS’s state-mandated CWS/CMS) has been more difficult than first anticipated, but Patty Armani believes the pilot may be up and running before the end of the year. Once it is successful, the work group hopes other schools districts will agree to join in.

Bodin sees agencies’ lack of ability to share data as a huge child welfare issue. Numerous individuals working on behalf of the same child without knowing what the others are doing is confusing and counterproductive, and she wonders if a legislative fix in Sacramento might be the answer. Judge Nash feels that the state legislature has not been the main impediment, at least from the standpoint of school districts. Rather, Federal legislation and the confidentiality clauses of FERPA—the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act—have been the primary stumbling block. (FERPA is less of an issue with youth in the juvenile justice system, he added, as the Probation Department has an absolute right to school records.) Nash believes that Congresswoman Karen Bass may be pursuing a fix in Washington, DC, and Armani noted that DCFS has met with Bass’s representative to explain the issue, which may be as simple as an oversight in the original language needing clean-up. However, it will literally take an act of Congress to remedy the situation.

Technical Manual Work Group Report

Laurel Bear asked to coordinate with the Community/School Connections Work Group to incorporate its materials into the technical manual. She will send out a draft table of contents soon for comment, as the manual has gone beyond its original concept in scope. Bear also announced that she will attend a school board convention this coming weekend and share the School Attendance Task Force’s vision and context.

Youth WorkSource Centers and Marketing Campaign

- Emily Hernandez presented an update on the 13 **Youth WorkSource Centers** that opened earlier this year as a partnership between the Los Angeles Unified School District's Office of Pupil Services and the City of Los Angeles's Community Development Department. A PSA (pupil services and attendance) counselor is outstationed at each center to access students' education records and provide academic and psychosocial assessments and referrals to appropriate services.

The centers' approach has changed this year to encompass a dropout recovery model, and staff has been working with about 70 percent out-of-school youth and 30 percent in-school youth. Dropout group members can enter a three-year program that helps them get their high school diploma or GED and earn one or more certificates in their chosen career field, with each center having a different professional focus. The centers are also the primary service provider for students in the truancy diversion program; 115 of the approximately 1,500 youngsters seen from August through October have been part of that program.

An additional grant from Los Angeles's Reconnections Academy will expand the number of Youth WorkSource Centers to 15 and increase the upper age limit of students served from age 21 to age 24. (In general, youth are served beginning at age 16, but middle-school 14- and 15-year-olds from the truancy diversion program may also qualify for most services.)

In answer to a question from Sharon Watson regarding the efficacy of the new truancy diversion program, Probation's Hellen Carter said that truancy numbers have gone down for LAUSD and for some other cities. Elsewhere, however, numbers are still high. Carter is working with local School Attendance Review Boards (SARBs) and meeting with individual district attorneys in various areas. After a prolonged drafting process, the finalized formal protocol for the graduated sanctions of the diversion program is now before Chief Probation Officer Jerry Powers for signature. (Sharon Watson will distribute the signed protocol to SATF members when it is ready.) Once that is done, Carter will meet with the Chief Executive Office about funding for more staff to fully implement the program; in four months, Carter said, she and two other staff have handled 18,000 citations.

Kim McGill again raised the issue of the approximately 300,000 tickets issued to minors prior to the closing of the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts—which led to Probation's diversion program in the first place—and the pulling or non-issuance of drivers licenses as a consequence of youth failing to respond to those tickets. At this time, only a single court location in Van Nuys is handling these citations, with recipients having to travel there in person to get their records cleared. Even if any legal authority existed for a blanket amnesty that would forgive these citations wholesale—and Judge Nash knew of none—individuals would still need to appear and receive the correct form to submit to the Department of Motor Vehicles. "It's the same process [as amnesty]," he said, "only we're doing it one at a time. The biggest problem is that there's only one location." Carter hopes to obtain funding for a hearing officer for each supervisorial district (at least), and preliminary plans may call for hearing officers to travel, perhaps setting up in vans outside of local probation offices.

Zoë Rawson also suggested partnering with community-based organizations for any community-service restitution component, so a number of individuals could complete their supervised service at one time, for example. Carter is looking at a grant to do exactly that. She has also, in response to numerous requests, reinstated the fine structure that had been eliminated. “People still want fines,” she said, even though community service requirements have been drastically reduced.

Rawson also recommended speaking with school police to see if the formal diversion on daytime curfew violations is working out, and if the Youth WorkSource Centers have the capacity to handle ongoing citation loads. Lydia Bodin suggested that Carter additionally work with the countywide SARB.

- Following the limited-time push for 2012’s School Attendance Month in September, the **Marketing Campaign** will regroup this coming January and begin to make long-range early plans for creative countywide participation in next year’s outreach.

Letter of Support for Department of Public Health Grant

Lauren Gase of the Department of Public Health’s division of chronic disease and injury prevention presented a draft letter of support from the School Attendance Task Force—to be signed, if the group approves it, by chair Michael Nash—in support of DPH’s application for a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Health Impact Project. Gase explained that DPH is interested in exploring social factors having an impact on health and in studying the connections between better education and healthier behaviors. This grant and one from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation would allow DPH to conduct analyses (such as, for example, the impact of free bus passes on school attendance) to help inform policy and programmatic decision-making. Task force members approved the draft letter of support without objection.

Conclusion and Adjournment

Josof Sanchez and Michael de la Rocha expressed appreciation to the SATF for giving young people the opportunity to excel, and for being a collaborative table where people can come together and express themselves honestly. Having just finished her first year with Los Angeles County, Hellen Carter also praised the task force. “You don’t realize the work you’re doing,” she told attendees. “You’re laying a foundation that other states simply don’t have, and it’s truly impressive. It’s heartening to work with so many engaged people.”

Next Meeting

Tuesday, January 15, 2013
12:00 noon to 2:00 p.m.
Children’s Court, 1st Floor Conference Room

The meeting was adjourned at 1:53 p.m.