

# School Attendance Task Force Meeting Summary

Children's Court

May 8, 2012

## Attendees

*Courts:* Michael Nash, Donna Groman, Jack Furay

*Law enforcement:* Lydia Bodin, John Gutierrez

*Legal:* Monica Barajas, Ruth Cusick, Alaina Mooves-Leb

*Los Angeles County Chief Executive Office:* Carrie Miller

*Los Angeles County Youth Departments:* Hellen Carter, Jennifer Hottenroth, Patty Armani, Steve Sturm

*City of Los Angeles:* Michael de la Rocha

*Schools:* Laurel Bear, Tom Steele, Hector Garcia, Tiffany Brown, Debra Duardo, Karla Estrada, Emily Hernandez, Teresa Garcia, Jewel Forbes, Jennifer Garcia, Lorena Martinez, Cecilia Ornelas, Belinda Walker

*Community/Advocacy:* Manuel Criollo, Zoë Rawson, Barbara Lott-Holland, Jamecca Marshall, Michelle Newell, Angelica Salazar, Eugenia Wilson, Kruti Parelch, Quanmesha Smith, Leslie Mendoza, Veronica Martinez

*Education Coordinating Council:* Sharon Watson, Evelyn Hughes

*Guest:* Chris Benson

## Welcome and Introductions

Judge Michael Nash welcomed everyone and asked for self-introductions. Sharon Watson announced that printed copies of the executive summary of the task force's February report, *A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Student Attendance in Los Angeles County*, are available in quantity for distribution. She circulated a sign-up sheet to request copies.

Nash reiterated the announcement he had made at the March meeting with regard to imminent (and severe) budget cuts within the superior court system. Last year, the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts in Los Angeles County handled 77,000 citations—the lowest number Nash remembers seeing—about 12,000 of which were for traffic tickets. The others were for a variety of offenses, including several thousand for 'daytime loitering,' 'truancy,' or other legal descriptions of youngsters not being in school when they should be.

Because of budget constraints, all twelve Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts in Los Angeles County will be closed at the end of this June, and that arm of the juvenile court will cease to exist for the time being. Nash acknowledged the task force's positive steps over the past year toward changing policy with regard to truancy violations, but said that court closures now send the situation "back to the drawing board." Neither the Los Angeles Police Department nor the other 69 law enforcement agencies in the county are expected to stop issuing these citations, but the court is losing the ability to handle them as it has in the past.

Starting in July, juvenile traffic tickets will be processed through adult court (a not-unprecedented method used by other counties), and the rest of the citations will be funneled to the Probation

Department. Nash distributed a draft protocol for that switch, which he intends as a starting point for a larger discussion. He expects revisions to the protocol before it is implemented, but intends to retain the current language expressing Probation's preference that none of these tickets be sent to the delinquency court. "That's a pipe dream, I know," Nash admitted, "but that's the attitude we want. There are other options than the courts for these cases, and it's our goal to use them. This situation can be a unique opportunity for the courts, Probation, law enforcement, schools, and community partners to put their heads together and come up with approaches that don't utilize the court system. For the less serious stuff, the courts should be the venue of last resort, and in many instances they haven't been. It's not necessarily the most effective way."

Nash foresees that Probation will institute a multi-level process to deal with the citations it receives:

- ⊗ Discard them immediately.
- ⊗ Send a warning letter to the youth advising him or her not to commit the offense again.
- ⊗ Counsel the youth and his or her family.
- ⊗ Recommend a formal diversion program.
- ⊗ If the offender is already on probation, decide to pursue the violation informally or through the legal system.
- ⊗ Send more serious offenses to the District Attorney, who will likely go through a similar sifting process.

The task force's report recommendations include many positive ways to work with youth and families, and Nash urged local communities to develop and expand effective diversion programs. He recently met with representatives from 40-plus law enforcement agencies in the county to explain the court changes, and many of them indicated a willingness to spearhead or help with diversion.

One example of such a program, Debra Duardo noted, is the dozen YouthSource centers being created across the county—opening on July 1—that will house Los Angeles Unified School District counselors to perform full assessments on students, examine their records, meet with their parents, and connect them and their families to resources at the centers and at individual schools that will help them graduate or move into vocational training. (Funding for these counselors is being shared by LAUSD and Los Angeles city's Community Development Department.)

Manuel Criollo expressed concerns about the speed of the transition, and encouraged a conversation about a moratorium on citations. School police have recently reported that over 34,000 tickets were given out over the past three years on LAUSD campuses, 40 percent to youth ages 10 to 14. Many were for disturbing the peace, scuffles between students, and truancy, all of which are behaviors indicating deeper issues that affect overall school climate and whether students stay in school. The Education Coordinating Council, the umbrella group for this task force, is the arena for those discussions, Nash said, as it has the ear of most of the school districts in the county.

"We need to strike a balance so we keep our communities as healthy as possible and at the same time ensure accountability, working with kids positively to keep them out of the criminal justice system both in the short and the long term. It won't get done overnight," Nash concluded, "but other counties in the U.S. have done it, and we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Our goal—

which we would be pursuing even if the budget situation hadn't changed—is minimal utilization of the court system. We'll do it.”

### **Data Collection and Sharing Work Group Report**

Lydia Bodin reminded task force members of the survey distributed at the March meeting, asking for responses from those who have not already submitted them.

Jennifer Hottenroth introduced Steve Sturm from the Department of Children and Family Services, who presented the ‘Volkswagen bug’ version of a data-sharing system that DCFS is currently using. It allows school districts to view the population of children in the dependency system and extract information about those enrolled in their schools.

The ‘Cadillac’ version, a similar secure web-based application—Riverside County’s Foster Youth Student Information System (FYSIS)—was presented by Chris Benson of Terben, Inc., a consultant firm that has worked with that county for the past several years to aggregate and make available to various agencies information on foster youth and their education.

### **Community/School Connections Work Group Report**

This work group meets every three weeks and is currently focused on gathering best practices and successful examples of how to create strong relationships among schools, parents, and community groups, Michelle Newell reported. Members hope to include these and guiding principles for effective school/community engagement in the technical manual being developed by another subcommittee. Draft language is expected to be ready by the July meeting, and Newell encouraged anyone interested in this work to join the group.

### **PSA/Marketing Campaign Work Group Report**

‘September Is School Attendance Month’ will be declared by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors at the end of the summer, Debra Duardo reported, and the Los Angeles Unified School Board is expected to create a similar resolution soon. Michael de la Rocha of Los Angeles City Councilmember Tony Cárdenas’ office promised to take the lead on this issue with the L.A. City Council.

The work group hopes, as a highlight of the month, to persuade all school districts in the county to join in a massive student recovery day (tentatively scheduled for September 14) when they would work with communities and staff to search out students with poor attendance or who have stopped coming to school and encourage them to return through home visits, phone calls, and other outreach, plus providing support and resources for their return. LAUSD has sponsored student recovery days for the past five years with ever-increasing success, and will offer toolkits to all districts willing to pledge their commitment to that effort.

In terms of the month-long observation, the work group will pursue extensive media coverage (including public service announcements, student videos, etc.) as well as events, webinars, trainings, town halls, social media, print materials, celebrity-recorded phone pitches to disaffected students, and asking the action groups sponsored by the Community Rights Campaign in several high schools to brainstorm and carry out other activities. The month’s message will be

differentiated to target the parents of young children—relating the importance of school attendance for kindergartners, for example—and, for older grades, the youth themselves.

Preparing schools to accept returning students is also imperative, given the ‘push-out’ occurring in many districts. Sample ‘welcome back to school’ letters for students and letters for schools explaining the problems generated by push-outs could be included in the student recovery day toolkits, helping to improve the school climate for returning youngsters.

### **School District Technical Manual Work Group Report**

The technical manual is a huge undertaking, Laurel Bear said, and although a comprehensive resource guide is still the goal, the work group has identified four areas in which to target initial efforts: attendance, discipline, parent involvement, and school safety. Members hope to include templates for safe-school plans that will work for modest-sized as well as large districts; sample MOUs for bringing in community partner agencies; PowerPoint training presentations for parents, the community, and students; various inventories of policies and procedures for board practices, crisis response, data collecting, technology guides, and so on; local campus climate surveys; and referral documents and resources.

### **Student Expulsion/Suspension Reduction**

Ruth Cusick distributed a handout on school discipline outlining the twelve bills currently being considered by the California legislature on related topics. The website [fixschooldiscipline.org](http://fixschooldiscipline.org) has a ‘Take Action Now’ button to e-mail letters of support for these bills, several of which are before the appropriations committee now.

The Community Rights Campaign is targeting four or five bills that specifically support reducing suspensions and addressing disproportionality issues for students of color—especially black students—Zoë Rawson said, and several high school students with direct experience in this area recently testified before the Assembly Committee on Education. Forty percent of suspensions are for ‘willful defiance,’ and Rawson hopes the task force will take on the issue of exclusionary discipline and how it affects attendance and graduation rates.

Lydia Bodin expressed her “substantial disagreement” for any blanket support of these bills, as she put it, saying that some would result in considerable differences in student treatment as schools apply truancy law. Legislation directed at high school students, for example, could have negative results for younger children being held out of school by their parents. The District Attorney’s legislative analyst has prepared a written analysis of all these bills, and Bodin will make that available to Sharon Watson for distribution to task force members.

Watson mentioned that the Education Coordinating Council will present an informational legislative update at its May 24 meeting at The California Endowment, starting at 9:30 a.m.

### **Other Updates**

- Barbara Lott-Holland reported that the campaign to expand free Metro access to all students is still in the fact-finding stage; the subcommittee meets on May 24 and hopes to have a report for the task force’s July meeting. The overall goal of the effort is to ensure free Metro

passes for all students (including those attending charter schools), amnesty for old tickets, and a less labor-intensive process for obtaining passes.

- Zoë Rawson recommended the formation of a work group to examine recently released data on exclusionary discipline and student attendance—Watson promised to e-mail that report with these minutes—and develop detailed recommendations. Anyone interested in participating in such a subcommittee should contact Rawson directly.
- Michael De La Rocha suggested forming a legislative and policy work group and is willing to take the lead.
- The suggestion was made to carve out some time at task force meetings to discuss different perspectives on deeper issues such as racial disparities and differing treatment for students with disabilities.
- Watson noted that task force meetings continue to be scheduled every other month, although an extra one may be calendared if necessary at some point. She will place work-group report-outs on the agenda when she is notified they are ready, and also requested that she be informed about all work group meetings so she can attend and help coordinate overlapping issues.

### **Next Meeting**

**Tuesday, July 10, 2012**

12:00 noon to 2:00 p.m.

Children's Court Judges' Conference Room