

School Attendance Task Force Meeting Summary

Children's Court
September 10, 2013

Attendees

Courts: Michael Nash, Donna Groman

Legal: Ruth Cusick, Patrick Hirsch, Natasha Khamashta, Kristen Byrdsong

Los Angeles County Youth Departments: Jesus Corral

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health: Amelia Defosset, Lauren Gase

Schools: Jewel Forbes, Zhaira Gastelum, Jennifer Gomeztrejo, Laurel Bear, Belinda Walker, Kathy Licursi, Hector Garcia, Hani Youssef, Lorena Martinez-Vargas

Community/Advocacy: Zoë Rawson, Kim McGill, Barbara Lott-Holland, Gil Espinoza, Josef Sanchez, Julie Matsumoto, Eugenia Wilson

Education Coordinating Council: Sharon Watson, Evelyn Hughes

Welcome and Introductions

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

Exclusionary School Discipline Work Group Report

- The letter to school districts regarding the exclusionary school discipline resolution passed by the Education Coordinating Council in April has been finalized, Zoë Rawson reported, and is ready for Judge Nash's signature. Work group members are reaching out to districts with the goal of spreading the movement and engaging more partners.
- The Los Angeles Unified School District's discipline task force is in the process of vetting a discipline matrix as part of LAUSD's school climate bill of rights; Rawson sees this as an opportunity for School Attendance Task Force members to weigh in on that process and the substance of the matrix.
- Rawson distributed an article about a state law recently enacted in Texas that prohibits school police officers from issuing citations for misbehavior at school (excluding traffic violations). Officers may still submit complaints, but prosecutors can choose several diversion paths before sending youth to court.

Free Student Transit Passes Work Group Report

- Barbara Lott-Holland has recruited a representative from the Los Angeles mayor's office to join the work group, and Los Angeles Unified School District board of education member Mónica Garcia has been following up with MTA board members. (Garcia now works four days a week as Supervisor Gloria Molina's deputy for justice, education, and fire.) Judge Nash suggested drafting a letter to each county supervisor encouraging their support of the campaign.

- Most school districts no longer fund school-bus programs except for homeless and special-education populations, and some charter schools pay out-of-pocket for student transit passes—between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year at the New Village charter school, for example. Belinda Walker suggested asking the California Alliance of Charter Schools to complete the online survey the work group has posted with regard to district transportation expenses.
- Approximately 1200 student surveys have been received, and Lauren Gase from the Department of Public Health has been analyzing that data as well as information from other locales about the cost and benefits of free school transit passes. (Boston, for instance, has found significant savings in using public systems.) She distributed a working draft of her report summary and welcomed feedback. The full report was prepared through literature review, consultation with other jurisdictions, and analyzing existing survey data plus information from the Southern California Association of Governments, Metro on-board surveys, fare evasion citation reports from the Sheriff's Department, and unexcused-absence statistics from LAUSD.

The report concludes that free transit passes for students could lead to:

- ✓ A \$128 million decrease in fare revenue for transit agencies in Los Angeles County
- ✓ An additional 26,000 transit riders in the first two years of the program
- ✓ Families saving \$750,000 per year in fines for fare evasion and \$2.5 million per year on student transit passes
- ✓ Students receiving 26,000 more instructional hours per year (for each 1 percent decrease in unexcused absences)
- ✓ Schools saving funds currently spent on student transit, and receiving an additional \$126,000 each year (for every 1 percent decrease in unexcused absences)
- ✓ Fewer cars on the road, and improved physical and mental health in the community

Recent turnstile changes at Metro stations will increase the criminalization of fare evasion, said Kim McGill, who also noted that student and neighborhood safety is another huge plus for public transit being consistently available to students.

Knowing how New York and Boston finance this kind of program will be key. "If we can figure out how to pay for it, we have a good shot," said Sharon Watson. Several years ago, the MTA agreed to provide free passes for transition-age foster and probation youth who had lived in group homes when they were 16 or 17 years old, but only on the condition that outcomes be tracked for each individual. That data, if available, could help show free transit's impact.

Youth WorkSource Centers

A Student's Life is a documentary series produced through a two-year American Graduate grant awarded to the Los Angeles Unified School District and television station KLCS. Its first season—highlighting the struggles youth face and how they overcome obstacles to their education—is available on YouTube. The series' second four-episode season premiered at the August 29 resource fair at The California Endowment prior to airing on KLCS later this month. The second season highlights youth participating in programs such as the Youth WorkSource Centers and the Attendance Challenge (a one-year incentive program for positive attendance imple-

mented at all LAUSD schools). Three of the students in the documentary participated on the resource-fair panel afterward and did a fine job of telling their stories.

September is School Attendance Month Campaign

- Tuesday's School Attendance Month kick-off press conference went very well, Ruth Cusick reported, hosted by the Centinela Valley Union High School District and involving 29 of Los Angeles County's 81 school districts. Cusick hopes more districts will join in next year, with planning stepped up to begin in the spring.
- LAUSD's student recovery day took place last Friday, said Jennifer Gomeztrejo, with the Baldwin Park and Pomona districts holding theirs the same day. Pasadena Unified is planning its recovery day later in September, while the Covina Valley district will hold four throughout the month.

School-Based Arrest Reform Partnership Update

Judge Donna Groman reviewed the history of the school-based arrest reform partnership that began a couple of years ago and which studied a pilot program to reduce court referrals from schools developed by Judge Steven Teske from Georgia. Some concerns raised by this effort were that victims are not heard unless a case is filed by the district attorney, and that schools have no resources to handle disputes if they are not referred to the courts. In a regrouping effort, the partnership has shifted its focus to restorative justice, exploring programs around the county having the ability to provide services and work with youth in schools. The Los Angeles Unified School District's board of education's recently adopted school climate bill of rights includes a plan to implement restorative justice in all LAUSD schools by 2015. Five programs have been identified that could provide training in this area—including Loyola Marymount's Center for Conflict Resolution and the California Conference for Equality and Justice—and the partnership has met with representatives to discuss pooling resources and defining similar practices such as transformative and community justice.

Could the School Attendance Task Force take on restorative justice as a project? In Cook County, Illinois, a juvenile justice task force has designed a system of school-based restorative justice hubs for juvenile ex-offenders, their families, and community members to foster collaboration with other organizations, address individual-level traumas, and provide youth with jobs. (Here in Los Angeles County, Groman suggested, hubs might instead be developed within community-based organizations, or at a probation department office, but various other models could certainly be considered.) At present, youth and their families get no immediate help when a youth is placed on probation, and months can go by before a case is adjudicated and services are ordered. Likewise, victims of crimes have no place in the juvenile justice system and restitution is rarely collected. "Restorative justice, through which victims, offenders, and community representatives find community-based solutions," stated Groman, "better serves victims."

In a typical example of a student-on-student fight at school, Kim McGill explained, both young people are generally suspended or expelled after a very 'top-down' hearing. They may be transferred to a community day school or directed to attend another comprehensive school; even if they return to their original classrooms, they will have missed instructional days. With a restora-

tive justice program in place, the students are separated and interviewed independently, being sent home only if their safety is at risk. A circle is then formed with the involved youth, their advocates, other individuals who may have experience with these students, and witnesses to the incident. Everyone speaks equally—without any assumption that the complainant is necessarily either the victim or the perpetrator—the roots of the conflict are explored, and the harm can be repaired. A similar process occurs when a teacher is involved, with teachers encouraged to voice concerns in the circle about endemic issues such as overcrowding. Yet another practice is regular circle time during homeroom period, which fosters communication throughout the school.

A variety of models exist, and each community ideally would create its own forms of restorative, transformative, or community justice practices, with some core elements in common. (New Zealand and the Mexican state of Oaxaca, for example, have replaced their court system with these practices.) How can communities find a system that works best for them?

A dialogue is scheduled for September 26 at the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools complex on Wilshire Boulevard to discuss restorative justice, its implementation, and possible grants.

According to Judge Nash, during the year following the closure of the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts, the number of citations going to the Probation Department fell to an all-time low, more than 25 percent fewer than the previous year. The number of petitions filed in delinquency court is also at an all-time low, but “we’re still seeing junk,” as Nash put it. He would be very interested in observing how a push toward restorative justice would affect that.

Nash also announced that, after a budget-induced hiatus, Referee Jack Furay is again serving as a hearing officer helping young people clear their records of old tickets, including those that may cause a suspension of or a hold on drivers licenses. This effort is under the control of the Probation Department, and Nash would love to see it expanded and multiple hearing officers given the ability to travel to different areas of the county. He asked that advocates experiencing obstacles to getting records cleared contact him for troubleshooting with Probation.

Hellen Carter is hosting clinics in various parts of the county so that young people know they may request community service, rather than fines, for traffic violations—as adult traffic court Judge Victor Greenberg has promised—and so that consistent information is given out by line staff at the various court facilities and Probation offices.

Legislative Update

- SB 744—which would severely limit the use of involuntary transfers that force thousands of California youth every year onto the streets or into under-resourced community day and continuation schools—has passed both houses and should be on the governor’s desk this week.
- AB 420—which would have eliminated suspensions for willful defiance in elementary grades throughout California, and limited them in junior high and high school—has been scaled back to a phase-in program, eliminating those suspensions for kindergarten through third grade in year one, adding fourth grade in year two, and adding fifth grade in year three. Willful defiance suspensions would continue in grades six and up. The bill’s author has pulled it to be considered in January.

- AB 549—which originally would have required school districts to have a memorandum of understanding with police departments that operate in their schools, and further required districts to define the role of law enforcement and other adults on campus—has been cut back to simply “encourage” those definitions.
- All opposition to SB 458, requiring youth and their families to be notified when they are added to a local or statewide gang database, has been withdrawn. The bill is expected to go to the Assembly floor for a final vote and then to the governor’s desk.
- SB 61—which would have severely limited the use of solitary confinement for youth in county and state custody—was rewritten as a result of lobbyist pressure to be *in favor of* solitary confinement. The legislation has been pulled with the hope of fixing it.

Announcements/Updates

- Judge Nash and the Youth Justice Coalition will both be honored by the Violence Prevention Coalition as “Angels of Peace” on September 26 at The California Endowment.
- The Partnership Conference will take place this coming Thursday, September 12, at Cal State University Los Angeles for stakeholders for the delinquency system. About 800 attendees are expected.
- Kim McGill urged adoption of the less familiar term “pushout” rather than “dropout,” since it tends to be more accurate: students are often told not to return to school and are given no support for enrolling elsewhere. Zhaira Gastelum agreed, saying that school staff need to be more educated about this issue and parents more empowered to deal with these circumstances.
- Judge Groman urged the inclusion of the Probation Department in the electronic data exchange currently underway between the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Department of Children and Family Services. Judge Nash agreed, saying that the top levels of the departments need to come to a meeting of the minds on this effort.

Next Meeting

Tuesday, October 29, 2013
12:00 noon to 2:00 p.m.
Children’s Court, Second-Floor Judges Lounge

Conclusion and Adjournment

Judge Nash adjourned the meeting at 1:45 p.m.