

Standing Between the Lockup and a Diploma

- L.A. County probation officers work inside mainstream schools to help young offenders steer clear of trouble.

By Erika Hayasaki, Times Staff Writer

Mother and daughter sit side by side, arms crossed against their chests like bulletproof vests. They do not want to be in this Lynwood High School classroom on this sunny spring morning facing this probation officer.

It took two letters, two missed appointments, a cycle of phone calls and classroom visits and a threat that they would be sent back to court for Martha Montes to get them both here.

Montes, one of 111 probation officers stationed at Los Angeles County middle and high schools, slaps the girl's attendance report on the table. It shows at least 20 absences in each class.

"There's no way you're going to avoid getting locked up or getting off probation," Montes tells the 16-year-old girl, a gang member on probation for drug use. "Do you want to graduate from high school?"

Similar scenes are playing out across Los Angeles County as more than 6,520 teenage offenders serving probation sentences for such crimes as theft, battery and weapons possession have enrolled in traditional public high schools — more than 2,000 more than three years ago.

The increase is the result of a quiet initiative by probation officials to enroll teenagers who have been released from juvenile detention facilities into large public schools where they have access to sports teams, extracurricular clubs, even honors classes.

In smaller alternative schools, probation officials say, some of these teenagers have little or no impetus to change. Many students at the alternative schools are affiliated with gangs, said Felicia Cotton of the L.A. County Probation Department, who spearheaded the initiative. "When you put those kids in small settings and they're all alike, it's hard to get them to set goals for change."

To ease the transition between juvenile facilities and school, probation officers like Montes have taken up residence on campuses as part of a 5-year-old undertaking negotiated between schools and the L.A. County Probation Department. The department, which relies on state funding for the program, handles youths convicted of

lesser offenses than those supervised by the California Youth Authority.

On-campus officers serve as academic counselors and law enforcers with the power to arrest. They are family mediators and child advocates. In most cases, probation officers have access to students' transcripts, teachers and counselors. They monitor absences and grades and meet regularly with parents and students.

But integrating more young offenders onto mainstream campuses worries teachers and principals, who sometimes blame the troubled students for discipline problems and low test scores. Some worry about their own safety and that of other students.

Additionally, alternative school administrators say their individualized programs that offer smaller class sizes are losing enrollment as more students enter traditional campuses.

"If you drop them into this large school, there's no personalization," said Michael Oviedo, a teacher at Jefferson High School in South Los Angeles. "A lot of times these students on probation usually cause some kind of disturbance because they don't understand [classwork], and they're very angry."

With nearly 80 students on probation enrolled at Los Angeles High, some staff members worry about their security, said Kofi Oparaocha, a teacher who believes the students on probation belong on alternative campuses.

"Some of my friends are teachers who teach in jails," he said. "They are safer than the ones who teach outside."

In traditional high schools, many principals are less inclined to reach out to students serving probation, said Hector Madrigal, director of pupil services for the Los Angeles Unified School District, because they believe "their schools will run smoother without these problem students."

Students are required to attend school while serving probation, and Probation Department officials say allowing those teenagers to have a more typical high school experience can reduce recidivism. Some recent research backs up that theory. A Rand Corp. study showed that students monitored by on-campus probation officers at large public schools in Los Angeles County were less likely to cut class or be suspended or expelled.

But national research shows that no matter where they go to school, only 20% to 40% of youths serving probation sentences earn diplomas or the equivalent, according to a report released this year by L.A. County's Education Coordinating Council. That report also showed that more than 40% of probation youths are enrolled in special education classes and that they read on average at a fifth-grade level.

Melanie Reyes works with between 60 and 80 students at Los Angeles High School.

Some are from single-parent homes. Some have learning disabilities. Some failed classes but were promoted anyway.

These kids, she said, need someone to push them.

Reyes considers herself that person. With six counselors serving 5,000 students at Los Angeles High, Reyes is often the only adult that students on probation will talk to about family or legal problems or graduation requirements.

Take Maynard Walker, an 18-year-old senior. Two years ago he was arrested on a charge of possessing a gun. He said he is a former gang member who went on joyrides in stolen cars.

After a judge ordered him to serve probation, Walker spent his days checking in and out of Reyes' office. She nagged him about grades. She talked to him about college. Somewhere along the way, he began to change.

Today, Walker is an honor roll student and football player who will attend Cal State Northridge in the fall.

Reyes isn't sure what would happen to students like Walker if probation officers were not in constant contact with them.

But she knows what she fears.

In 2003, she said, she had an epiphany about the importance of her job and the program itself. She had served on a jury that ordered the death penalty for a gang member convicted of a triple murder.

During the trial, Reyes learned the defendant had been a special education student who was put on probation as a teenager.

"This could be the future of many of my kids," Reyes said. "If he had a probation officer at school with him, would he have ended up differently?"

At Lynwood High, administrators welcomed Montes and her 50 or so students on probation. Her caseload at the 4,200-student school includes those who have been arrested on charges of drug possession, car theft, assault and possession of weapons, including guns, knives and brass knuckles.

All are required to check in with her before first period. She calls the teachers and parents of those who do not.

Inside Montes' third-floor classroom-office, Virginia Maya, whose daughter is the gang member, is crying and yelling in Spanish. She tells Montes that her daughter hits her and doesn't come home at night.

The girl's father was a gang member and drug user. He died when she was a baby. At 12, she began inhaling air fresheners. At 13, she began smoking marijuana. She reads at a sixth-grade level, stumbling over words like "relativity" and "wreck."

"Right now, your grades are not good," Montes tells her, pulling out a report card with five Fs and one C.

"Have you ever had any dreams?"

The 5-foot, 3-inch, 120-pound girl with orange-streaked black hair and a tiny dotted triangle gang tattoo on her left hand picks at her eyelashes in front of a compact.

"I wanted to be a stripper," she says, "I like to dance."

"You can do anything, and you decide that is what you want to aspire to?"

"Well, I've been noticing lately I like to help people."

"OK," says Montes, clinging to those words. There is a nursing program on campus, she tells her.

The girl keeps picking.

Exasperated, Montes will not give up. Photos of students wearing purple caps and gowns hang on her wall. Those students once came to her with just as many problems.

Montes tells the girl to go to sixth period. "I will see you [again] when?"

The girl replies: "Wednesday, 7:30."

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