

Program to Help County Foster Children Graduate High School Announced

By Bethania Palma Markus, Staff Writer

EL MONTE - One foster child slipped through the cracks in the education system when he told school officials he was being home schooled. But his "teacher" was really his 82-year-old, Spanish-speaking grandmother.

Another child kept running away from his foster home and visiting his plumber brother in Lake Elsinore, who happened to have a bullet lodged in his skull.

Needless to say, neither of the boys was racking up credits in high school.

Now a team led by County Supervisor Gloria Molina is rolling out a program meant to plug the cracks for foster children in high school.



Molina and representatives from the Department of Children and Family Services met with social workers at MacLaren Childrens Center on Durfee Road this week to discuss the pilot Foster Youth Education Program, which has dramatically increased graduation rates.

"I want you to know that if we can get this rolling it really will give children a fighting chance," Molina said.

The program is structured to be cost-neutral and since 2008 has been put in place in Montebello, Pomona, El Monte, Hacienda-La Puente and Azusa unified school districts. It will be rolled out at El Rancho Unified in Pico Rivera next.

So far, results are encouraging.

While foster children nationally only graduate high school 30 to 50 percent of the time, children in Molina's pilot program graduated 75 percent of the time and 80 percent of those graduates went on to four-year colleges, DCFS officials said.

Officials hope to eventually expand it to the rest of the county.

The key to the program is partnering with school districts and agreeing to share data, said Angel Rodriguez, program manager.

"A lot of (foster) kids are saying this is the first time anyone has asked them about school," Rodriguez said.

Social workers participating in the program will work with a school team to develop educational plans for foster children.

The program has hurdles - schools for example, don't currently keep track of foster children, social workers pointed out.

And when foster children go to juvenile hall after running afoul of the law, their case with DCFS closes and the probation department takes over.

It's often difficult to access school credits earned while teens are incarcerated, said Chandra Alston, a social worker out of Glendora who works with students at Los Altos High School in Hacienda Heights.

"We have the toughest time getting their credits from Los Padros (Juvenile Hall)" she said.

And foster children are often moved suddenly from one home to another and change schools in the process. Credits are often lost in the shuffle, Rodriguez said.

Part of the program is finding out where the children were enrolled and recovering their school credits to help them move toward graduating. Social workers so far have recovered more than 1,000 lost credits, which is more than 200 semesters' worth of class time.

Social workers are currently assigned cases based on proximity to the children's biological mother, but the program will change that, said Martha Molina-Avilas, children's deputy for DCFS.

Social workers will instead be assigned cases based on the children's school district. One social worker, for example, will be assigned all cases at El Monte High School.

"For us, it's very efficient because they get to see their kids every day," Molina-Avilas said. "From the feedback we're getting it seems for (social workers) to be a real positive and it's changing their relationship with their case load."