



Education Dialogue with School District Superintendents

March 9, 2009

10:00 a.m.

Los Angeles County Office of Education Headquarters
9300 Imperial Highway, Downey, CA

Present:

- Michelle Koenig Barritt, ECC
- Lynn Bedrosian, Torrance Unified School District
- Diane Bladen, El Monte Union High School District
- Zeff Dena, Rowland Unified School District
- Williams Elkins, LACOE
- Marsha Evers, Covina Valley Unified School District
- Petra Galindo, Los Angeles Unified School District
- Marie Hansen, Compton Unified School District
- Robert Henke, Montebello Unified School District
- John Herron, San Gabriel Unified School District
- Jitahadi Imara, Probation Department
- Gwenis Laura, Culver City Unified School District
- Patricia Levinson, LACOE
- Richard Martinez, Pomona Unified School District
- Carrie Dunbar Miller, ECC
- James Monico, Paramount Unified School District
- Hon. Michael Nash, Presiding Judge, Juvenile Court
- John Ortega, Montebello Unified School Police
- Cecilia Ornelas, Bassett Unified School District
- Louis Pappas, Covina Valley Unified School District
- Ginny Peterson, Garvey School District
- Trish Ploehn, Department of Children and Family Services
- Dolores Preciado, Garvey Unified School District
- Beverly Pye, Inglewood Unified School District
- Ron Randolph, LACOE
- Barbara Richardson, Rosemead School District
- Gerry Riley, LACOE
- Darline Robles, LACOE
- Gayle Rogers, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District
- Lilia Alvarez Ronco, Juvenile Court
- Andre Sauvageau, Rosemead School District
- Marvin J. Southard, Department of Mental Health

Present: Norma Sturgis, Los Angeles Unified School District
(cont'd) Rebecca Turrentine, Probation Department
Jonathan Vasquez, Los Nietos School District
Edward Velasquez, Montebello Unified School District
Sharon G. Watson, ECC
Jen Wolbransky, Juvenile Court

Los Angeles County Office of Education Superintendent Darline Robles welcomed attendees and asked everyone to introduce themselves. She thanked them for attending this latest installment of the ongoing dialogue between school district leadership and county departments, sponsored by the Education Coordinating Council, to discuss issues pertaining to students under the supervision of the county.

“Those children fall through the cracks all too often,” Robles said, “and our dialogues help us learn what issues need to be addressed and what barriers we can move. The elephant in the room these days—the whole herd of elephants—is the budget cuts we are all facing.” After the May 19 election, when California voters make some decisions with regard to the state budget, discussions can continue around its impact on schools. In general, they are looking at approximately \$2,000 less per student per year, with across-the-board education cuts of 25 to 30 percent causing major reductions to programs and services.

Issues from the Juvenile Court

Judge Michael Nash, now in his twentieth year serving as presiding judge of the juvenile court, summarized actions that the court has undertaken since the last education dialogue.

- The delinquency courts have completed their training on protocols for bringing on advocates for youth who need them.
- The minute-order template now includes information on the holder of a child’s education rights, and clerks are well on the way to adding that information as a matter of course.
- A pilot project has begun that uses volunteers from Cal State Los Angeles to tutor youth waiting for their court appearances and provide them homework help. As background, Nash explained that the Edelman Children’s Court, opened in 1992, was designed to be a ‘child-sensitive’ facility, in line with Los Angeles County’s recognition of the importance of children appearing at court proceedings that affect their lives (a value not held by all jurisdictions around the nation). “Every kid there is a victim of abuse or neglect,” Nash said, “and we hope that a friendly setting can contribute to their healing process. We don’t force them to come to court, and we try not to bring them back multiple times, but they’re the most important people in the process and they need to be able to communicate what they need.”

But when children come to court, they miss school. “We’ve thought about adjusting court hours,” Nash acknowledged, “but given security costs, especially in this financial climate, that’s just not practical right now. But one thing we can do is help them with their homework while they’re there.” He introduced attorneys Jen Wolbransky and Lilia Alvarez Ronco, who explained that three externs from the Children’s Law Center (students at Cal State Los

Angeles) come to the court's 'shelter care' area two days a week to help youngsters with schoolwork and refer older youth to services available to them through the county's independent living programs. "Kids are missing classes," Wolbransky said, "so we want them to at least get credit for doing their homework—especially since we were told by LAUSD [the Los Angeles Unified School District] that teachers determine on a case-by-case basis who gets that credit. It's a long day for most kids at the court. They're bored, and, in an informal survey we took, they said they'd like the help." With the assistance of Pat Levinson and LACOE's Foster Youth Services, attorneys are working on further structuring the pilot program. "Apparently nobody else in the country is attempting to do anything like this," Nash said. "We think it's got real potential."

- For some years, youth have generally been sent to probation camps for periods of three months, six months, or nine months. Educational concerns arise with three-month stays, however, because no full complement of academic credits can be earned in so short a time. After discussions with the Probation Department, Nash hopes that a new process—abolishing three-month commitments in favor of stays of five to seven months or seven to nine months—will be implemented in July. "This will give Probation a better chance to work with the kids," he said, "and eliminate some of the educational issues we've had."
- Many young people in the dependency court system are at risk of, or already dealing with, substance abuse; joint assessments done by the Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department on 'crossover' youth (foster youth who have committed a crime and been transferred to the jurisdiction of the delinquency court) have shown this empirically. A few years ago, the dependency court developed a new protocol to identify young people with these risk factors and link them with appropriate service providers for screening, assessment, and treatment. After being piloted on a small scale, and with the completion last week of a major court training, the protocol is now being implemented in 19 of the county's 20 dependency courts. (The Lancaster court will join in once the training is done there.)

"Schools could be helpful to us," Nash told attendees, "by identifying foster kids with substance abuse issues and telling social workers or caregivers who can bring that to the attention of the court. Our goal is the well-being of the child. We want to do everything we can to get these kids treated and prevent them from crossing over into the juvenile justice system. The new protocol's been a very useful tool so far." Once again, Los Angeles County is leading the way on the issue, since Nash could find nowhere else in the country with similar protocols. "We looked for a good program we could steal," he joked, "but there wasn't one."

- With the able assistance of the Department of Mental Health over the past few years, the courts have greatly refined the approval process for prescribing psychotropic medications. What hasn't been monitored systematically, though, is the impact of those medications on young people. As a result of a major collaborative effort with DCFS and Dr. Charles Sophy's medical unit, a new process was implemented last week to have the results of every new medication or dosage change assessed by trained individuals who then report back to the court on how the youngster is doing. "This is another first-of-a-kind program," Nash said, "although a bill requiring this kind of monitoring was introduced in the legislature last year."

It didn't make it then, but it's back again this year, and we're the statewide pilot to see how this works. We're pleased to get the program off the ground."

Dependency Education Pilot Project

The Department of Children and Family Services has three major focuses with regard to children: safety, permanency, and well-being. "We've done pretty well lately on safety and permanency," said department director Trish Ploehn, "but we could do better on well-being—things like health, mental health, dentistry, and education." Three or four years ago, Casey Family Programs offered a breakthrough collaborative series on education for foster youth, a grant Los Angeles County applied for and received. DCFS focused the two-year project in its Pomona office, partnering with the Pomona Unified School District to good result: improvements in student grades, in communication, in sharing information, and in building programs.

Recently, First District Supervisor Gloria Molina began digging into the educational achievement of foster youth elsewhere in the county, and found that many school districts didn't know how many DCFS students were enrolled in their schools, nor how they were doing. The Montebello Unified School District researched the question, and—through a series of conversations with the ECC and the Chief Executive Office, the First Supervisorial District, DCFS, and the Montebello and Pomona school districts—became part of a one-year pilot project funded by Molina's office that has brought two social workers into Montebello schools and one into Pomona schools to do intensive educational planning and case management for foster youth. During the six months that the program has been in Montebello, it has offered 50 youth personalized services involving DCFS social workers, teachers, and counselors who all 'speak the same language' and can work with students and connect them with programs in the community to help them achieve their goals.

(In total, the Montebello district has about 320 DCFS students in grades one through twelve, or 1.5 percent of the total student population; Pomona's numbers are about the same. By contrast, the Los Angeles Unified School District had about 3,000 students on probation and 8,000 known to DCFS—including those in kinship care—at the time of its most recent data match.)

Montebello Unified's Edward Velasquez said that simply identifying DCFS students was an initial hurdle for them, since the district's student information system did not contain that field. A new system now being implemented will include that data, along with a student's probation status, if any. The district has long been part of an effort that locates probation officers within schools, which has led to a 90 percent success rate with probation youth graduating high school. (Montebello was also recently awarded a Federal grant—\$9 million over four years from the Safe Schools/Healthy Students program—to provide psychological services to students.) According to Robert Henke, the collaboration with DCFS workers in the schools helped develop a series of cases studies for personalized services from social workers and education staff that particularly targeted DCFS high school seniors. "We believe a huge percentage of these kids will now graduate," Henke said, "and we also have to give credit to our colleagues in Pomona who preceded us in this effort."

Richard Martinez from Pomona Unified thanked Judge Nash for mandating the sharing of information a few years back. "That was an opportunity for our board of education to see that this was seri-

ous,” Martinez said. “Our data match let us know where the kids are who are in foster care and kin care, and we also looked at homeless kids and kids on probation—the ten percent who are with their families in the community. And we found that instead of supporting them, we were expelling and suspending these kids. The breakthrough collaboratives series allowed our board to make a commitment to do whatever it takes to support the subgroups not identified by the No Child Left Behind act. We know the numbers that are in our schools, we know the ethnic breakdown, we can offer support to parents.”

With regard to the pilot, a memorandum of understanding is now in process with Los Angeles County, and a social worker and intern have been in place within the Pomona school district for the past six months. The district has some flexible counseling dollars through a supplemental grant, too, and began the project in the comprehensive high schools, working with counselors. “We created a relationship with DCFS,” Martinez said, “and came to trust that they’re about children. It was relationships first, then paperwork. We encourage everyone who has reservations about working closely with the county to take the plunge. It really helps you do your business better, and hone your skills and services.”

Overall, preliminary comparisons of participating students’ achievement last year with how they fared after only a single semester in the pilot program indicate that 62 percent of students have improved their grades significantly, from an average grade last year of D+ to a C+ level now. “Some kinks are being worked out,” ECC director Carrie Miller said, “and we’re moving forward. At the end of the current semester, we’re expecting an even greater improvement.” (Students took the California high school exit exam in February, but have not yet received results; many enrolled in CAHSEE ‘boot camp,’ which should increase their chances of passing.)

In September 2009, the county wants to begin replicating the pilot countywide, and Miller encouraged any districts interested in participating to contact her. “The pilot offers techniques that can help any at-risk kid,” she said. “This expansion could help a lot of students.”

In practice, said ECC youth development consultant Michelle Barritt, the pilot has focused on high school seniors, making a last-ditch effort to connect them to services and have them graduate. (In Montebello, for example, at least five seniors would not have graduated without the pilot.) The goal for the rollout, though, is to extend the same kind of in-depth attention to foster children all the way down to kindergarten—and to expand the lessons learned to the probation population as well.

Recalling the point about the importance of relationships to the program, Ploehn said that relationships between individual departments to more easily share information are only one aspect of what has changed. “The main reason we’ve seen such positive outcomes with young people,” she said, “is the one-on-one relationship between the adult and the young person. Since there’s no more money involved, replicating the program won’t be easy. We probably can’t do it exactly, but we can certainly identify themes and increase the ability of my social workers to work differently with school districts. We definitely could show improved outcomes for kids across the county.”

In the ensuing discussion, Velasquez said that Montebello Unified wants to offer the same courses in alternative, continuation, and community day schools (the last are not accredited) as in comprehensive high schools, and to eliminate independent study programs. “When kids are detained—in

Los Padrinos [juvenile hall], for example,” he commented further, “they don’t go to school unless they’re there for a long time. But those are the kids who really don’t need to miss school.”

Both Darline Robles and Bill Elkins, LACOE’s director of juvenile court and community schools, emphasized that detained youth should indeed be attending school, and Robles asked if perhaps Probation was not sending them. Although Probation’s Jitahadi Imara stated that legitimate reasons could exist for detained youth not being in school, he acknowledged a possible disconnect between policy and practice that bears looking into. Robles also mentioned the misinformation parents sometimes have about whether or not their detained children are in school, and urged the routine sharing of that information.

“Thematically,” Henke pointed out, “this issue ties into what we were talking about—you can never have too much communication between agencies and organizations. We in Montebello think it’s a very positive outcome for us to open our doors and work with others for the benefit of these kids, whether it’s with Probation, the juvenile court community schools, or DCFS. We *want* to be talking for the betterment of kids.”

In general, past discussions with Probation have centered around the transition of detained youth back into comprehensive high schools, and Velasquez said that with the proper support systems—credit recovery, distance learning programs, drug rehab, and social preparation—that was possible. The Pomona board of education aims to use alternative education and community day schools as a last resort. “We want to keep kids close to their house,” Martinez said. “We lose them in the transition from comprehensive to alternative schools. We’ve got a 29 to 30 percent dropout rate, and we need to do something about it.” A credit recovery program embedded in the school day, with a new contract vendor, will begin next year.

Marie Hansen, who worked ten years in the Montebello district and is now with Compton Unified, oversees many homeless students and youth in foster care and on probation, and stressed the importance of school districts’ receiving information on students prior to their transition into district schools. She expressed interest in the pilot project and in a data match.

Issues and Concerns of Participants

- In response to Marie Hansen’s question about available funding to replicate and expand the school-based probation officer program, Jitahadi Imara explained that the Probation Department is looking at juvenile field services in terms of risk level: high, medium, and low. With an increase in low-risk caseloads, which demand less attention, it is possible that probation officers could be freed up to take on more high-risk cases, or be placed on school campuses. The department’s internal budget resources may be exhausted, but collaborative partnerships and outside funding, such as Montebello’s Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, are still an option. A portion of that grant has been dedicated to fully funding a second school-based probation officer, Robert Henke said, to supplement the one in place for the last six years.
- Marsha Evers from Covina Valley Unified expressed appreciation to the Probation Department for “resolving an issue that has haunted our district for years—kids being released from camp with no preparation. That hasn’t been a problem in Covina Valley for a year and a half,” she said. “Camp officers are calling ten days in advance, forwarding transcripts, giving

us parents' names, saying 'let's prepare.' We talked about it here a couple of years ago, and I just want to say thank you." Imara passed those thanks along to Judge Nash, who had championed the process of notifying schools in advance. (The court protocol for doing so is being expanded into smaller school districts, Bill Elkins said, and will be shared once it is complete.) "If we fall short," Imara told Evers, referring to Probation, "you let us know."

- Carrie Miller announced the upcoming availability of Federal Title I funds to address youth in group homes (through DCFS or Probation's suitable-placement program). The application for those funds, due in July, should be released in May, and she will make sure that it is distributed. Imara suggested that districts apply for those monies to fund probation officers, social workers, or mental health clinicians, depending on the needs of the schools involved.
- In response to Edward Velasquez's question about court liaisons—the judge adjudicating youth from Los Padrinos into the Montebello school district apparently knew little about available support systems, but now has a specific district contact to help—Judge Nash said that the issue should be discussed. Co-locating staff within the courthouse is one option, Richard Martinez said, and the Pomona district may do that for a half-day a week.
- Mental Health Services Act dollars earmarked for reducing school violence should be available for school districts to apply for soon, Marv Southard believes. The recent state budget settlement could upset those plans, though, if voters approve Proposition 1E, which would divert \$460 million from MHSA into the general fund. "If that passes on May 19," Southard said, "we're not sure what programs the money will come from. School violence dollars should be available in some measure, but we don't yet know when and how much."
- Another 'day at dependency court' has been approved for sometime in April, and Pat Levinson hopes that school liaisons and other district personnel will take advantage of the opportunity to visit if they have not already done so. She thanked Judge Nash for making LACOE welcome at the children's court; an education coordinator has an office there and helps with obtaining school records, making connections to Foster Youth Services, and ensuring that youth don't lose school credits or jeopardize their attendance records when appearing at court. "They don't always tell teachers where they were," Levinson said, "but a court appearance is the only legitimate excuse in ADA [average daily attendance protocols]. If the teacher or the district ever has any question about whether or not a kid was in court, or suspects that's where they were, the courts are willing to help get you that information."

Nash finds it very helpful to have school liaisons present at the court to work with judicial officers, attorneys, families, probation officers, and social workers. "I'm always happy when folks come out and learn how the system works, too," he told attendees. "You're always welcome. If you can't make it on a group day, just contact my office and we'll set up a visit any time you're interested. Confidentiality is a so-called 'cloak' over the place, but I believe that the more open the process is, the better."

With regard to schools being unaware that youth are at court, Nash suggested raising the topic at the next multiagency meeting with children's attorneys and education and departmental representatives, to come up with a more systematic notification process. "Attendance

is a big issue,” Darline Robles acknowledged. “How can we get the information to individual teachers while still keeping confidentiality intact? What’s the make-up procedure for the work? There are lots of questions.”

- Southard mentioned that the breakthrough collaborative series that preceded the education pilot discussed earlier was actually only the first such series. The second is a partnership—now in its beginning stages—between the departments of Mental Health, Children and Family Services, Probation, and the courts to focus on crossover youth in SPA 6. “School districts serving that region may be asked to participate in doing something that focuses on these potential crossover kids,” Southard said. “Education will be a huge partner in that effort.” (Imara also mentioned an AB 129 pilot site in the Pasadena area.)

Anti-Bullying Project

The work of the ECC is governed by its Blueprint recommendations, one of which calls for safe schools and safe transitions to school. Late last year in the Acton-Agua Dulce Unified School District, a 14-year-old boy who had been bullied and harassed by fellow students for years shot and killed himself at his high school. Out of that tragedy, the boy’s father began a grassroots movement—Project 51, named for the boy’s athletic jersey number—to bring school districts, parents, students, and communities together to eradicate bullying and violence on campus. “When Supervisor Antonovich’s office called the ECC for help,” Michelle Barritt said, “we were thrilled to pitch in. This is the beginning of a project that can have a very long-term positive impact.”

Project 51 offers a toll-free number and an e-mail address—staffed around the clock by trained parent volunteers—through which anyone can report (anonymously if they so choose) instances of bullying or harassment, whether they were a victim of or witness to an incident. Once volunteers take the information, they relay it to a school-district point person. The school district then investigates the incident, remedying the situation where possible. Volunteers follow up with the original caller (if he or she gave a name) to see if things were resolved. For at least one complaint already, the reporting student has stated that the bullying has stopped.

“Teasing, bullying, and harassment looks very different now than it did when most of us were in school,” Barritt said. “Much of it has moved online, where it can be anonymous, and it can do a lot of damage. This project builds on programming that most districts already have in place, bringing together policy and practice and paving over the cracks between. In Jeremiah’s case, the duration and severity of what he endured had fallen through those cracks, and that’s what we want to prevent. The nonprofit’s ultimate goal is to create a model program that can provide technical assistance to expand districts’ existing programs and add training and mentoring components. We want to gain some momentum, and then offer it elsewhere.”

Darline Robles will have Bob Tyra, project director of the California Counselor Leadership Network, call Barritt, and Edward Velasquez offered the services of the Montebello district’s school police officer, John Ortega, who facilitates sessions on cyber bullying (as do LACOE personnel). Ortega is currently working with the Department of Mental Health, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the Los Angeles Police Department on a threat assessment program. “A lot of bullying

is kids making long-term, multiple threats,” Ortega said, “and intervening with one student can stop these threats. We’re developing a good partnership with law enforcement and the mental health folks to get in and do that intervention. A model that Montebello started two years ago has teams at each high school of school resource officers, psychologists, and administrators to take threat assessments to the next level. We also do assemblies on cyber bullying and presentations for parents and students that are very well received.”

In Petra Galindo’s local LAUSD district, which encompasses East Los Angeles and parts of South Los Angeles, threat assessment teams include mental health workers and teachers, and begin at the elementary level. “We use them as problem-solving meetings,” Galindo said, “generalizing from specific incidents to the whole school campus, building a school-wide positive climate of caring. There are some serious cases, even in the elementary grades, and the team approach is proactive.”

Several school districts in the county have implemented various models of character education as part of their curricula, transforming the culture within school systems and sometimes extending that peer-to-peer work into the larger community. “Michael Josephson’s ‘Character Counts!’ is one model,” Robles said. “There are lots of them. Essentially, it’s all about everyone taking care of each other.” The Culver City district, where Josephson himself is a parent, uses Character Counts! and has also formed an anti-bullying task force of parents, students, teachers, and administrators that is researching further programs. “Some of them are costly,” Gwenis Laura said. “We appreciate the LACOE trainings, and we’d love to see them expand to parents more.”

Closing

“These are very productive meetings,” Judge Nash said, “and it’s good to hear about something new and positive. Little by little, things are getting better, and we need to keep talking and keep plugging away. Many thanks to Sharon and Carrie and Michelle and the ECC for their efforts in bringing folks together, and thanks to everyone attending today.”

Edward Velasquez expressed appreciation to Darline Robles for hosting the meeting, and Robles thanked everyone for being there.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:50 a.m.