

Los Angeles Education Summit On Needs & Challenges Facing Foster Youth: “Identifying Obstacles and Forging Solutions”

A.

Introduction¹

In Los Angeles, there are a staggering number of children under the jurisdiction of the dependency court system; the educational progress of these youth is a crucial factor in ensuring that the children our County undertakes to “raise” reach their full potential. While a quality education is a key component of every child’s successful transition to adulthood, a sound educational foundation is especially crucial for children who spend long periods of their childhood in foster care.

Recent studies focusing on the problems facing dependent youth have identified the educational needs of this population as one of the most critical areas in need of attention and collaboration. Far too many of our dependent youth are at risk of educational failure:

- 30% of foster youth function below grade level;
- Over 35% are in special education;
- 50% of foster children are held back;²
- 46% of foster youth do not complete high school (by way of comparison, 84% of non-foster youth complete high school); and
- As few as 15% enroll in college.

Without basic educational skills and competence, these children have little chance of a stable and productive adult life.

¹ This report was prepared by staff at the Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles and produced with generous funding from Casey Family Programs. The contents of the report and recommendations are based on the notes compiled by designated “reporters” who sought to memorialize the discussion at the Summit. Anyone with an interest in reading the recorders’ notes should contact Lisa Romero, Children’s Law Center, at (323) 980-1599.

² Previous releases of this report erroneously read 83% rather than 50%.

Not surprisingly, these poor educational outcomes lead to anything but a stable adult future. Within two to four years after emancipating from the foster care system:

- 51% of foster youth are unemployed;
- 40% of foster youth are on public assistance or incarcerated; and
- 25% of foster youth become homeless.

More can and should be done to address these disturbing figures and to work toward improved educational outcomes for abused and neglected youth.

B.

The Summit

In a County with tremendous geographic breadth, there are infrequent opportunities for educators, social service workers, members of the judiciary, and advocates to meet and discuss protocols and procedures addressing the education needs of dependent children. Moreover, while there are numerous committees, task forces, and working groups within our community that meet to discuss the education needs of these youth, there is no centralized group that coordinates the efforts of all of these bodies.

On May 16, 2003, over one hundred educators, child welfare experts, advocates, and community leaders gathered together for a first-ever day-long "Education Summit" aimed at identifying key issues, challenges, and possible reforms relating to the educational needs of our County's foster youth. At this historic event, key policy makers from a variety of different disciplines shared their expertise and perspectives on the hurdles that have resulted in poor educational outcomes for our County's most vulnerable youth. Featured guests and speakers included: Dr. Darline Robles, Superintendent of the Los Angeles County Office of Education; Los Angeles Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash; Dr. David Sanders, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services; Los Angeles County Supervisors Michael Antonovich and Zev Yaroslavsky; as well as numerous other judicial, community and school leaders.³

A variety of challenges relating to the educational attainment of dependent youth were identified and analyzed over the course of the day. In particular, five breakout sessions allowed smaller groups to explore in greater detail the following areas:

- Ensuring and maintaining school and placement stability;
- Access to, and transfer of, education records, crafting effective enrollment/disenrollment procedures, and challenges in calculating school credits;
- Administering and overseeing non public schools;
- Developing an academic support network for foster youth -- mentorship, tutoring and other support mechanisms; and

³ A complete list of Summit Attendees is attached at Appendix A.

- Creating and implementing a foster youth literacy initiative.⁴

At the close of the Summit, a spokesperson from each breakout session presented specific recommendations for change relating to the group's area of focus.

All of the attendees agreed to work together in the coming year not simply to bring about these recommendations for reform, but also to continue the spirit of collaboration and communication established at the Summit. An effort will be made to reconvene the Summit participants and others at the one year mark to discuss the progress that has been made in relation to these recommendations and to continue this critical dialogue in regard to the educational needs of our County's abused and neglected youth.

⁴ A copy of the program from the day, as well as the specific questions discussed in each of the breakout sessions, is attached at Appendix B.

C.

Recommendations

Not surprisingly, certain consistent themes resonated over the course of the day and found their way into the recommendations of several of the breakout groups. These general recommendations are listed first, followed by the more specific recommendations that were developed by each breakout group and relating to the topics and issues under consideration by that group.

1. General Recommendations

A. Maintaining School Stability

1. Placement decisions for foster youth should be based, at least in part, on the need to maintain the youth's school stability. To that end, whenever possible children should be placed within their community and maintained in their school of origin.
2. Social workers should be trained to consider school stability, educational integrity, educational attainment, and school readiness in placement and other related decisions impacting foster youth.
3. Replacements should be timed, whenever possible, to avoid disruption of the youth's academic, enrichment and extracurricular activities.

B. Training and Empowerment of Education Advocates

1. Multidisciplinary teams should be created to provide training for parents, children, caregivers, advocates, social workers and bench officers regarding the educational rights and unique needs of dependent youth.
2. Teachers should receive mandatory training to ensure better understanding of the needs of foster children and how to best work with the parents and caregivers of foster children.
3. Parents, caregivers and children should have a voice at every stage of the educational planning for dependent youth.
4. Advocacy organizations, caregivers, the court, child welfare workers and the schools need to collaborate in recruiting and training volunteer education advocates for foster children and

ensuring that each foster child has an informed education advocate.

5. Resource guides are needed to assist children, caregivers, educators, social workers, advocates and the court in identifying and accessing services aimed at improving the educational attainment of foster youth.
6. School and child welfare policies and forms should be updated to accurately reflect current law in regard to the education rights of foster children.

C. Improved Coordination

1. A Countywide Foster Youth "Education Coordinating Council" should be created to improve and monitor the educational attainment of foster youth and to implement the reforms developed at the Summit. (The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has already acted upon this recommendation. A copy of the Board's motion is attached as Appendix C.)
2. The education and child welfare systems should clarify who bears the responsibility for decision-making and implementation of critical changes at each step of a dependent child's education.
3. DCFS should create an education "unit" to oversee the educational needs of dependent youth.

2. Specific Recommendations from Each Breakout Group

A. Records Access and Enrollment Issues

1. At time of a child's entry into the foster care system:
 - a. Parents should be provided with a pamphlet explaining the youth's educational rights and the parent's responsibilities;
 - b. The social worker should gather and provide to the court basic information regarding the child's education status, including the name of the last school attended and the child's educational progress; and

- c. Courts should encourage the parents' participation in school related decision-making. Courts should also issue orders, as needed, addressing the child's school attendance, check out, and reenrollment (if a change in school is needed).
2. School Selection, Planning, and Assessment
 - a. Each child should have an educational plan.
 - b. Typically, the child should remain in his or her school of origin until or unless the educational plan calls for a change.
 - c. A diagnostic center or team should be developed to determine the educational needs of the child.
3. If a school change is in the child's best interest:
 - a. The child should be taken to the school to say good-bye, pick up personal items, return books, collect schoolwork, etc. Older students can also obtain course schedule and transfer grades during this visit.
 - b. The child should be immediately enrolled in the new school regardless of the availability of transcripts, immunization records, school uniform, or fees owed to the prior school.
4. The social worker should provide information to the school regarding the child's status as a foster child and any unique circumstances or challenges the child is facing.
5. Schools should identify foster youth at the administrative level, and give these students priority for space, tutoring, and any other needed services. However, the school must protect the child's privacy by maintaining the confidentiality of the child's status as a foster child.
6. Credit calculation
 - a. The 81 school districts and LACOE should develop compatible systems for calculating full and partial credits for foster youth.

- b. Foster children should not have grades lowered due to absences resulting from improper check out, court appearances, replacement or other court related activities.

7. Regionalized supervision of dependency cases

- a. The juvenile dependency court should explore the possibility of assigning each courtroom to a particular geographic area. This would allow the hearing officer, court staff, and advocates to become familiar with the resources in each region (schools, teachers, social workers, etc.).

B. Academic Support and Enrichment

1. Tutoring

- a. The child welfare and education systems should create methods for identifying foster youth in need of academic support and enrichment opportunities, and make tutoring more readily available for all foster children.

2. Programming

- a. There is a need for more home and community based programs for foster children, as well as more educational programs equipped to handle dependent children with special needs.
- b. There should be more enrichment and after school programs for abused and neglected children ages 0-5 and for youth in high school.

C. Literacy

- 1. Steps should be taken to ensure that all foster children are able to read at grade level standards. In particular, all entities that play a part in the educational attainment of foster youth should institute a literacy campaign designed to ensure that no dependent youth emancipates from the system without basic literacy skills.

2. Assessment and Evaluation
 - a. Dependent children should receive:
 - o Basic vision and hearing screening;
 - o Developmental assessments, to include assessment of whether the child is meeting developmental milestones (including pre-reading milestones); and
 - o Yearly literacy assessment - developmental (for younger children) and psycho-educational (for school age children).
 - b. Child welfare workers should obtain and maintain copies of assessments and testing already conducted at the schools.
3. Caregiver responsibilities should include:
 - a. Providing a stimulating environment that includes available and accessible pre/reading resource materials and activities in the child's daily routine;
 - b. Attending parent teacher conferences; and
 - c. Attending training in regard to managing the child's educational progress, including navigating the school system, talking to teachers, and recognizing developmental milestones.
4. Child Welfare Responsibilities
 - a. Ensuring the child's Educational Passport includes current and accurate information;
 - b. Gathering information regarding, and reporting on, the child's developmental and educational progress and needs; and
 - c. Identifying community resources and helping caregivers write letters and advocate for the child.

5. Schools System Responsibilities
 - a. Be aware of and apply relevant laws (McKinney Vento, etc.);
 - b. Ensure each child has a current academic assessment;
 - c. Provide intervention as needed - extended school day, Saturday school, tutoring, etc.;
 - d. Provide pertinent information to the caregiver, DCFS, and the Court regarding available programming both at the school site and in the community; and
 - e. Provide information to the classroom teacher regarding the child's status as a foster child and any unique circumstances or challenges the child faces.
6. Role of the Court
 - a. Monitor the child's educational attainment;
 - b. Craft minute orders to ensure accountability and the provision of needed services; and
 - c. Encourage family/caregiver participation in educational attainment.

D. Non Public Schools

1. Data should be collected to ensure enhanced accountability of nonpublic schools.
 - a. Testing, suspension, and expulsion data should be broken out based on the child's status as a foster youth and by NPS enrollment.
 - b. Attendance, retention, discipline and opportunity transfer data needs to be collected and then broken out based on foster child status and by NPS enrollment.
2. Enhanced Monitoring
 - a. Each child's progress in an NPS must be monitored closely.

- b. Each NPS should receive incentives or consequences based on its performance and ability to bring about positive outcomes for students.
- 3. School placement decisions should not be governed by residential placements; mainstream school placement options other than the on-grounds or affiliated school should be considered, whenever possible.

E. School Stability

- 1. Provider contracts should focus on improving school stability and educational achievement and include greater provider accountability in regard to the performance of providers in these areas.
- 2. Social Worker Training and Reporting of Educational Progress
 - a. DCFS agreed to provide training to incoming and present social workers stressing the value of educational integrity and the importance of school stability. This training should become a component of the CSW Academy Training, as well as part of the mandatory continuing education for senior social workers.
 - b. Supervising Social Workers will ensure that Status Review Reports include current educational information and will not sign off on reports that lack this information.
- 3. Improved LAUSD Procedures and Training
 - a. LAUSD agreed to develop and implement specific policies and procedures to ensure school stability, smooth transitions, and a timely flow of information.
 - b. LAUSD will also train frontline personnel regarding the procedures and policies relating to dependent youth.
- 4. Court Procedures
 - a. The court will explore the creation of a blanket order designed to overcome barriers in the exchange of information and to enhance judicial scrutiny of school stability.

5. CASA, Attorney and Caregiver Training
 - a. Efforts should be made to evaluate and improve training in relation to school stability and educational integrity. CASAs should add an "education section" to their reports.

D.

Conclusion

As this report demonstrates in no uncertain terms, much was accomplished in this historic daylong gathering. Much more, however, remains to be done.

The resounding and enthusiastic commitment by the many agencies and organizations represented at the Summit to improving educational attainment for foster youth was truly inspiring. The momentum and renewed focus on these important have already generated positive action on a variety of fronts in the intervening months.

The Summit attendees ably tackled the first critical step in any attempt to reform our system -- identifying the key issues and barriers impacting educational attainment of our community's neediest youth. The over fifty detailed and thoughtful recommendations developed during the Summit provide an invaluable roadmap for turning the corner and improving educational outcomes of dependent youth in our community. Creation of an "Education Coordinating Council," a concept recently embraced by the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, will further ensure an ongoing forum within which concrete action on these and other recommendations can occur.

The real work is ahead of us. Even more importantly, the real opportunities are ahead of us as well. With the continued support and ongoing collaboration of leaders within our county, city, judicial, education, child welfare, and advocacy communities we are sure to create not simply a new educational picture for abused and neglected youth throughout Los Angeles, but also a model to inspire other parts of our state as well.