

Education Summits – 2003 and 2004
PROGRESS TO DATE AND THE CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN

Los Angeles is home to one of the largest child welfare systems in the country, accounting for nearly one in ten foster children nationwide. These youth demonstrate potential to triumph over difficult childhoods and become the community leaders of our future – but without basic educational competence, the same children have little chance to lead a stable and productive life.

The first Los Angeles Education Summit was established in 2003 to identify problems and find solutions to the dismaying educational outcomes of foster youth. In 2004, the Summit expanded to examine the needs of probation youth, recognizing that they face similar roadblocks.

It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to achieve in life, if he is denied the opportunity of an education.

Brown v. Board of
Education, (1954)

During both Summits, child advocates, educators, the judiciary, caregivers, and former foster youth joined together with representatives from DCFS and Probation to share their expertise and work toward overcoming the vast educational achievement gap these youth experience. As detailed below, progress has been made in many key areas since the first Summit in May, 2003. Nonetheless, much more remains to be done.

What has been accomplished:

- ***Coordination:*** The establishment of the Education Coordinating Council is a significant step towards systemic coordination.
- ***Information Sharing:*** AB 490 amended Ca. Ed Code Section 49076 to allow social workers to access educational records. In addition, DCFS has created a Release of Information Form so parents can authorize the release of records.
- ***Specialized Units and Protocols:*** LAUSD created a Foster Care Liaison unit in an effort to promote compliance with AB 490, and DCFS has established an educational unit. In addition, LAUSD recently released Bulletin 787 with protocols to meet the needs of foster youth.
- ***Training:*** DCFS, educators, and child advocates created training materials with respect to AB 490 and school stability issues. In addition, DCFS is developing instructional guides for parents and social workers regarding educational rights. The Judiciary is also expanding training on educational issues for bench officers and has developed a judicial checklist.
- ***Legislation:*** AB 490 addresses school stability and educational rights; AB 1858 addresses standards and certification of nonpublic schools.

What remains to be done:

- ***Improved Coordination:*** Although there has been some success, coordination between the many entities involved in the child's life (DCFS, Probation, DMH, minor's counsel, school districts) needs to be improved and sustained.

- **Data Systems and Records Access:** All agencies serving foster and probation youth must develop data collection systems and protocols to facilitate meaningful analysis and accountability. Records should be readily available and shared in a timely manner.
- **Literacy:** Progress needs to be made in identifying foster youth who are illiterate and/or performing significantly below grade-level and ensuring that they are provided with the services necessary to master basic literacy skills.
- **School Stability:** Despite progress under AB 490, foster youth continue to experience multiple academic and caregiver changes and, as a result, lack basic school stability.
- **Training:** There is critical need for training of caregivers, social workers, probation officers, attorneys, judicial bench officers, and school personnel. Training should focus on individual advocacy as well as the educational needs and rights of foster and probation youth.
- **Advocacy:** Knowledgeable advocates experienced in the educational system should be available to assist caregivers and children understand and protect their educational rights.
- **Support for Academic Success:** Caregivers ought to be encouraged to provide an environment conducive to academic success.

He who opens a school door, closes a prison.

Victor Hugo
- **Non-Public Schools/Special Education:** Children must be placed in the most appropriate and least restrictive academic setting, per state and federal law. That setting is determined by the child's needs rather than the convenience of the placing agency, school district, or others.
- **Implementation of AB 490:** While AB 490 created significant rights for foster youth, including the right to remain in their school of origin when it is in their best interest and immediate enrollment, much remains to be accomplished and implemented.
- **Transportation:** Transportation issues continue to be a significant barrier to ensuring school stability and the right of children to remain in their school of origin.

Specific recommendations regarding many of these issues are detailed in the Education Summit Reports. Certain themes resonate throughout those recommendations. Disparate organizations must be brought together through ongoing communication and collaboration; training for individuals and agencies throughout the system must focus on the unique problems faced by these vulnerable youth; and stability and sensitivity must become the watchword as we make decisions for our children.

The Summit recommendations form a thoughtful and thorough guide toward progress. This path will not be easy, but it is one that Los Angeles must undertake together for the sake of our whole community. With one of the largest child welfare systems in the country, we have enormous challenges, but we also have the exciting opportunity to build a model that can become a template for the rest of the country. To do anything less is to forsake our communal future and abandon our most vulnerable youth.