

1999 - 2000 Ventura County Grand Jury Report

Ventura County Juvenile Court Schools

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Background

The purpose of juvenile court schools is to provide both a high-quality education and personal-growth opportunities to incarcerated youth in a challenging, safe, and supportive environment.

In September of 1999, the Grand Jury visited the County Juvenile Detention facilities on Hillmont Avenue. This initial visit generally concerned itself with the facilities and the physical condition of the detention area. Following this visit, the Grand Jury determined that it would be beneficial to have a second visit to the facility, focused this time on the instructional program.

This report addresses the instructional program conducted by the Ventura County Juvenile Court Schools at the Frank A. Colston Youth Center and at McBride School in Juvenile Hall.

A unique quality of both facilities is that three agencies, the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools Office, the County Probation Services Agency, and the Health Services Agency, have equal participation in the development and operation of the overall program.

Juvenile Hall inmates are incarcerated for a relatively short period of time. At Colston Youth Center, juveniles are committed for at least 120 days, but are assessed for release after serving 60 days. Juveniles who are committed for 150 days are assessed for release after serving 90 days. All juveniles are enrolled in school and start attending class upon their arrival.

The Colston Youth Center is a coeducational, residential correctional facility that houses 45-48 minors, ages thirteen to eighteen, from three to six months. Colston has been recognized on a statewide and national basis as a model treatment facility for incarcerated minors.

The McBride School is unique in that it is located within a maximum-security juvenile detention facility. The turnover and volume of students that pass through the school facility is approximately 2500-

3000 minors each year. The number of students enrolled each day ranges from 90 to 140, with 110 being average.

Methodology

At the time of our announced visit, McBride was preparing for their first accreditation by the Western Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges. In spite of the obvious stress associated with this preparation, the school counselor gave us a very thorough briefing on the instructional program and a tour of the classrooms. Every effort was made to answer all questions and to provide us with requested materials.

This report did not examine the detention facilities, but rather focused on the instructional program as it was conducted within the two specific facilities, Colston Youth Center and McBride School. The investigation was conducted by two on-site protocol visits, interviews with the staff members and faculty, and review of published materials collected at the sites.

Findings

A. Colston Youth Center

- F-1 Colston Youth Center is in a modern, medium-security facility that provides a safe and secure environment for wards of the juvenile court from thirteen through seventeen years of age. The center offers a full school program. The high security nature of this facility makes it necessary for safety procedures and precautions that are unique from any other school in the county.
- F-2 At Colston each student, in addition to a complete school day, participates in a variety of intensive support services that are also conducted throughout the week, such as skill building, small groups, release planning meetings, treatment teams, family counseling, and community aftercare.
- F-3 Colston School offers a comprehensive core academic program in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, History/Social Science, and Health in keeping with county and state requirements and recommended courses of study. Elective offerings include Physical Education, Computers, Journalism, Art and Ceramics, Career Planning, Woodshop, and Life Skills. These classes support the academic program and offer a broad-based educational approach that assists each student in making the most of their abilities while regaining and maintaining his/her self-confidence.

F-4 The students at Colston Youth Center are also given the opportunity to work extensively on thematic lesson units as well as develop and implement a number of specialized presentations and projects. For instance, the woodshop class teaches real life skills such as how to frame a door and the importance of learning to plan for and measure materials accurately. The teaching staff also works with students on developing science projects for a Science Fair to display student work for judging. Students in English classes have written poetry that has been presented in a public reading at Oxnard Community College as well as in a performing in front of a live audience. Journalism students also write and develop a newspaper entitled *The Chronicle News* and utilize computers to create their stories and articles.

B. McBride School

F-5 McBride School is housed within the original Ventura County Juvenile Hall. This facility is old and scheduled to be replaced within three years. Although this report focused on the instructional program, the state of the facilities and the overall look of neglect could not be ignored. Hallways needed paint and some classroom bulletin boards were decorated with what appeared to be cutouts from ancient magazines. One classroom was stocked with very old encyclopedias and other texts. It was also painted a rather repugnant shade of pink. Although this particular classroom was well equipped with computers, they did not appear to be used, possibly because of the lack of software.

F-6 One example of student work produced by one of the English classes at McBride was the building of a tabletop city based on the book, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. This particular group of students were primarily 15 to 17 years of age (although the school has students between the ages of 9 and 18.) Each group of students took a character from the book and built the character's house as it was described in the book. Then the city was laid out using the information given in the story. The students had daily opportunities to update the project as the reading progressed. At the conclusion, the students then shared their character's background with the group as part of a tour of the "city" they had built. In completing this project, the students acquired reading, writing, team building, and presentation skills as well as self-confidence.

F-7 The staff at McBride works to ensure cross-curricular approaches to learning for the students. Due to the rapid turnover of students, peer tutoring was observed being done in one classroom. Peer tutoring is mutually advantageous,

both to the coached students and those who are coaching.

- F-8 Classrooms at both schools were generally well equipped with modern, powerful computers. However, in one classroom there seems to be a notable lack of appropriate software. The classes were small, allowing for one-on-one instruction. In one class, students experienced in computer usage were instructing new students in how to operate the equipment.

Conclusions

Lisbeth Schoor in her book, *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America*, lists some items that define a successful program. Schoor believes that the programs in the governmental and private sectors that function most effectively have the following attributes:

- Successful programs are comprehensive, flexible, and responsive to the student's needs.
- Successful programs see children in the context of their families.
- Successful programs have a long-term preventive orientation, a clear vision, and continue well over time.
- Successful programs are well managed by committed and competent individuals with clearly identifiable skills.
- Successful programs are staffed with personnel who are trained and supported to provide high quality responsive services.
- Successful programs are operated in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

Except for the shabby state of some of the McBride School classrooms, it appears that the criteria listed above were being met. However, the state of at least two of McBride classrooms may very possibly affect the instructional program in a negative way.

The Grand Jury was presented with *Small Voices*, a book of poems written by the students incarcerated in Juvenile Hall and published under a grant from the South Coast Writing Project. A quotation from the introduction of this book seems to sum up very well the philosophy of the instructional staff.

... by its very nature a facility like this is a place of "No! You can't!" It is the culmination of a string of "No! You can't!" that began back in the fourth grade and is now almost a daily occurrence. If you are willing to listen, and look past their

anger, you just might hear, a tiny but powerful voice saying, "Yes! I can!" This is where the journey begins.

It was apparent from our visits that the faculty of both schools did indeed embrace this philosophy.

Commendations

The Grand Jury was impressed with the skill and knowledge of the staff. The faculty appears to be dedicated to their students.

Overall, the Grand Jury believes the administration and staff of the Ventura County Juvenile Court Schools is providing a valuable and worthwhile function within the constraints of working with incarcerated students. Learning is taking place.

The school counselor is to be commended for establishing excellent rapport with the staff of the detention center and commencing group therapy classes for the students.

Recommendations

- R-1 Repaint classrooms and halls where necessary. The physical facility should be maintained as well as possible even though the building may be replaced in three years.
- R-2 McBride School should attempt to replace outdated text materials. For example, encyclopedias on CDs should be considered as replacement for the outdated encyclopedias found in the classrooms.

Response Required

Principal, Juvenile Court Schools, to R-2.

Director, County Probation Department, to R-1 and R-2.

