

# **THE CHILD NOT YET LEFT BEHIND**

## **SANTA BARBARA COUNTY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS**

**The Grand Jury commends the teachers and administrators  
of the Santa Barbara County Community Schools  
for their dedication to the betterment of at-risk minors.**

### **Introduction**

The Santa Barbara County Education Office operates three Community Schools in Santa Barbara County – El Puente in Santa Barbara, El Puente in Lompoc and Peter B. FitzGerald School in Santa Maria. Male and female students from grades seven through twelve attend. The unique function of these schools is to serve as a bridge between Los Prietos Boys' Camp or Academy, Juvenile Halls or other Court Schools and regular public schools. They also receive students who are expelled, suspended, on probation, or referred by their parents. Community Schools are an important safety net for seriously at-risk students who might otherwise disappear from the school system. Students at these schools receive many services in addition to course work. The Civil Grand Jury would like to see the Community Schools enhance their good work by assuring that all three schools have access to the same services.

The Grand Jury looked at the Community Schools and concluded that they are doing a commendable job. The Jury is impressed by their efforts in:

- creating a supportive environment for students and staff,
- raising students' grade levels in a short time,
- preparing students for re-entry into public school or for graduation,
- increasing test scores,
- providing a safe learning environment,
- training teachers and staff in new approaches, and
- continually seeking programs that provide greater coordination, tracking and academic achievement of the students.

While dedicating funds for some program enhancements, the Santa Barbara County Education Office is contemplating cuts in staff. Everyone working with these at-risk students is dedicated to their betterment. The Jury hopes that the County Education Office continues to support the teachers, aides and all other adults at the schools, for they are critical to student success.

## **Method of Investigation**

Members of the Grand Jury visited the three Community Schools two or more times and Los Prietos once. Members met with two principals of the schools and conferred with twelve teachers, several teachers' aides, and a community liaison. Members also interviewed administrators, including the Superintendent, at the Santa Barbara County Education Office on two occasions. We also interviewed administrators of the high school districts in Santa Barbara and Santa Maria. A continuation school principal, a trainer for the UCSB program, and Probation officials were also interviewed.

## **Background**

The first El Puente, "The Bridge," School began in 1980 in a trailer in the back lot of the County Education Office. Two dedicated teachers asked to set up a school to serve students released from Court Schools. These students often cannot easily transition back to public schools. At the time, this special school was one of a handful in California. The Santa Barbara El Puente School is now a model for alternative education and is often visited by state educators.

An Administrator of Juvenile Court and Community Schools at the County Education Office oversees all three schools. The schools in Santa Barbara and Santa Maria have an on-site principal; the school in Lompoc does not have a principal but a teacher acts as a site liaison. All instructors are fully credentialed, and all now engage in direct classroom teaching.

The Community Schools utilize the California Standards Based Instruction Program. It is not a college prep curriculum, but it is transferable to any accredited school. Also, there is a cooperative plan with Santa Barbara City College and Allan Hancock College for additional coursework; students are encouraged to enroll. Community Schools are not to be confused with continuation schools that are part of public high school districts.

The objective of the three Community Schools has been to prepare at-risk minors for successful re-entry into public school or for high school graduation. Students can elect to stay after their time assigned by the Court or the Probation Department. It is not uncommon for students to want to graduate from these schools. Given the diversity of reasons for attending Community Schools, students stay as little as one day or as long as they need to graduate. At the time of the Grand Jury visits, 150 students were enrolled in FitzGerald School in Santa Maria, 43 students in El Puente Lompoc, and 165 in El Puente Santa Barbara. Community Schools have a high rate of success – either through graduation or re-entry into public schools. School officials often credit this success for saving taxpayers possible costs of incarceration, probation or other social services in the future.

## **Observations**

Community Schools offer a setting that is structured as well as supportive. For some students, this is their first time in a highly structured educational environment. Safety

measures include signing a neutrality agreement not to engage in gang activity and a strict dress code. Each student is individually searched at the beginning of the day and is continually monitored both inside and outside the building. Staff is trained in security measures. Teachers and aides carry the full responsibility of student supervision, including during breakfasts, lunches and breaks.

In addition, all three schools recently acquired video surveillance in the classrooms and the halls. Videos can be used as evidence in case of altercations. The cameras are also intended to have a calming effect. The adult presence of teachers and aides has the same effect.

Students arriving at the Community Schools typically are below grade level and deficient in units. Community Schools fill the gap by testing students upon entry, assessing abilities, targeting areas for remediation, and providing appropriate intervention programs. The schools recently acquired state-adopted programs to accelerate the students to grade level. Pre- and post-testing, as well as periodic benchmark testing, is built into the programs. Classes can be made up in 1- 5 unit increments, rather than the 5 units per class requirement in public schools. This segmentation in credit recovery allows students to re-enter public school classes at different times during the year and not have to wait or repeat the entire course at the beginning of the next semester. Moreover, the Community Schools are year-round schools. The extra time spent during the summer can allow a student to recover up to 25 units. It is not uncommon for students to go up several grade levels while attending Community Schools. Students and teachers are proud of this achievement.

Test scores at the three Community Schools have improved significantly, meeting and going beyond state and federal requirements for adequate yearly progress. When a weakness was found in the writing portion of the high school exit exam, the County Education Office invited the South Coast Writing Project from the University of California, Santa Barbara, to create a series of workshops to help train Community Schools teachers in strategies to round out the highly regimented remedial math, reading and writing programs now used in the classroom. Serving breakfast is another new approach to helping the student holistically. The teachers have noted a marked improvement in student attention with this nourishment.

This year, the Community Schools acquired two new computer programs. The first program, Northwest Evaluation Association, identifies student skills through computerized adaptive testing. The second program, Cyber High, is an accredited electronic course provider, so students can advance academic course credits in an individualized manner. College preparation coursework is also available through Cyber High. The programs emphasize independent mastery but claim that teachers and aides will have as much opportunity to interact with students as with direct instruction. Human interaction is the strongest component of the success rate of these students, and use of electronic testing or computerized teaching programs should not supplant this.

Students generally need three semesters to come up to grade level. School administrators stated that three full semesters are also needed to stabilize the student emotionally. The fact that the Community School students often need dedicated support

systems in both academic and personal areas underscores how interaction with people as well as programs is necessary for success. School officials often said that the students are more successful at the Community Schools because of the positive individual attention coming from the adults in the classrooms. One school superintendent credited the success of these schools to the teachers.

The standard ratio is 25 students to one credentialed teacher per classroom. The seven teachers at El Puente Santa Barbara have fourteen aides, two aides per classroom. The first serves as an instructional assistant, and the second is an extra aide to accommodate special education students in the class. In Santa Maria the seven teachers have six aides; in Lompoc, the two teachers have two aides. In Santa Maria this year some aides have had to rotate to cover classrooms without aides. The lack of dependable aides in the North County classrooms is keenly felt. Special education needs in North County are often not met because the special education teacher and two aides must cover several school sites. Moreover, the County Education Office has reduced the hours of newly hired aides. With the frequent testing of incoming and exiting students, aides are often called out of the classroom to administer exams. Teachers' aides provide an essential academic and security component in the classroom. When there is only one, or none as can happen in North County, the teacher has no assistance, and cameras may not deter disruptiveness or fights. Reduction in the number of aides and their hours adversely impacts the classrooms.

Another factor affecting optimal educational environment is the size of the classroom. Both Santa Barbara and Lompoc have large classrooms that allow the circulation of aides and teachers. The students in Santa Maria are crowded into small classrooms, sometimes without enough desks or with no space between desks. Especially with these students, such close proximity can lead to less academic focus and more interpersonal tension.

Behavioral problems are as much a concern at community schools as is interaction with peers. A successful transition back to public schools often involves counseling. The Santa Barbara campus is fortunate to have a full-time bilingual psychologist, two full-time drug counselors and two interns, two special education psychology interns, a speech therapist, a behavior therapist, and a mental health therapist. There are many counseling groups on-site for crisis and anger management, conflict mediation, suicide prevention, and drug and alcohol abuse. South County nonprofit agencies<sup>1</sup> reach out to the students and provide these services. The County Education Office does not have to pay for these counselors and programs that benefit the students. The schools in Santa Maria and Lompoc are not so fortunate. Nonprofit agencies in North County provide intermittent services. The schools in North County do not have regular on-site counselors, and the students at these campuses do not have access to counseling services when they need them. *The Santa Maria campus has not had a full-time counselor at the school in over 12 years.* This sometimes places the teachers and the aides in the position of acting as counselor. While all of the teachers have a real connection with these students, it is taxing to be counselor, security guard, breakfast and lunch provider, test administrator, record keeper for frequent student transitions,

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<sup>1</sup> Active agencies in South County are Casa de la Raza, Child Abuse Listening & Mediation (CALM), Council on Alcohol & Drug Abuse (CADA), Fighting Back, Los Compadres, Planned Parenthood, Rotary, and YMCA.

and be the teacher for academic content as well. Teachers can feel that they need as much support as the students.

These discrepancies in services should be addressed especially now that the need for alternative schools is growing in North County. Not only has the youth population grown in North County, but also the youth crime rate. The Juvenile Hall in Santa Maria just expanded to accommodate this growth. Santa Maria also has a greater number of youth on probation than other cities in the county. As these juveniles transition out of the court system, many will need to be placed in the Community School. FitzGerald School has not expanded since Santa Maria's population was half what it is today. The school often has a waiting list. Students released from Los Prietos Boys' Camp and Juvenile Halls have priority in entering Community Schools, which causes other referred students to remain on the waiting list. Moreover, students known to be on probation have been seen on the streets when there is no room for them at the Community School.

In spite of waiting lists, there are empty seats in the North County Community Schools. Truant students are still enrolled, so the schools cannot accept more students to fill their vacant seats. Unfortunately, there is not adequate follow-up on these absentee students because the Probation Department has cut back its anti-truancy enforcement. As part of a Fighting Back grant, a truancy counselor visits the Santa Barbara campus three times a week. There is no truancy counselor for Santa Maria or Lompoc. These schools often lose state funding because the money that they receive from the state is for students in attendance, not students enrolled.

With less incoming money, there is pressure from the County Education Office to cut staff. The school in Santa Maria cannot afford to lose staff. The school needs to expand. A larger campus would help in several ways. For example, a computer lab is needed. The classrooms are so compacted that current computer stations are inconvenient for student use. There are several empty rooms at the FitzGerald campus, but they are reserved for occasional County Education Office business.

The Santa Maria Joint Union High School District has discussed an expansion of FitzGerald School with the County Education Office. The District is willing to contribute more to the Fitzgerald School, just as Santa Barbara High School District contributes to the cost of rent for the Santa Barbara El Puente School. If FitzGerald School does expand, or another Community School established in Santa Maria, attention will have to be made to providing counseling and other in-class services as well as a facility that allows students more breathing room. Negotiations regarding FitzGerald School's expansion need to continue in earnest.

### **Conclusion**

The Santa Barbara County Community Schools are not just a revolving door or safety net. At-risk students succeed in this school environment. All teachers and staff that the Grand Jury members talked to at Community Schools were committed to these students, respected them, and loved their work. While these students need the structure and discipline found at Community Schools, they appear to thrive because of the human contact and encouragement given them in the smaller classes and counseling sessions.

The presence of several adults in the classroom provides added security and, just as important, individual attention to help students grasp the educational material. The Community Schools are doing an admirable job of preventing students from disappearing from the educational path.

The County Education Office needs to remain committed to funding these schools. It especially needs to address the growing at-risk student population in North County. All students in Santa Barbara County's Community Schools should have access to the same benefits. When at-risk students succeed, the entire community benefits.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

#### **Finding 1**

The Lompoc and Santa Maria Community Schools do not have the same ratio of permanent teachers' aides to students as does the Santa Barbara Community School.

#### **Recommendation 1**

The County Education Office should staff the Lompoc and Santa Maria Community Schools at the same level as the Santa Barbara Community School.

#### **Finding 2**

The Santa Maria and Lompoc Community Schools lack staff for special education students.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The County Education Office should provide special education teachers and aides for the North County schools.

#### **Finding 3**

The Lompoc and Santa Maria Community Schools do not have volunteer counselors and psychologists from non-profit organizations as does the Santa Barbara Community School.

#### **Recommendation 3**

The County Education Office should ensure that the Lompoc and Santa Maria Community Schools work to find alliances with non-profit service groups in the community to provide comparable counseling services.

#### **Finding 4**

Instructional space is inadequate at the Santa Maria campus. School population is likely to increase. The campus has a few vacant rooms that are occasionally used by the County Education Office.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The County Education Office and the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District should work together to find another more spacious site to lease for the school. In the

meantime, the County Education Office should make their office rooms available for instructional needs.

**Finding 5**

Absenteeism and truancy remain a problem in Community Schools. The problem is worse in the North County schools, where they have no truancy counselor.

**Recommendation 5a**

The County Education Office should work with community service organizations to ensure that all three schools have truancy counselors.

**Recommendation 5b**

The Probation Department, local Police Departments, and the County Education Office should work together to provide effective anti-truancy enforcement measures.

**Affected Agencies****County Education Office:**

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b

**Santa Maria Joint Union High School District:**

Finding 4

Recommendation 4

**Probation Department:**

Finding 5

Recommendation 5b

**Lompoc Police Department:**

Finding 5

Recommendation 5b

**Santa Barbara Police Department:**

Finding 5

Recommendation 5b

**Santa Maria Police Department:**

Finding 5

Recommendation 5b