

Edsource

Counties turn to 'transition specialists' to help students in court schools succeed

By [Michael Collier](#) | September 1, 2016 |



Credit: Michael Collier for EdSource

Josue Valdez graduated from court school at the top of his class, became an Emergency Medical Technician and has been accepted to Sacramento State's paramedic program.

Counties across California are stepping up efforts to ensure that students going to schools in juvenile detention facilities make it back to their communities — and have a fighting chance to succeed in school and life.

In addition to help from caseworkers and counselors, many counties are hiring additional support staff, called “transition specialists,” to help students bridge the gap between “court schools,” which they may attend for a few weeks, and an educational placement allowing them to graduate from high school.

At least sixteen California counties, from Butte in the north to Riverside in the south, have hired transition specialists, according to the [California County Superintendents Educational Services Association](#), which oversees county court schools.

The support such specialists can provide can be key to ensuring that students enrolled in court schools have the best chance of success. On an average day, about 7,000 students attend these schools, but over the course of a year the total number of students served is several times higher.

Lauren Brady, an attorney in the Berkeley office of Public Counsel, a public interest law firm, said the encouraging news is that the state “has started to recognize that this is a population of students who need attention and support,” including better instruction in court schools.

But more needs to be done, Brady said. “What do we do to keep young people connected to school?” she asked. “And how can schools find ways to keep kids in the system rather than out of the system?”

That task has become more manageable, as the number of young people in court schools has been dropping by about 1,000 students per year since the 2012-2013 school year.

REACHING OUT TO STUDENTS

Josue Valdez, the son of Guatemalan immigrants, is one of the students who benefited from transition specialists and other support staff in Alameda County’s Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro, just south of Oakland. As a teenager, he landed in detention centers across the state for offenses including assault, graffiti and vandalism.

His juvenile court teachers told him he was smart. But he lacked drive. At 17, he got into another fight.

“That’s when they sent me to camp for eight months,” said Valdez, now 20, referring to Camp Sweeney, a residential facility in Alameda County’s Juvenile Hall complex.

He could have easily “graduated” to an adult prison but for a probation officer and a teacher in the Alameda County Juvenile Court School, who saw his potential and reached out to him.

Transition specialists work directly with students and spend lots of time verifying records for students’ release and transition to other schools, while compiling and evaluating student transcripts and coordinating assessments.

“My fundamental mission is to get kids back into school as soon as possible,” said Jordan Seiden, a re-entry specialist in the [transition center](#) at Alameda County’s Juvenile Justice Center. The transition center was one of the first of its kind when it opened in 2009.

Other counties have opened transition centers since then. Nicole Rocha, who administers two juvenile court schools in Tulare County, said she had one employee last year. This year the county has hired four transition specialists to supplement its services.

“Our kids have a lot of needs, and it’s been nonstop since we started,” Rocha said. “We are here to help get them on the right track.” By their second week on the job, the new employees were working with more than 100 students and their families. One hurdle was placing students in appropriate classes.

TRACKING EVERY STUDENT

Orange County’s Department of Education, with 27 school districts, has one of the state’s largest networks supporting students in transition. It employs seven transition specialists, in addition to school counselors. The staffers must track each student from court school to a public school, said Laura Strachan, assistant superintendent for the county.

“We make sure that students are enrolled in the right classes and that the transition is seamless,” Strachan said. “I think it’s really exciting. Now we have ways to help them, and they have goals in mind.”

Better transition for students from detention to their home schools is one recommendation of a recent [highly critical report on the state’s court schools](#) by the Youth Law Center, an advocacy group in San Francisco.

“The court school system is failing to meet the educational needs of its students in a profound way,” the report said, adding that court schools must do a better job to serve a largely minority population who often lag far behind their peers academically.

California’s county superintendents association [challenged the report](#), saying the advocacy group misinterpreted state data on dropout, suspension and truancy rates in court schools.

“Our kids have a lot of needs, and it’s been nonstop since we started,” said Nicole Rocha, who administers two juvenile court schools in Tulare County.

Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director of the Youth Law Center, told EdSource that her organization stands by its criticisms of court schools and its recommendations for improving them. She does not plan to revise data in the report. In an [email to the superintendents group](#), she said she would like to work with them “to get a more accurate picture of the status and progress of students in court schools.”

Forty-seven of California’s 58 county offices of education oversee court schools. Some students who recently attended court schools told a July forum, co-sponsored by the Youth Law Center, that instruction was lacking. The students said they remember being in classes where teachers paid little or no attention to them.

SHORTER SENTENCES

The increased focus on helping juvenile offenders comes as they are spending less time in juvenile court schools. In 2014, California voters approved Proposition 47, which reduced many sentences for nonviolent drug and property crimes from felonies to misdemeanors.

In Alameda County, that means average detentions of 10 days instead of two weeks, officials said. In Orange County, it means average stays of a month rather than six months. Shorter stays mean speedier transitions for students going to traditional or alternative schools.

Based on the state’s Local Control Funding Formula, court schools receive more funding per student than regular schools, because every court student, by definition, is classified as “high-needs.” According to EdSource calculations based on state Department of Finance figures, a court school last year received \$17,428 per student, compared with the \$12,546 a regular school with the same student demographics would receive.

REDEMPTION

After his arrest in 2012, Josue Valdez’s probation officer suggested he take a class on emergency medical response. “I fell in love with it right away,” Valdez said. “It was something that would take me out of the lifestyle that was easy.”

His path also crossed three Emergency Medical Technician instructors, who told him of similar turning points in their lives and urged him to pursue his dream. His teacher, Nicole Crosby, prepped him for a transition back to school.

He completed the pre-EMT program at camp while earning credits toward high school graduation. When he was released in 2013, he was referred to an adult school where he completed his diploma. A year later, he finished at the top of his class and passed the test required to work as an EMT.

Valdez has a new goal — to become a paramedic. He begins a program at Sacramento State University this year, with a full scholarship.

2012 - 2016 County Juvenile Court Schools ADA (Average Daily Attendance)

Source: California County Superintendents Educational Services Association

County

2012-13 JC ADA

2013-14 JC ADA

2014-15 JC ADA

2015-16 JC ADA

County	2012-13 JC ADA	2013-14 JC ADA	2014-15 JC ADA	2015-16 JC ADA
Alameda	277.69	248.01	220.37	152.89
Alpine	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Amador	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Butte	57.01	38.47	38.55	29.32
Calaveras	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Colusa	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Contra Costa	283.04	273.48	260.90	250.57
Del Norte	44.18	32.61	42.43	33.90
El Dorado	261.77	240.97	228.51	207.14
Fresno	363.07	351.13	344.01	275.70
Glenn	17.32	20.26	10.88	10.52
Humboldt	39.64	32.36	35.08	28.49
Imperial	19.59	17.91	15.91	13.29
Inyo	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Kern	507.05	489.01	475.01	425.64
Kings	86.61	66.29	61.80	54.01
Lake	23.19	17.56	12.56	3.57

County	2012-13 JC ADA	2013-14 JC ADA	2014-15 JC ADA	2015-16 JC ADA
Lassen	10.09	13.23	10.18	5.82
Los Angeles	2,454.47	2,074.84	1,809.88	1,669.72
Madera	70.24	76.83	66.26	51.01
Marin	15.50	11.53	15.38	17.32
Mariposa	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mendocino	26.91	19.34	11.90	22.50
Merced	96.98	86.48	70.78	71.25
Modoc	33.71	36.63	34.14	33.01
Mono	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Monterey	150.56	135.47	101.38	112.11
Napa	27.89	27.15	23.48	16.02
Nevada	12.91	17.07	17.00	18.33
Orange	1,406.42	866.18	668.26	530.87
Placer	31.68	27.34	24.74	19.34
Plumas	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Riverside	333.78	293.43	224.57	252.51
Sacramento	245.42	254.65	249.34	226.60
San Benito	9.53	10.17	5.00	8.38
San Bernardino	348.12	325.06	337.43	320.31
San Diego	1,305.57	1,094.57	840.20	693.86
San Francisco	118.14	109.84	93.69	83.65
San Joaquin	185.79	155.08	165.21	163.33
San Luis Obispo	41.67	28.04	30.19	30.00
San Mateo	124.20	110.42	123.97	105.00
Santa Barbara	173.10	128.05	110.66	135.33
Santa Clara	223.67	193.17	182.07	158.24
Santa Cruz	126.47	103.42	108.69	85.19
Shasta	84.90	28.66	29.93	19.20
Sierra	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Siskiyou	16.54	14.12	12.52	11.95
Solano	108.46	111.02	83.99	92.65
Sonoma	138.97	119.58	105.06	88.75
Stanislaus	157.52	146.01	116.03	128.00
Sutter	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Tehama	21.26	18.50	20.60	15.46
Trinity	7.30	10.51	3.74	0.00
Tulare	194.76	213.37	195.65	198.48
Tuolumne	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Ventura	132.03	121.01	103.63	102.26
Yolo	29.27	30.40	31.02	41.47
Yuba	62.05	64.54	64.97	57.18

<https://edsources.org/2016/counties-turn-to-transition-specialists-to-help-students-in-court-schools-succeed/568940>