

March 14, 2021

To: Supervisor Nora Vargas
Supervisor Joel Anderson
Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer
Supervisor Nathan Fletcher
Supervisor Jim Desmond

Re: Board Letter to Receive Update Regarding San Pasqual Academy and
Authorize Request for Extension of Pilot Project

I am writing to request that you vote in favor of the above Board Letter. I am a retired County of San Diego employee. I worked for the county for thirty one years, all but five of them in Child Welfare Services. My last five years I was the Child Welfare Director and North Central Regional Manager.

Over the years I have seen many reforms of Child Welfare Services. All of them well intentioned. SPA was only one component of a system wide reform that occurred during the years 1997-2002. The progress in reducing the number of children in foster care over the last 20 years since San Pasqual Academy (SPA) was established is remarkable. However, there has always been a lack of foster and relative placements for teens despite all the improvements that have been made.

As a result, frequently the only viable placements were high end, costly group homes. These teens did not have serious mental health issues we just did not have any other resources. We did not have many successes with teens during these years. Our High School graduation rate was about 45%. There were no transitional service programs when they aged out. Teens were released to whoever we could find to take them or they struck out on their own. Former foster children were a large component of the homeless population and unfortunately many became involved with the criminal justice system. This was not a unique San Diego problem, it was a nationwide issue and disgrace.

Historically large numbers of teens were housed in Hillcrest Receiving Home and then Polinsky Children's Center. Polinsky was a welcome replacement to Hillcrest

because children could be placed in cottages by age and behavior and treatment services could be provided on site. But it did not solve the lack of placement resources for teens. Even at the new, beautiful, expansive Polinsky campus we had many teens we could not place and consistent AWOL and behavior problems were the norm. Their education and stability suffer significantly when they remain placed in a setting designed for emergency placement.

This is the why and how San Pasqual Academy was developed. San Pasqual Academy was one of many system wide reforms that were implemented with the direction and support of the Board of Supervisors, the Juvenile Court, and the Health and Human Services Agency. Our goal for youth was to provide a stable family setting, maintain family connections, place siblings together, provide an education leading to high school graduation and be prepared for independent living. The Academy has far exceeded any expectations any of us involved in its development expected. The 10 year and 20 preliminary research evaluations have documented the incredible success of the program.

Polinsky by State regulations is an emergency shelter with a 10 day stay limit. The population at Polinsky has been increasing and there are teens who have been there for many months. AWOL and other behavior issues are common. My understanding is that the teens frequently AWOL and when they return they are entered as a new entry and the 10 day clock starts over. I would request you ask for the data showing the number of teens housed there, the number of AWOL episodes per child, and the cumulative time they have been at the shelter including days absent due to being AWOL. The financial data should also be looked at. Polinsky was a more expensive placement than SPA because of its very 24/7 emergency design and federal funding regulations. I do not know the current funding information. Clearly this is not a stable setting for these teens.

The statement has been made by CWS that if SPA closes, no teens will go to Polinsky. This is total fantasy in my opinion. I think if you look at the Polinsky stats you will have a clearer picture. I am still regularly involved with SPA. It is concerning that the overwhelming majority of teens who come to SPA are still significantly behind in school credits and have been in multiple failed placements. Where are these 70 appropriate placements for the current residents at SPA?

It appears that an old County policy that a child had to fail in “x” number of placements before being placed at SPA is in effect. I do not have firsthand knowledge of this as a policy, but the vast majority of SPA’s current placements come with a serious deficit in school credits and multiple failed placements. Why is this happening? When there is not a viable placement with a relative or foster home within a reasonable amount of time why isn’t the teen referred to SPA.

The fact that SPA outcomes are so good considering all of the above is nothing short of miraculous. Look at the high school graduation rate, the college admission rate, the college graduation rate. The fact that you want to close a program that is a best in the nation model is short sighted at best. For all the above reasons I hope you will support this board letter and work to find solutions to keeping SPA for many years and students to come.

In closing, I just want to say that if you are not swayed by my letter please listen to the students and alumni. The real story and proof of SPA’s success is what you have heard from its students and alumni since the closing was announced. These youth do not consider SPA a group home it is HOME and Family. It was designed from day one to be a family centered approach with house parents who live there with the students, many of whom have their own children. There is a grandparent program where seniors live on the property and do what grandparents do. They go to their games, have birthday parties, hem their prom dresses, cook dinner for the whole family, take them deep sea fishing, and teach them how to drive. Most importantly they are there for them.

When the County bought the property the physical plant was totally remodeled to provide small family homes. There was extensive input from teens in the development of SPA. There was also extensive community involvement culminating in a three day design workshop. The nationwide RFP to operate SPA required the provider to provide a permanent home for the students to come home to. It was very controversial but so was the whole project. How can you argue with the results? The County has many reasons to be proud of SPA and its students. I have attached a copy of the program for the grand opening of SPA in 2001 to give you a better sense of the hope and dreams we had and still have for our most vulnerable citizens.

Yvonne Campbell