



The Orange County Department of Education

This case study is an example of how we used our relationships as well as our policy and strategic expertise to create opportunities for students and to help school leaders make positive change. We successfully shepherded this important bill through the legislative process resulting in better options for students in juvenile court schools so they can continue their education, remain engaged in coursework, and obtain a high school diploma.

The Challenge

A recently enacted statute was causing young people enrolled in juvenile court schools to end their coursework before completion or obtaining a high school diploma. The new law, intended to promote high school graduation for this vulnerable population, was instead creating obstacles for the county office of education to provide educational services beyond a minimum of courses.

The Plan

We teamed up with the advocates from the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE) to co-sponsor legislation that would establish a process for juvenile court school students to continue education coursework and meet more meaningful high school graduation requirements. This partnership gave us access to a greater number of legislators who could author the bill and bring a stronger focus to the legislative effort.

The team was able to secure Assembly Member Sabrina Cervantes from Riverside County as our author. She was committed to this issue and her staff was engaged and enthusiastic. Additionally, Ms. Cervantes, a freshman legislator, was one who the majority party would want to protect in the next election, which could be helpful as this bill moved through the legislative process.

We also met with an array of stakeholders on the juvenile justice issues, including representatives of education, social justice and civil rights organizations. The goal was to find ways to promote better futures for students in juvenile court schools.

Legislators, too, were concerned about the poor outcomes for these youth who have high drop-out rates and often leave juvenile detention or incarceration centers with few skills or job prospects. These students need support or they too easily become casualties of the “school to prison pipeline.”

We were worried that our legislative proposal would raise red flags. So we spent time talking with the key legislative staff who worked on the prior legislation and were anxious to ensure that its goals remained intact.

The statute in question was the result of a bill passed just the year before, it was highly unusual to try to change provisions of law so soon after initial enactment, especially because our clients had not opposed the earlier bill.

The other critical step was to get the education policy consultants from both houses together before the bill was ever heard. We needed them to discuss and ultimately draft precise bill language that would maintain the intent and foundation of the current law, while at the same time achieve the flexibility in the law that our clients were seeking.

The Outcome

The bill passed the legislature. The initial meetings with key stakeholders helped pave the way to move the bill without any opposition or no votes.

In our many years of experience, there have been few times when a bill can move this smoothly. This case highlights the value of building consensus early. Because of our work with the consultants and stakeholders, consensus was reached. The bill was on consent in every policy committee and on the floors of both the Assembly and Senate.

The bill improves options for students in juvenile court schools. It allows school staff to talk with young people and their families to explain options and the benefits of continuing their education and reaching their goal of earning a high school diploma.