

# Positive Youth Justice Initiative Year 1 Evaluation – Summary of Implementation in Solano County

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## Solano County

This summary reviews the implementation of the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) in Solano County during Year 1 of the initiative's implementation phase. The summary includes an overview of the County's implementation plan and structure; a synthesis of key strengths and challenges based on data from interviews, focus groups, and staff surveys; and a description of results from the Year 1 youth and caregiver surveys.

The Year 1 evaluation data collection included the following activities. The number in parentheses represents the number of respondents who participated in each of the activities or the number of focus groups that were conducted.

- Focus group with PYJI Leadership Team (1)
- Focus group with Education and Juvenile Detention Facility staff (1)
- Focus group with Probation Officers and community-based organization (CBO) line staff (1)
- Site Visit
- Documentary Data
- Staff Survey (10)
- Youth Survey (34)
- Caregiver Survey (0)

## Implementation Plan and Structure

### Implementation Plan

Distinct among the PYJI counties, Solano County's PYJI is led by the **Vallejo City Unified School District (VCUSD)** and focuses on crossover youth in the city of Vallejo. In the long run, Solano County hopes to expand PYJI to other school districts in the county. Solano County defines crossover youth as **young people who are currently engaged in the juvenile justice system and have a prior case history or referral to the child welfare system**. According to their July 2014 data report, in 2013, of the 270 youth on probation supervision in the city of Vallejo (including informal supervision), 118 were crossover youth.

To best serve crossover youth in the context of the school setting, VCUSD's implementation plan outlined a number of operational capacity goals to support PYJI, including improving data practices and systems; developing an incentives and

### Implementation Highlights

During the first year of PYJI implementation, Solano County:

- Hired a PYJI Liaison to work with crossover youth students
- Finalized MOU between VCUSD and Solano County Probation
- Established mechanisms to identify and track crossover youth
- Developed referral case flow processes between VCUSD, Probation, and Solano County Office of Education
- Held staff trainings in trauma-informed care and restorative justice

sanctions matrix; training PYJI partners in PYJI elements; restructuring preexisting student success team (SST) meetings to better incorporate PYJI principles and partners; improving and formalizing referral mechanisms between schools and the Probation Department; and hiring a PYJI School Site Liaison to support VCUSD crossover youth in navigating the systems with which they interact.

## Implementation Structure

VCUSD created a PYJI taskforce to carry out planning and implementation. The taskforce comprises leadership from VCUSD, Solano County Probation Department (SCPD), Solano County Office of Education (SCOE), Solano County Health and Social Services Department (H&SS, which includes Child Welfare Services and Behavioral/Mental Health), Kaiser Permanente, the UC Davis Center for Community School Partnerships, and two student representatives. The PYJI planning and implementation process is managed by VCUSD's Director of Partnerships & Community Engagement.

## Pre-Implementation Context

Leadership and line staff from PYJI partners emphasized that VCUSD's approach to supporting its students, particularly the commitment of District leadership to youth development and addressing racial and ethnic disparities, provided a strong foundation for the District's undertaking of PYJI. Through its Full Service Community Schools (FSCS) program—which aims to ensure that all youth and families reach their full academic, social, and emotional potential through integrated services—VCUSD has placed mental health specialists at high school campuses, implemented restorative justice practices, and instituted youth leadership programs. One PYJI partner stated:

*It has been the charge of the [District] Superintendent to eliminate disparities when it comes to suspensions and expulsions of black and brown youth. Things she's been doing to implement interventions like Restorative Justice and trauma-informed care—that level of professional development and training is almost a mandate at each school site.*

PYJI stakeholders including school and community representatives also observed that simultaneously, changes in Probation leadership in recent years have led to a “*shift from a punitive mindset to a more educational mindset*”—a shift that many have seen trickle down to multiple levels of the SCPD. Stakeholders commented that in a county where the prevailing mindset has been punitive, rather than restorative, this progress is quite significant.

Along with a strong philosophical foundation for PYJI, VCUSD and County leadership highlighted several areas related to operational capacity and collaboration that were strong prior to the initiative. For example, the H&SS Network of Care database is designed to facilitate data sharing among partners and allows youth to develop their own electronic personal health records. SCOE and Child Welfare Services also reported having a data-sharing system in place. In addition, SCPD has co-located staff in Child Welfare Services and the department had a practice of using evidence-based assessments and county wraparound services for youth. PYJI leadership also noted that Solano County's Interagency Case Management Committee represents a forum where stakeholders including law enforcement, Behavioral Health, Child Welfare and School District stakeholders come together on a regular basis to engage in

collaborative planning for youth facing out-of-home placement; under PYJI the County plans to expand the role of this body in team-based decision making by convening the team earlier in a youth's case.

## Key Strengths and Progress in Implementation

### Strong Support for PYJI from Leadership and Line Staff

PYJI leadership described that the PYJI task force, which includes representatives from Probation, the education system, Behavioral Health, and the Court, among others, is well aligned in its vision and commitment to collaboration. One member of the PYJI leadership team observed:

*There's a level of cultural competency that exists within this team that I don't think is everywhere.*

Focus group findings also suggest that Vallejo has achieved a high level of buy-in for PYJI from SCPD staff at multiple levels. SCPD leadership has informed all probation officers about PYJI, and SCPD leadership and line staff alike reported a high level of philosophical alignment and support from probation officers. Several probation officers who have participated in the SST process observed a positive impact on meeting the educational and treatment needs of crossover youth. Probation officers shared in focus groups:

*We're willing to go to an SST and consider not violating the kid yet, see if we can get that buy in. We're all about trying to make it work in the community first.*

*[PYJI will be] time consuming. [But] if we can get a positive result, I don't mind.*

While challenges remain in securing full buy-in from school staff, VCUSD's progress report also cited instances where school teachers and administrators have involved PYJI staff in decision-making processes regarding crossover youth and have used less punitive measures in response to academic and behavioral issues.

### Building Partnerships and Collaboration

VCUSD reported formalizing and developing several key partnerships to carry out its PYJI plan. At the time of VCUSD's progress report in March 2014, VCUSD had signed an MOU with SCPD outlining information sharing agreements, confidentiality requirements, referral processes, and roles and responsibilities of each party under PYJI. VCUSD specified that the PYJI taskforce has identified several community-based services to serve crossover youth, including gender-specific care; trauma-informed care (TIC); FSCS wraparound services; and county wraparound service providers, which have assigned 15 service slots for crossover youth. Using the County's Interagency Case Management Committee, Child Welfare Services and SCPD have also begun to align their efforts around case management plans for crossover youth, efforts that agency leadership attributed to PYJI.

During the first year of PYJI implementation VCUSD also partnered with a community-based organization (CBO) to implement a positive youth development (PYD) leadership skills training program

called Project Restore. Project Restore, offered at high schools and Probation's Day Reporting Center, provides an opportunity for youth to talk about issues of race and inequality while developing leadership skills; according to school leadership, the program has received positive feedback from participating youth.

Staff survey responses also pointed to strong partnerships between partner agencies and CBOs, with all respondents from VCUSD and County agencies indicating that they agreed that their agency works with other agencies and organizations to provide coordinated services to crossover youth. Although the results from CBO respondents were somewhat mixed, respondents generally reported positive ratings of collaboration between organizations and agencies serving crossover youth, and felt that their organization coordinated well with the other agencies and organizations providing services to crossover youth.<sup>1</sup> CBO respondents reported the greatest level of collaboration with VCUSD and the least collaboration with SCOE and juvenile justice related agencies.

### **Engaging Youth and the Community**

Discussions with PYJI leadership emphasized Vallejo's commitment to youth engagement and involvement in PYJI planning and implementation as a pillar of its approach to PYJI. From the beginning planning stages, VCUSD partnered with the UC Davis Center for Community School Partnerships to gather youth input on their perceptions of the system for crossover youth and suggestions for system improvement. VCUSD leadership noted that youth feedback was instrumental in creating the PYJI Liaison position. VCUSD has also included crossover youth in the youth leadership groups at VCUSD high schools to promote their ongoing involvement in PYJI efforts.

VCUSD also reported engaging parents and caregivers of youth by conducting parent surveys and presenting information about PYJI at events such as town halls. In May 2014 VCUSD held its second annual Positive Youth Justice Summit, a public forum to discuss efforts to support the County's youth, including restorative justice, PYD, and TIC.

### **Building Operational Capacity**

Findings from focus groups and VCUSD's PYJI progress report highlight several key accomplishments in the areas of staffing and policies and procedures.

**Staffing.** VCUSD's PYJI service implementation began with the hiring of the PYJI School Site Liaison (PYJI Liaison) to engage and support VCUSD's crossover youth. The PYJI Liaison meets individually with youth, including those who are reentering school from Juvenile Detention Facility (JDF), to help them navigate the transition to school and support their academic, social, and emotional development. PYJI stakeholders described that in its hiring process, VCUSD intentionally sought out a staff person who was reflective of students' background, hiring an African American male, Vallejo native from the same community as many students. Further, while not undertaken as part of PYJI, SCOE also hired a Student

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<sup>1</sup> All CBO respondents were from the same provider. Because there were only four CBO respondents and all were from the same organization, we have not included percentages here.

Support Specialist to serve all Solano County youth at the JDF; within PYJI, the Student Support Specialist plays a special role in coordinating with the PYJI Liaison.

**Policies and Procedures.** PYJI leadership identified a number of concrete changes that County agencies and VCUSD have made related to referral processes for crossover youth. For example, VCUSD reformed the SST referral process to receive referrals directly from probation officers; SCPD and VCUSD have developed an electronic referral form for probation officers; and SCPD has trained probation officers to set up an SST meeting prior to filing a violation of probation for school-related issues. Line staff specified that SCPD and VCUSD have also developed a process for referring cases from the JDF to the school system by way of a warm handoff to the PYJI Liaison, which they noted enables the PYJI Liaison to follow up with youth (including visits to youth at JDF) and provide ongoing support after youth are released from juvenile detention to the school system. Solano County's March 2014 progress report also highlighted an increased focus on formalizing service referrals for youth and prioritizing high-risk youth, in contrast to focus group findings suggesting that previously staff would make referrals based on their personal knowledge of the system and available resources. In addition, PYJI leadership described that SCPD worked with TA providers to draft a Positive Youth Development response grid, and VCUSD is finalizing a tool for staff at secondary schools to assess trauma. Staff survey responses provided support for Solano County's progress in formalizing the service referral processes, with a majority of respondents from VCUSD and County agencies reporting they agree (40%) or somewhat agree (30%) that they understand the formal referral process for county wraparound services. Likewise, all respondents from these agencies reported that they agree (70%) or somewhat agree (30%) that they know where and how to refer youth for support services. At the same time, survey results from the staff of the one CBO that responded to the staff survey may indicate a gap in the communication of formalized referral processes: while all CBO respondents reported they generally knew where and how to refer youth to support services, only half agreed that they understood the formal referral process for county wraparound services.

**Staff Training.** Solano County and VCUSD leadership reported consulting with TA providers to develop and conduct a number of trainings to prepare staff for implementation. For example, school staff and probation officers have attended trainings related to PYJI, PYD/Restorative Justice, and TIC. Survey responses also suggested that VCUSD and County agencies have emphasized training on PYD and TIC, though it is not clear whether this training occurred as part of PYJI or prior to implementation. A majority of staff survey respondents reported that to some extent (40%) or a great extent (50%) their agency has participated in PYD trainings. Similarly, most respondents replied that to some extent (40%) or a great extent (40%) their agency has participated in TIC trainings. Fewer respondents reported that their agency has participated to some extent (40%) or to a great extent (10%) in training related to county wraparound services. Nevertheless, all survey respondents reported that they agreed (30%) or somewhat agreed (70%) that staff in their agency are well trained to support crossover youth.

**Data Collection and Sharing.** Focus group and survey findings highlight the progress that County agencies and VCUSD have made in identifying and tracking crossover youth. SCPD has developed a process for identifying crossover youth through their existing case management system, and the department provides appropriate data to VCUSD per their data sharing MOU. Staff elaborated that SCPD

has developed a mechanism to track students at JDF who are on the PYJI caseload, which enables the PYJI Liaison and Student Support Specialist to closely follow up with these students. In addition, the County is moving toward enhancing its ability to measure youth data using an electronic case management system. VCUSD and County agency survey responses pointed to progress in strengthening data capacity: 70% of respondents reported that their agency to some extent or a great extent adapted their data and reporting systems to track crossover youth, and half of the respondents reported that their agency to some extent or a great extent shared data with other agencies serving crossover youth. At the same time, 30% indicated they did not know the extent to which their agencies had adapted their data and reporting systems and half reported they did not know the extent of their agency's data sharing practices.

### Improving Service Coordination and Delivery

Stakeholders from VCUSD, school sites, and SCPD agreed that the partnerships, procedures, and staffing created under PYJI have improved service coordination and delivery for the PYJI caseload. VCUSD leadership reported that probation officers enjoy working with the PYJI Liaison and respect his advocacy role for crossover youth. As a result, they explained, the PYJI Liaison is able to maintain communication with probation officers and has found them to be easily accessible. According to VCUSD leadership at the time of the progress report, the level of partnership between the PYJI Liaison and Probation has far exceeded expectations. PYJI stakeholders also noted that collaboration and communication has been strong between the PYJI Liaison, academic support coordinators at VCUSD schools, and the Juvenile Detention Facility's Student Support Specialist. The PYJI Liaison articulated:

*There hadn't been communication previously.... I'm the call board and you've had all these people calling, but there was no one there to make the connections, so the phone call was one ended. I'm working the switchboards now.*

This coordination appears to have trickled down to students as well, with education and law enforcement stakeholders observing that students appreciate the PYJI Liaison's role. Stakeholders attributed this in large part to the success of the PYJI Liaison in building rapport with students. The JDF Student Support Specialist observed that since the PYJI Liaison has come on board, VCUSD students "notice that there is someone there who is going to care and be there to provide service for [them] and make sure [they're] going to school." A key stakeholder from the UC Davis Center for Community School Partnerships highlighted the "role model status" that the PYJI Liaison has been able to achieve as someone from a similar background as many of the PYJI students:

*It plays a huge dynamic in the relationship building. Having an African American male to support other males has to be huge.*

In this vein, the PYJI liaison affirmed:

*The significance of ethnicity and gender as it relates to my position cannot be understated. Because our crossover youth are mostly African American and Latino young men, they don't get an opportunity to interact with adults that look like them on a consistent basis, and who have*

*been in their shoes. I start off telling each kid – telling them I’m from Lofas (neighborhood in Vallejo). That immediately creates a connection with them that goes beyond me just walking in the room. That gets them in the room. That’s half the battle.*

## Key Challenges and Opportunities

### Gaining Buy-In from Key Stakeholders

VCUSD and the County have had clear successes in gaining support from the Probation Department and other key partners to undertake broad-based system and culture changes in how the county supports young people. At the same time, several stakeholders noted that support for and awareness of PYJI—and the requisite shifts in organizational culture—varies across school sites, with some individuals and schools demonstrating greater buy-in than others. VCUSD stakeholders observed that this variability depends in large part on organizational culture, as many school site administrators and teachers, particularly those who have been in the field for many years, are accustomed to educational approaches that do not align directly with a PYD philosophy. The progress report also suggested the need to bring additional partners to the table, including Court stakeholders and law enforcement.

As highlighted in VCUSD’s progress report, another barrier to implementation is the perception on the part of some teachers, youth, and other partner agencies of the Probation Department; in the Vallejo community, probation officers are often perceived as law enforcement figures only, rather than as partners supportive of the PYJI philosophy.

Along these lines, County, VCUSD, and CBO staff suggested that because many youth and families have had negative past experiences with the justice system, as well as negative experiences with disciplinary action in schools, one of the most significant challenges to the success of PYJI may be securing youth and family buy-in. As one probation officer shared:

*The challenges are moving the kids forward and changing their mindset so they can embrace what we’re trying to do. That’s the million dollar question.*

### Strengthening Interagency Coordination and Communication

According to Solano County and VCUSD leadership, one of the foundational challenges at the time of implementation was the limited coordination and communication between Probation and the school district. As of the start of PYJI, there was no formal system in place to ensure that schools were aware of youth coming from juvenile detention facilities or to allow Probation and the school system to communicate about students’ needs. Stemming from this challenge, Probation and educational stakeholders have voiced some confusion around roles and responsibilities, especially in terms of ensuring that students are enrolled in and attending school. Probation line staff also noted some differences between Probation and Child Welfare that have caused complications, particularly related to standards for substantiating child abuse claims, the urgency of 241.1 reports, and understandings about which agency should have responsibility for youth whose jurisdiction may not be clear.

Staff survey responses also reflected the continued need to improve coordination and collaboration between Probation and education stakeholders. Respondents from Probation, VCUSD, and SCOE expressed differing opinions on how effectively the agencies and organizations serving crossover youth in Solano County collaborate, with 20% reporting they somewhat disagree, 60% reporting they somewhat agree, and 20% reporting they agree that the agencies and organizations serving crossover youth collaborate effectively. Responses showed similar ambivalence about data collection and sharing, with 40% of respondents replying they somewhat disagreed, 40% replying they somewhat agreed, and 20% replying they agreed that the agencies and organizations serving crossover youth collect and share data effectively.

According to PYJI leadership, while interagency data sharing has improved, Solano County continues to face challenges in finalizing procedures that are in line with data privacy and confidentiality requirements.

### **Overcoming Challenges to Service Delivery**

While VCUSD has made significant progress in rolling out PYJI programs and processes at school sites, Probation Department and education stakeholders highlighted several obstacles that have arisen around SST meetings. First, there has been limited participation in SSTs from teachers or administrators in the student success team process, which PYJI stakeholders attributed both to lack of buy-in and scheduling difficulties. Probation officers also expressed some uncertainty about their role in the SST process. Encouraging parent and caregiver involvement in SSTs has also been a significant challenge. VCUSD and Probation stakeholders suggested several possible reasons for this, including competing family needs, perceptions of SSTs as punishment, and mistrust of authority figures. VCUSD noted that the PYJI Liaison is actively seeking to develop better relationships with parents and families of youth to mitigate this obstacle.

While Solano County has made significant efforts in providing support for crossover youth in the context of team-based decision-making and PYD, at the time of Sierra Health Foundation site visits in April 2014, no crossover youth had access to formal county wraparound services. Leadership communicated that a common understanding of service eligibility and referral processes among institutions is required before this service model can be more effectively provided.

According to Solano County's March 2014 progress report, additional challenges in service delivery include gaps in access, availability, and coordination of youth services. Probation officers and service providers also mentioned that providers, youth, and their families often have limited awareness about the available resources for youth in the system. Access to employment is limited based on requirements for students' grade point average that are very challenging for crossover youth to meet. Additionally, there are limited bilingual services available for youth who need them as well as challenges with transportation to and from services.

Finally, even with the impressive successes of the PYJI Liaison, VCUSD stakeholders voiced concern that he already operates under a large caseload, and that at least one PYJI Liaison per high school campus would be required if PYJI is expanded to additional districts.

## Youth and Caregiver Experiences: Survey Data

### Respondent Description

In Solano County, 34 youth responded to the youth survey, out of the approximately 100 identified crossover youth. There were no caregiver respondents from Solano County. The ages of youth respondents ranged from ages 15 to 19 and the mean age was 17. Respondents were predominately male (88%). Nine percent of respondents were female and 3% were transgender. Seventy-six percent of respondents were African American/Black, followed by Hispanic/Latino (12%), American Indian/Native Alaskan (6%), Asian or Pacific Islander (6%), White/Caucasian (6%), and other ethnicities (6%).

While VCUSD's PYJI Liaison was the primary mechanism through which the youth survey was disseminated, youth reported hearing about the survey through a variety of sources, including individuals from school (30%), counselors or therapists (27%), staff from CBOs (21%) and other individuals such as mentors (18%). Of the youth surveyed, all answered that they currently have a probation officer. Nine percent of youth reported currently having a social worker; 64% reported they do not have a social worker and 24% indicated they don't know if they do. The one youth who did not report currently having a social worker reported having had a one in the past. Nearly all youth (97%) replied that they were currently in school.

### Youth Responses

Youth responses suggested mixed feelings about their experiences and relationships with their probation officers. More than half of youth (58%) reported that it is very true that their probation officer wants things to go well for them and 49% reported that it is very true that they can get in touch with their probation officer when they need to. In contrast, 28% of youth responded that it is not at all true and 38% responded that it is only a little bit true that their probation officer talks to them about how what they have been through affects them, a survey question designed to capture whether staff are using a TIC approach. Nearly a quarter of youth indicated that it is not at all true (23%) or only a little bit true (23%) that their probation officer tells them about other programs that might be helpful.

Of the three youth who reported currently having social workers, two responded that it is mostly true that their social worker wants things to go well for them. One youth replied it is mostly true and one replied it is a little bit true that their social worker talks with them about how what they have been through affects them. One of the youth indicated it is not at all true and another that it is a little bit true that their social worker tells them about programs they can benefit from. All three youth reported it is a little bit true that they can get in touch with their social worker when they need to.

Youth also reported mixed feelings about their experiences and relationships with teachers or adults at school. Almost two-thirds of youth responded that it is very true (61%) that their teacher or other adults at school want things to go well for them, while 26% responded this is somewhat true, and 13% responded that this is a little bit or not at all true. While a quarter of youth indicated that it is very true that teachers and other adults at school talk to them about how what they have been through affects them, 25% responded it is not at all true. More than one third of students reported that it is very true

(35%) that teachers or other adults at school tell them about programs that might be helpful for them, while 38% reported that this is not at all true. A majority of youth indicated involvement of other adults in deciding what programs to participate in. A large majority of youth (79%) reported that family members are involved in deciding what kind of services would be most helpful for them. More than half of youth (58%) responded that probation officers, social workers, and others ask them what kinds of programs they want to participate in.

Less than half (44%) of youth replied that there is a group of people they meet with to decide what types of programs would be helpful, a survey question designed to assess whether youth and families were involved in team-based case planning meetings. Respondents most commonly identified probation officers (63%) as adults involved in a group that youth meet with. About one-third of youth indicated that teachers (34%) or mentors (28%) were a part of this group. Less than a quarter of youth reported that their therapists (19%) or social workers (19%) were part of this group. Smaller percentages of youth identified doctors (13%) or adults from faith-based settings (9%) as a part of the group. Youth also reported that parents and behavioral specialists were involved in this group. It should be noted that while this survey question was designed to capture information about team-based decision making, it may not have been clear that a “group of people” referred to participants in *joint* meetings.

With regard to participation in programs, no more than one-third of youth replied that they participate in any given program. The most common activities youth reported participating in were programs to help them succeed in school (33%), followed by therapy or counseling (30%). About a quarter of youth indicated they participate in after school programs like sports, art, or music (24%); mentoring (24%); or activities at church or temple (24%). Slightly less than one-fifth of youth (18%) reported they participate in job training or internship programs. Youth also conveyed mixed opinions about the activities they participate in. Almost one-third responded it is not at all true (29%) that programs help them succeed in school, but 26% responded that it is very true and 23% responded it is mostly true. A majority of youth indicated that it is not at all true (42%) or only a little bit true (23%) that the programs they are involved in help them participate in activities in school. Similarly, over two-thirds of youth reported that it is not at all true (48%) or only a little bit true (23%) that the programs they participate in get them more involved in their community. Conversely, a large portion of youth responded that it is very true (40%) or mostly true (27%) that the programs they are involved in help them develop skills that will be useful in the future. Similarly 40% youth replied that it is very true that the programs they are involved in are a good fit for them. Youth respondents expressed mixed opinions to the whether programs help them get along better with their family; 28% indicated it is not at all true, while 28% indicated it is mostly true and 24% indicated it is very true.

Most youth respondents indicated feeling respected by adults in their life, with over 80% reporting that it is very true (46%) or mostly true (36%) that adults in their lives respect them, whereas 15% responded it is a little bit true and 3% responded that it is not at all true. Nearly half of youth replied that it is very true (47%) that when they feel sad or lonely there are people that can help them; however 25% reported that this is not at all true. Similarly, 58% of youth responded that it is very true that if they need help in school they know where to find it, while 12% reported that it is not at all true.