

San Pasqual Academy



MAY 2026

The Children's Initiative

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San Pasqual Academy

Background

In May 2000, the County of San Diego (County) purchased a 238-acre campus in the San Pasqual Valley. Through San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) hearings and engagement with community members and foster youth, input was gathered to help inform its intended use. This included the need for a stable placement option for older youth in foster care who were rapidly cycling through foster care placements. Board members, the Juvenile Court Bench, other community stakeholders, and the Children's Initiative visited successful boarding schools across the country. Through County, stakeholder, and Children's Initiative research and efforts, San Pasqual Academy (Academy) opened in 2001, a voluntary 250-bed residential education campus for 12–18-year-old youth in foster care.

At the time of the initial Request for Proposal for an Academy provider, only half of youth in San Diego County exiting the foster care system at age 18 had earned a high school diploma. Meanwhile, 25% - 40% of all foster children in the United States became homeless within twelve months of exiting the foster care system due to turning 18 years old.¹ The Academy was created to be a stable location for youth with a history of unsuccessful placements to complete school, obtain life skills, and prepare to transition to independent adulthood. Over the past 25 years, the Academy has served over 1,000 youth, with a peak of 195 youth in fiscal year (FY) 2009-10.

However, due to extensive research into evidence informed practices and national best practices, federal and state legislation regarding foster care has shifted dramatically in the last decade to provide better outcomes for the children, youth, and families involved in the child welfare system. In 2015, California's Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) (AB 403) limited youth's placement in congregate care settings (group homes which provide 24-hour care such as the Academy). The Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), enacted in 2018, further reduced unnecessary placements into foster care, and prioritized keeping children with their families when safe. Together,

¹ San Pasqual Academy RFP# 00119-2. A Residential Education Campus for Foster Youth.

CCR and FFPSA prioritize keeping children in a family setting, identifying home-based settings with caregiving families as the best placement option for youth, limiting congregate care to short-term treatment focused placements, and eliminating the use of congregate care settings, such as the Academy as originally designed, as a placement option. Current County Health and Human Services Agency, Child and Family Well-Being (CFWB) Department placement policy prioritizes the following placement types through the lens of safety:²

1. The home of a parent.
2. The home of a relative or other known person.
3. A community foster family home.
4. An Intensive Services Foster Care home.³
5. A Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program.⁴
6. A Community Treatment Facility or locked facility

Subsequently, both nationally and locally, the number of children in care and the use of congregate care settings have been significantly reduced. In 2001, the year the Academy opened, there were over 8,450 children and youth in San Diego County placed in out-of-home care by CFWB (formerly known as Child Welfare Services). In FY 2024-25, there were 2,320 children and youth in San Diego County in out-of-home placements. The vast majority of these 2,320 children and youth were placed with kin, guardians, and foster parents. A small percentage of the children and youth required intensive services, a higher level of care, which necessitated specialized placement. Over the past two decades enrollment at the Academy has steadily declined reflecting the federal, state, and county focus on prevention and family first placements. As of December 2025, there were 49 youths residing at the Academy, a 20% occupancy rate.

² CFWB Policy Manual, Placement Services – Placement Types. Revised 2/21/25.

³ A program for youth requiring intensive treatment and behavioral supports including enhanced supervision.

⁴ STRTP is a residential facility operated by a public agency or private organization that provides an integrated program of specialized and intensive care and supervision, services and supports, treatment, and short-term, 24-hour care and supervision to children that is trauma-informed. California Health and Safety Code 1502(a)(18).

San Diego County Board of Supervisors' Actions

Passed in 2018, Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) required full implementation by October 1, 2021. In November 2018, the County worked with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to create a three-year pilot project that would allow the Academy to continue to operate through December 31, 2021. On March 16, 2021 (12), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer to request an extension through June 30, 2022, to allow youth to complete the school year, which was granted.

In December 2021, the Superior Court of California, County of San Diego issued a preliminary injunction barring the state from terminating the Academy's license as long as the Academy continues to comply with licensing standards and the County covered the full cost of the placement.

Concurrently, in preparation for the anticipated closure, CFWB and the Children's Initiative engaged Harder+Company to conduct focus groups with stakeholders on potential future uses of the Academy campus and produce a report summarizing feedback. Approximately 89 stakeholders participated in seven focus groups which covered the four scenarios for which federal funds can be used for group homes under FFPSA including:

1. Qualified Residential Treatment Programs for foster youth (including Short Term Residential Therapeutic Programs),
2. A specialized setting for pregnant and parenting youth,
3. A supervised setting for youth who are eighteen and living independently, and
4. High-quality residential care and supportive services for children and youth who have been, or are at risk of becoming, sexually trafficked.

After receiving that report, on January 25, 2022 (19), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer to develop a plan for utilizing the campus as a continuum of care multipurpose campus.

Additionally at that time, the Board authorized procurement for a group home and resource family homes. In October 2022, the County contracted with Rite of Passage

Adolescent Treatment Centers and School, Inc. (Rite of Passage) for that work which included the effort to shift the group home to resource family homes over three years.

On October 25, 2022 (23), the Board authorized a competitive solicitation for a Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program and a Transitional Housing Program.⁵ Rite of Passage was awarded both contracts. Twelve STRTP beds have since been added to the campus.

More recently, on November 18, 2025 (24), the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer, to conduct stakeholder engagement to develop recommendations for best serving foster youth, maximizing use of the Academy campus, and ensuring fiscal sustainability of foster youth programming, and to return to the Board in 180 days with recommendations to ensure the campus can benefit individuals and families in the region to the greatest extent possible while ensuring sustainable programs. Following the November 18 Board meeting, the County partnered with the Children’s Initiative to undertake a community engagement process and publish a public survey on the Engage San Diego County website.

⁵ Temporary housing programs to support young adults ages 18-25 in leaving foster care and transitioning to independence as adults.

Community Engagement

Between January and March of 2026, the Children’s Initiative held 13 engagement sessions with a wide range of community members including current and former foster youth, CFWB staff, Juvenile Court partners, education partners, Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board, community organizations that support foster youth, and other key stakeholders that support foster youth and the Academy. Engagement sessions were conducted both in-person and virtually and at various times of the day. More than 270 participants attended engagement sessions.

The details of the engagement sessions are:

	Meeting Date	Focus Group
1	January 13, 2026	Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board List Serve
2	January 21, 2026	Child and Family Well-Being Managers
3	February 2, 2026	Youth currently placed at the Academy
4	February 3, 2026	Public At-Large
5	February 9, 2026	Friends of San Pasqual Academy, the San Pasqual Academy Foundation, and San Diego County Office of Education
6	February 10, 2026	Juvenile Justice Task Force Comprehensive Strategy
7	February 12, 2026	Academy Staff and On-Campus Partners
8	February 18, 2026	Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board List Serve
9	February 18, 2026, and March 4, 2026	Academy Alumni
10	March 3, 2026	Public At-Large
11	March 4, 2026	San Diego Center for Children
12	March 6, 2026	County Housing and Community Development Services
13	March 26, 2026	Juvenile Court Bench, Attorneys for Parents and Children, Voices for Children

Engage San Diego County

Community members who could not attend an engagement session or simply had more to contribute could do so through the Engage San Diego County website. The Academy survey on the Engage San Diego County website included the same questions

as at the engagement sessions and was accessible in County threshold languages. The survey was posted from February 20 through March 30, 2026. During that time more than 180 submissions were received.

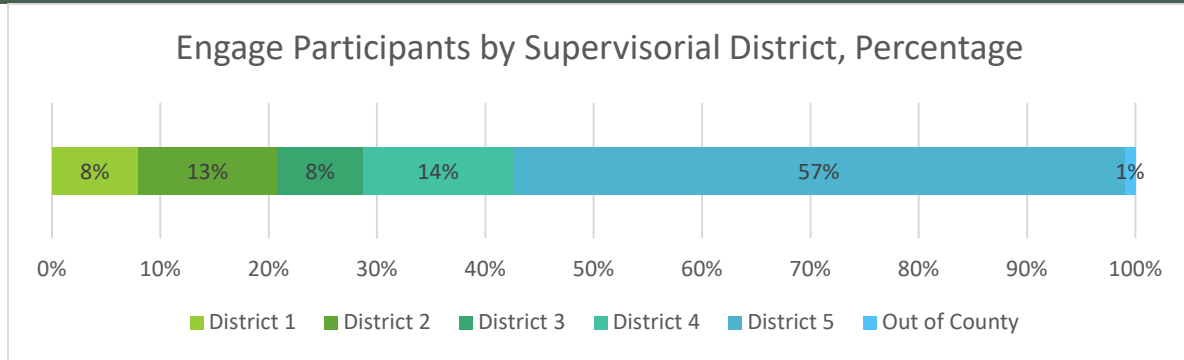
Outreach

Community members were notified of engagement sessions and the survey on the Engage San Diego County website through various methods of communication. Emails regarding the process were sent to over 400 on the Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board distribution list as well as to more than 80 community groups identified by CFWB. Furthermore, organic social media posts and a messaging campaign were developed that together resulted in more than 164,000 impressions.

Participants

Participants in the engagement sessions and/or Engage San Diego County website survey represented a wide range of interests. In addition to the groups who have traditionally participated in engagement regarding the Academy (current youth, alumni, Juvenile Court Bench, social workers, legal representatives, community based organizations), participants included community members that live close to the Academy campus, representatives from local educational districts and agriculture organizations, community members throughout San Diego County, and a cross-section of County employees.

Participants in the survey were asked to identify their affiliation with the Academy. The top three affiliations were “Educator”, “Other”, and “Advocate”. Input was received from residents across all supervisorial districts. The zip code most often given was in the Escondido area.



Session Format

Each of the 13 engagement sessions followed the same format. First, the context of the engagement session was explained. Next, some of the changes in foster care and at the Academy over the past 25 years were presented. Then, there was a discussion on each of the seven topic areas. The session ended with participants being informed of the next steps in the process and the Engage San Diego County website.

Topics

Participants in focus groups and/or the Engage San Diego County website, were asked to give their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions in seven topic areas: education, extracurricular activities, behavioral and mental health, the campus environment, transportation, connections to families and communities, and location.

The next section of the report will detail each of the questions asked in each topic area as well as the common themes and ideas given by participants.

Education**WHAT EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS SHOULD YOUTH AT SPA HAVE ACCESS TO?**

The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) operates a high school on the Academy campus. Since the federal, state, and County CFWB focus has shifted to prevention and family-first placements, the high school typically serves fewer than 40 youth at any given time (from a high in 2001 of 160 youth).

As of April 6, 2026, there were 41 youth living at the Academy, 31 attend the on-campus high school. The remaining 10 were either youth who attend an off-campus high school or middle school youth.

As a small school, SDCOE receives limited funding for the educational program at the Academy because the California funding model is based on pupil enrollment and attendance. Staffing at the Academy includes a principal, two fully credentialed teachers (one who teaches English and history/social science and one who teaches math and science), two career technical education (CTE) instructors, two credentialed education specialists, a credentialed reading specialist, a credentialed counselor, a student specialist, a classroom assistant, and an administrative assistant. Some of these employees are shared with other SDCOE-operated school programs located in North County.

As with each of the topic areas, participant suggestions covered a wide range of options. For education, some participants spoke about adding a middle school run by SDCOE on the Academy campus, allowing the current and potentially new middle school youth to attend school on campus. Participants stated that if middle-school-age youth are not able to attend school on campus, they should not be placed at the Academy as having youth attend school off site is not part of the Academy model.

Across all engagement efforts, participants emphasized at a minimum the youth at the Academy must be provided the opportunity to meet the California education “a-g” requirements that are needed to qualify for entry to a California State University or University of California school. This feedback is consistent with what is provided in the

high school; youth at the Academy have access to “a-g” aligned classes and most graduates earn this diploma. In school year 2024-25, 100% of seniors graduated. Participants noted the desire for SDCOE to increase laboratory-based science classes, more foreign language options, and adding visual and performing arts including dance and music. Above that, participants discussed courses should prepare youth for the rigors of college. Youth in 10th and 11th grade are currently taken on college tours; some suggested including younger grades as well. The idea of having college fairs on campus was identified as an opportunity to promote a college-bound environment. Participants highlighted that youths’ Individualized Education Plans (IEP) must be followed with the identified accommodations needed fully implemented. Statutory timelines pertaining to education and special education must be adhered to as strongly as statutory timelines pertaining to foster youth placements. The SDCOE central office team collaborates with site staff to ensure compliance with all foster youth and IEP requirements.

Participants, as well as current youth and alumni, accentuated that Academy youth must be afforded a rigorous, in-depth education to better prepare them for higher education and adult life. Many mentioned tutoring should be offered, which could be done in partnership with local colleges.

Feedback included that youth should be taught about civic duty as well as other topics that would typically be learned from observing family members (budgeting, changing a tire, sewing on a button, etc.). Education should integrate financial literacy, leadership development, social emotional learning, communication, and life skills.

Participants expressed their desire for youth attending the high school on the Academy campus to have access to all the educational options that are available to teenagers at other public schools. This includes options to earn college credit for courses through Advanced Placement or dual enrollment programs. While the Academy does not currently offer Advanced Placement options, dual enrollment with Palomar College is an option that youth may participate in.

Alternatively, participants expressed that the school should offer CTE classes for those youth who may choose not to attend college. The high school offers CTE courses in the culinary arts pathway, however many participants suggested expanding career and

technical education courses or partnering with local colleges and businesses to allow youth to learn a trade or business. Youth should have the ability to earn certifications in trades, health care, agriculture, or technology. These career fields should be aligned with youth interest. Many of the suggestions involved increasing both on- and off-campus learning and employment opportunities for youth. One suggestion is to maximize the Academy's guidance counselor's time to support youth with resume writing and job applications, the college admissions process, preparing for standardized tests, and finding scholarships.

Participants, including youth and alumni, expressed a desire for additional teachers and support staff so that youth could be placed in classrooms according to their school grade and subjects, as is done in traditional public school. Participants mentioned the importance of youth being taught by teachers fully credentialed in all subjects they teach, ensuring high-quality education classes can be offered. This is consistent with SDCOE's staffing of the Academy; all teachers and certificated staff are fully credentialed, with some having multiple credentials such as single subject credentials for the courses they teach.

Due to the small number of teachers, participants stated there was a considerable risk of educational disengagement if a youth does not have a good relationship with one of the teachers or if the youth's learning style and the teacher's style do not align. Youth and alumni share that they would like to see more focused engagement rather than independent work on packets. As there are youth of differing ages, grades, and abilities in each classroom, it can be hard to focus when there is excess noise and movement. Youth and alumni advocated for more strategies to improve classroom management.

While all youth at the facility have the choice to attend either the Academy, a neighboring public school, or their home high school (from the community that they used to reside), many participants suggested transferring all youth, including high school youth, to a neighboring school or their home school of origin beginning in the 2026-27 school year. This suggestion was discussed repeatedly, as participants felt that the youth attending the on-campus school were not receiving an equitable education due to the lack of a public funding mechanism to provide the youth with all the educational opportunities and supports afforded to other public school youth.

Overall, participants stressed the need for diverse learning opportunities to match the wide range of youth needs and interests. The importance of offering a variety of courses, including music, dance, theater, laboratory sciences, a wider array of career technical education, more diverse foreign languages, and physical education, was mentioned repeatedly. Participants stressed the need to continue the school's focus on literacy support for the youth, as many who enter the Academy are grade levels behind in reading as well as other life skills needed to become a successful adult.

Extracurricular Activities

WHAT TYPES OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES SHOULD YOUTH AT SPA HAVE ACCESS TO?

Participants listed many extracurricular activities youths at the Academy should have access to, as well as details about the conditions under which those activities should be offered. Extracurricular activities should build positive relationships, create a sense of belonging, and promote consistent participation.

Many emphasized that youth living at the Academy should have the same access to extracurricular activities as youth who are not living at the Academy. This includes the ability to participate in school sports and club sports teams, theater, dance, music, art classes, photography, martial arts, summer camps, and other affinity and service groups. Other participants thought the activities offered should complement the location, for instance hiking, mountain biking, stargazing, or gardening.

Participants also noted that some, if not all, of the activities should be therapeutic and designed to support physical and mental well-being. Therapeutic activities cited included mentoring, youth support groups, meditation, and creative outlets.

Many participants advocated for youth living at the Academy have access to activities to help them learn and celebrate their culture. Ideas in this category include learning traditional cooking and dancing as well as being able to attend cultural fairs and festivals both on and off campus. Activities that include youths' families could be a great way to strengthen family bonds by passing on family and cultural knowledge.

Some believed public speaking programs could teach youth at the Academy how to best tell their story to advocate for foster youth in the future. The need for leadership opportunities was highlighted frequently by participants.

In terms of what activities are offered, participants felt it was important to align extracurricular activities with youths' interests. In some cases, such as team sports, the

Academy campus has the facilities, staff, and equipment, however, there has not been enough interest among youth to field teams.

Participants also stressed the importance of ensuring youth have transportation and financial support to access the extracurricular activities they choose to pursue. Participants in every engagement session spoke at length that what youth in the community can participate in such as club sports, volunteering, camps, swimming, biking, etc., must also be available for youth attending the Academy.

Some participants discussed the need for better communication between campus staff to ensure youth can participate in all of the activities that interest them. Oftentimes, in family homes, there is a parent who tracks the differing appointments, sports practices, and other extracurricular activities to make sure the children are not double booked. Participants suggested there needs to be a staff person filling a similar role for the youth at the Academy.

Participants also communicated that youth at the Academy should be able to regularly participate in career readiness activities such as job shadowing, internships, and part-time employment. It was suggested youth could be given internship opportunities with various County departments in line with their interests.

Participants shared that funding, transportation, location, staffing, and coordination should not be barriers for youth at the Academy participating in extracurricular activities both on and off campus. Youth and Alumni shared that denying participation in extracurricular activities due to individual or cottage-level behaviors should be reconsidered and that alternative responses should be identified.

Behavioral and Mental Health

WHAT SERVICES AND RESOURCES WOULD BEST SUPPORT THE BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUTH AT SPA?

Participants offered both individualized and campus wide suggestions for building a sense of wellness and support on the Academy campus.

On the individual level, current youth reported having easy access to on-site talk therapy during business hours. Other participants discussed the need for crisis intervention on weekends and evenings. The behavioral health staff should be highly trained in trauma informed practices, adolescent brain development, and have the skills necessary to work with youth who have experienced abuse and neglect. Participants, including youth and alumni, suggested youth should have access to alternative therapies such as yoga, meditation, equine and animal therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).

Participants also mentioned that youth need to build self-regulation strategies they can rely on after leaving the Academy, when therapists are no longer readily available. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and yoga could support this skill building.

Participants discussed that conflict between youth needs to be turned into a learning opportunity on how to live with people who are different than you. Merely separating the youth involved misses this opportunity for youth to learn emotional resilience. House meetings, if facilitated correctly, could be an optimum venue for restorative circles.

Participants shared that there needed to be an overall campus-wide emphasis on wellness. Activities could include access to animal therapy or animal support, more focused substance use education, annual universal wellness assessments, a mentorship program, and peer support groups. Youth should have a consistent way to contribute to the well-being of the campus and cottage.

Consistency was a common theme among participants. It was noted that mental health services are most effective when paired with consistent structure, clear expectations,

and healthy daily routines. Mental health services should be integrated in daily life, not siloed or reactive. All people involved with youth (school, behavioral health, caregivers, mentors) need to coordinate the support they provide.

At multiple sessions, participants highlighted the importance for all adults (staff, partners, and volunteers) on campus to be knowledgeable and fully trained in how trauma affects adolescent development and how to develop and maintain a trauma informed campus. All adults on campus need to communicate and interact with the youth in a calming and supportive manner and to have been trained in deescalation techniques. Youth and alumni shared that they could sense when adults on campus are frustrated which can affect the youth's mental health. The youth and alumni shared about how the restrictive environment caused by California Care Licensing regulations did not allow them "alone time" out of the eyes of staff to decompress or process their feelings.

Additionally, some participants as well as youth and alumni shared an immediate need for more consistent staff and far better communication with youth. Examples were provided of youth going to sleep and waking up to staff they had not met before or coming home from school to unfamiliar staff assigned to their cottage. Often this was attributed to fill in staff. Participants suggested that prioritizing the consistency of morning and evening staff could help youth start and finish off the day more balanced. Participants shared that all the staff/adults should implement the rules consistently so that a supportive relationship can develop with youth, which would in turn support the mental health of youth.

Campus Environment

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CONDITIONS FOR CREATING AN OPTIMAL LIVING ENVIRONMENT FOR FOSTER YOUTH?

This question tended to be answered in one of two ways by participants, the first had to do with the overall feel of the campus and replicating a home-like environment and the second dealt with the geographic environment.

Participants noted the campus should feel home-like and youth should have the same opportunities and responsibilities as youth living in a home: the ability to have a pet, to open their bedroom window, to decorate their bedroom, to have friends over, to have siblings spend the night, and the ability to grocery shop, plan and cook meals, clean, and do their own laundry. Some of these opportunities are limited by Community Care Licensing regulations for group homes.

Participants emphasized the importance of a family-like environment and noted when the Academy was first developed it was with a house parent model that allowed for a normal family-like environment. Many participants state that using a “staffing” model does not support a home-like setting. Participants, current youth, and alumni, emphasized that using shift workers causes a lack of consistency in applying rules and expectations. Many current residents and alumni reported that rules and expectations are not consistently followed or enforced. There are also multiple levels of rules, those for the entire campus, then some for the cottages, as well as school rules. When rules are inconsistently applied, youth assume favoritism is the cause which impacts campus morale. Lack of consistency leads to feelings of bias, unfairness, and lack of safety which erodes youths’ trust and belonging.

Participants conveyed that the campus should have a shared sense of community and belonging. Participants pointed out that staff on campus have a substantial impact on the feeling of community. The high level of staff turnover was mentioned frequently by those associated with the campus. The Academy was designed to be a placement option for youth that provided stability for those who had experienced frequent changes in placement. Frequent turnover of staff hinders that sense of stability.

Participants suggested ideas to create community and belonging. The Intergenerational Mentor Program (formerly the Grandparent Program) and team sports were highlighted as effective ways to create a sense of community and belonging. Other suggestions were supporting youths' culture through food and celebrations, creating opportunities for leadership and personal growth, and helping youth feel empowered.

Participants, youth, and alumni discussed discipline issues in most sessions and attributed variation to shift workers with differing rules and expectations. It was pointed out that group discipline, when the entire cottage is put on restriction because of one youth's actions, does not create a feeling of belonging or community and may contribute to some of the reports of bullying on campus. Current Academy youth also recounted that they were not allowed to participate in activities if any youth in their cottage was on restriction, causing isolation and lack of connection. At the same time, youth accountability is important. Youth need to learn the consequences of their actions but in an environment that provides caring, safety, and stability.

The need for clear communication between all staff as well as between youth and staff was mentioned by participants. Participants suggested a group chat or other ways to ensure information sharing.

Participants suggested there needs to be a cultural shift in understanding the population of youth currently at the Academy and how they may differ from the image of residents originally envisioned when creating the campus and programs.

In terms of geography, participants said that the lack of proximity to services and employment, and barriers to interacting with the broader community currently limits youth opportunities. Participants noted the location is not close to health care, courts, or other school options. The youth are removed from society, making it difficult for families and friends to visit and to know what is happening on campus daily. The location of the campus requires youth to be transported off campus for services which, at times, can result in delays in appointments being scheduled or in the cancelation of appointments. The remoteness of the campus limits job and internship opportunities. Any off-campus employment hours need to be coordinated with staff to ensure transportation can happen.

Participants stated that the way the campus is built, with the buildings hidden from the road, does not project a feeling of being welcoming to the public nor feel home-like. Also, having security on the campus projects concern for safety and is not welcoming. Many youths do not have the opportunity to make friends with youths in the community, and when they do, those friends are not allowed to visit campus. Participants, current youths, and staff expressed that for the Academy to feel home-like and like a family, more consideration needs to be given to how youth can engage with community youth and build broader friendships.

Multiple participants stated that to be the most beneficial, a campus should be located in a more centralized neighborhood so that youth are more involved in the routine of daily life off campus.

Other participants questioned the boarding school model entirely. They worry that when youth live and go to school in the same location, it can create isolation and a lack of real-world understanding. Some participants doubted whether a congregate care setting could realistically provide the level of connection, stability, and individualized support that is needed by youth in foster care.

Transportation

WHAT TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS WOULD MAKE IT EASIER FOR FOSTER YOUTH AT SPA TO ACCESS EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, EMPLOYMENT, INTERNSHIPS, AND FAMILY VISITS?

In the recent past, two youths have been able to obtain their driver's license and a car. However, the vast majority of youth must depend on Academy or County staff for transportation. Current youth, alumni, and staff report transportation to be limited by available staff and the number of available cars. Transportation requests are prioritized which can sometimes result in youth not being able to get transported off campus or, more often, a delay in their return trip. When pick-up is delayed, youth end up spending more time off campus unsupervised, which can be a safety risk. While there was once a bus stop on the road outside of the Academy, the North County Transit District discontinued that route in 2021.

Youth reported being interested in obtaining their driver's license but shared that obtaining the necessary behind-the-wheel hours is difficult. Participants suggested that the County should help youth obtain their driver's license and even vehicles as parents in the community often do for their children. Some participants advocated partnering with a local driving school for lessons and behind-the-wheel experience.

Participants suggested that a volunteer driver program could help with transportation. This option has the benefit of also connecting youth with local support. Many participants suggested ride shares or shuttles as ideas for youth transportation, noting the liability of these options would need to be explored with California Community Care Licensing.

The isolated location of campus also makes it difficult for families and support people to be able to visit the youth on campus. Participants proposed providing families and support people with gas cards or transportation that would allow them to visit youth on campus. In the past, a family day was held at the Academy so that the youth could show their families the campus. In addition to holding more of those events, participants suggested having off campus family days that rotate through different neighborhoods to ease the burden on families to travel all the way to the Academy.

Youth who have family or support people in a neighborhood could be transported to a park or community center for the event and then brought back to the Academy. This plan has the added benefit of allowing the youth to spend time with additional relatives that may not be able to make it to the Academy campus.

Connection to Families and Communities

HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FOSTER YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

The isolated location of the campus itself is a barrier to maintaining youths' connection with their families and their communities of origin. The importance of maintaining contact with family, when safe to do so, was brought up by participants frequently. The importance of permanent connections, relationships that continue beyond a youth's time in foster care, have been extensively documented.⁶ Regular, consistent, and meaningful family visits, both in-person and virtual, can help the youth maintain connection with their families. Monthly or quarterly family events on campus were identified to strengthen family connections. Participants suggested the Academy host monthly family dinners on campus so families can stay connected with youth. Other ideas included allowing overnight visits with siblings on campus and sponsoring family events in other neighborhoods in the county. Some participants suggested using underutilized buildings on campus for family weekends. This idea would allow youth to maintain connection with their families but in a location with supervision and support.

Participants noted that as all youth in foster care have experienced either abuse or neglect, the Academy should provide regular and intensive family therapy and develop and implement restorative circles to help address that trauma and rebuild connections. Focusing on repairing that trauma could also open additional placement options for youth either with their parents or other relatives.

It was noted that not all youth have supportive families. Participants suggested that the Academy should help youth build their own circle of support through mentors or other supporters. Court Appointed Special Advocates for Youth, Community Wraparound, and other programs were mentioned as agencies that provide support for youth with limited family connections.

⁶ For example, see Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. *Never Too Old: Achieving Permanency and Sustaining Connections for Older Youth in Foster Care*, July 2011 or Ahrens, K. R., et al. "Qualitative Exploration of Relationships with Important Nonparental Adults in the Lives of Youth in Foster Care." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 2011, 1012–1023.

The importance of keeping youth connected to their community of origin was also mentioned by participants. Youth should continue to be encouraged and supported to attend, and be transported to, cultural and religious events in their communities of origin. Community service in their community of origin and attending sports games or other events were mentioned as ways to maintain connection with community.

Civic involvement was discussed on multiple levels including trips to see local government bodies at work to ideas for volunteering in the community. Participants felt that youth should have more access to the broader community in north county. Participants stated that the location of the Academy itself is isolating, so purposeful community engagement is necessary. Importance was placed on interactions between youth at the Academy and youth in the community. Participants noted that increased interactions off campus could lead to a job, a placement, or additional support people for youth. Increased community interactions also have the benefit of helping to demystify the Academy. Many participants mentioned not knowing a lot about the Academy or repeated rumors that they had heard from others. Although most information must remain confidential due to laws and regulations, additional transparency could rally increased community support and understanding.

Location

THE SPA CAMPUS IS 238 ACRES, HOW COULD THAT SPACE BE USED TO MEET OTHER NEEDS OR SERVE OTHER POPULATIONS?

Responses to this question included both other populations that could be served on the campus *alongside* the Academy as well as other populations that could be served on the campus *instead* of the Academy.

Participants most often mentioned housing other populations on the campus, including seniors, people in hospice, veterans, those experiencing homelessness, or those in need of affordable housing. Other groups were suggested such as Job Corps, California Conservation Corps, or other young adult education partners in need of housing. If these population options were to coexist alongside the Academy, consultation with California Community Care Licensing and County Counsel would be required.

Other ideas as to populations that could be served at the location were aligned with the services being provided on campus. Those include families who are beginning to reunify and could benefit from extra support, relatives willing to take in youth but whose housing is a barrier, and transition aged youth (ages 18-26). The idea of creating a prevention hub or family visitation center for families at risk of involvement, or already involved, with CFWB was also suggested. Each of these suggestions would utilize and build upon the services already on campus.

While some participants advocated for the land to be used for housing, high density housing and tiny homes were specifically mentioned, others adamantly stated they did not support high density development. Participants with that belief suggested the land could be used as a nature immersion program, animal sanctuary, park, culturally rooted healing center, outdoor school, or camp. Some participants thought the land should be used for agriculture, either as an agricultural learning center, or as a farming co-op with a corresponding farmers market.

Some participants suggested using the Academy campus to address gaps in care identified by families accessing county services. Those include an inpatient drug and alcohol treatment program and a residential behavioral health treatment center for youth.

Another emphasis was to increase community involvement on the campus. Some participants proposed a farm-to-table restaurant that would allow youth to be engaged in every part of the process from soil management to menu design and meal presentation. Others suggested inviting businesses or organizations that would be willing to employ youth as a condition of being on campus. Creating a vocational training center or satellite college campus open to the public were also mentioned as possible uses for the land.

Participants also suggested renting the sports fields to local sports teams or building a venue for community events and activities. Many participants proposed a regional workforce training center.

Other participants thought that the campus should meet the needs of the local community and suggested housing for farm workers or summer interns at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park.

Some participants believed the location of the Academy to be an insurmountable barrier. Participants stated that with the changes in federal and state foster care regulations it is not possible to identify and place enough foster youth on campus to allow SDCOE to secure adequate funding to provide a high-quality education. Without being able to provide foster youth with access to high quality and comprehensive education, participants felt the model was no longer viable.

Additionally, with difficulty accessing services, activities, employment opportunities, and barriers in connecting to family, many participants supported closing the facility and moving the youth to a more central location so they can be closer to services and their families.

Inherent Limitations and Strengths

Participants shared that both the residential education model as well as the Academy campus have inherent limitations and strengths. The limitations include:

- Changes in state and federal laws that prioritize home-based placements, reduce reliance on congregate care, and restructure funding to support licensed and accredited congregate care settings,
- The educational funding model in California, and
- The location of the campus.

The first limitation is that the passage and implementation of both the FFPSA and the CCR resulted in congregate care settings no longer able to be funded with federal or state funds unless they fall into one of four areas:

1. Qualified Residential Treatment Programs for foster youth (including Short Term Residential Therapeutic Programs),
2. A specialized setting for pregnant and parenting youth,
3. A supervised setting for youth who are eighteen and living independently, and
4. High-quality residential care and supportive services for children and youth who have been, or are at risk of becoming, sexually trafficked.

The Academy, as originally envisioned as a boarding school group home, does not fall into one of those areas.

The second inherent limitation of the Academy model is that school funding in California is directly tied to student attendance through Average Daily Attendance (ADA), which creates a structural limitation for education systems. Because funding is based on the number of youths physically present, schools can only financially support programs, staffing, and services in proportion to attendance rates. For low enrollment schools such as the Academy, which typically serves fewer than forty youth, this results in consistently lower overall funding. Even when youth needs are significant, lower ADA funding constrains the number of teachers, support staff, and specialized services that can be sustained. As a result, the combination of low enrollment and an attendance-based funding model can limit the school's capacity to offer a full range of academic opportunities, enrichment, and targeted supports compared to larger school settings.

The last inherent barrier is the location of the Academy. The Academy campus is about eight miles from the closest transportation hub along a two-lane rural road that lacks both sidewalks and streetlights. As most youth at the Academy both live and attend school on campus, their ability to interact with the wider community is severely limited. Almost all youth are dependent on Academy staff for transportation as the public bus stop near campus was closed in 2021. In addition to making it harder for youth to get off campus to attend medical, dental, or specialty appointments, the location is a burden to maintaining connection with family and community. The remote location makes it difficult for families and positive support people to visit youth at the Academy to maintain their relationship. Conversely, the lack of transportation limits youths' ability to visit their community for religious gatherings, family events, or community activities.

Equally, the Academy model and campus have foundational strengths which include:

- A sense of community,
- Support from Friends of San Pasqual Academy and the San Pasqual Academy Foundation, and
- The Intergenerational Mentor Program.

On-site staff work hard to create a sense of community through supporting youth voice. The cottages were built to resemble a family home with a full kitchen and lounge area along with bedrooms and bathrooms. Youth have input into the rules of their cottage, and the goal is for each cottage to feel like a home and the youth inside to feel like a family. Youth can represent their cottage at cottage meetings where issues relating to multiple cottages are addressed. Additionally, Rite of Passage has created a Student and Alumni Advisory Board which brings together current youth, alumni, and partner agencies to discuss campus wide initiatives. Multiple activities are put on each month such as campus wide brunch, movie nights, and vision board making.

The Academy community comprised of volunteers with Friends of San Pasqual Academy, and the San Pasqual Academy Foundation has embraced the youth. These two organizations have provided financial and emotional support to the Academy youth for decades. These organizations provide laptops for each youth, organize school dances, and attend every sports game, home or away. Friends of San Pasqual Academy make sure that each youth receives a card and gift on their birthday as well as hosts

holiday events. Each graduating senior receives a tool kit, first aid kit, towels and sheets, a coffee maker, grill, and blender to help support them as they transition off campus. These organizations recruit volunteers and donors to support the youth on their journey to adulthood. Volunteers are often on campus providing support and mentorship to the youth.

An innovative feature of the Academy that has been present since the start, is the Intergenerational Mentor Program, formerly known as the Grandparents Program. In this program people over the age of 55 live on the Academy campus rent free in exchange for volunteering a minimum of 10 hours per week with the youth. This program is one way to pass knowledge down to the youth that others not in foster care might have learned from their parents or families. There are currently eight grandparents on campus. On their application, grandparents identify the skill or talent they wish to contribute. In the last few months, the grandparents have led mountain biking and camping trips, art therapy projects, scavenger hunts, and remote car racing. Activities with grandparents range from the novel to the timeless, from 3D printing to baking. The Intergenerational Mentor Program is frequently mentioned as a favorite part of the Academy. A goal of this program is to provide additional lifelong connections for youth living at the Academy. Alumni from the Academy still speak fondly about the grandparents and the activities done together.

Themes

Participants shared that due to the limited number of youth attending school on campus, the Academy is currently not able to provide foster youth with high quality education, extracurricular opportunities, and level of services they need and deserve. Fewer children in foster care have resulted in the number of youths placed at the Academy to be below what is needed to sustain academic rigor and educational opportunity. Additionally, the group home model is not aligned with current regulations which makes continued use as a group home fiscally challenging for the County. Two themes emerged during the community engagement process; the first is to expand the population at the Academy, the second is to explore expanded community use of the land.

Theme One: Enhance Current Program by Expanding Youth Population

Multiple approaches were identified to enhance the current program. One identified approach included increasing the number of youths on campus and at the school. There were some suggestions that would increase the number of people on campus but not the number of students. Such as housing people who have already completed high school. Other suggestions increased the number of students attending the on-campus high school but did not increase the total number of youths on the campus. For example, allowing youth not living at the Academy to attend the on-campus school. Three primary paths could be explored to increase both school enrollment and the number of youths on campus.

Participants cautioned that if the number of youths on campus cannot be increased the campus should close. Similarly, if the number of students attending the on-campus school are not increased, the school should close.

Increase Youth Participation through Outreach

One pathway to increase the number of youth is through outreach to neighboring counties. Statewide, children in foster care aged 11-17 have the highest rate of placement changes.⁷ The Academy was designed to be the last resort for youth who

⁷ California Child Welfare Indicators Project, Report 4-P5

were not successful in multiple foster care placements; participants believed this need still exists and want to continue to support the Academy model. Other counties likely have youth who have not been successful in multiple and repeated foster care placements and would benefit from the stability that comes with being placed at the Academy. Partnering counties could pay a fee for each placement, allowing the County to recoup some of the costs of maintaining the campus while increasing options through the additional number of youths on campus. This option would require the approval of California Community Care Licensing and consultation with County Counsel.

Increase Youth Participation through Providers

A second pathway to increase the number of youths at the Academy is to allow non-profit residential providers to identify children currently in their residential care in other counties in California who would benefit from moving to the Academy campus. Currently, some providers operate multiple residential campuses housing youth in California. Co-locating these similarly situated youth would allow the provider to save on the cost of renting multiple properties while simultaneously providing an income stream to CFWB. Increasing the number of youths on the Academy campus would allow the Academy to increase educational, vocational, and extracurricular classes and offer additional support. Note, this option would also require Community Care Licensing approval and consultation with County Counsel.

Increase Youth Participation through Housing Options

The third pathway to increase the number of similarly situated youth on campus is by expanding the types of housing offered. This aligns with the continuum of care multipurpose campus approved by the Board on January 25, 2022 (19).

Resource Family Homes

Rite of Passage, the current provider at the Academy, is already in the process of changing some of the cottages into traditional family-based foster care placements. Under this model, approved foster parents would move onto the Academy campus and be responsible for the youth in a cottage. Note, there has been difficulty identifying foster parents who are willing to move to the Academy campus and fulfill this role.

Group Home

For the most part, the Academy is still operated as a group home. However, as the state stopped supporting group home placements, the County must pay for each youth. Some aspects of a group home should be retained for the limited number of youth that need that level of placement.

STRTP

There are currently 12 STRTP beds on the Academy campus. Additional STRTP facilities could be added. These STRTPs could address some of the missing services noted such as drug and alcohol and behavioral health treatment. Note that the youth placed at STRTPs may come from other counties in alignment with the first pathway to increase youth participation through outreach.

Transitional Housing

Rite of Passage currently provides housing for the Academy alumni who need short-term housing (typically over college breaks). This program could be expanded into a transitional housing program for young people aged 18-24 who are leaving the foster care or juvenile justice systems and beginning independent living.

Balancing these four housing types would provide some diversification in funding streams while maintaining the campus as a safe place for young people in foster care or in need of additional support.

Theme Two: Broaden Community Use Opportunities

Suggestions for maximizing use of the campus involved opening the campus land for other purposes.

Housing and Treatment Center Use

Many participants mentioned the region's need for affordable housing and proposed adding hospice, family shelters, or transitional age youth housing. Others sought to take advantage of the services already co-located on campus by opening housing for families who are being reunified or relative housing. Other service-based ideas included a North County Family Connection Hub, a Visitation Center, or respite beds that are more accessible to nearby residents.

Some participants suggested alternative uses for the campus that would take advantage of the remote location such as in-patient substance abuse center or intensive behavioral health program for youth involved in either foster care or juvenile justice.

Business, Community, and Recreational Use

For a second pathway, participants suggested opening the campus to businesses who would agree to train and hire youth as a condition of the lease. Business ideas included wildlife veterinary care, the trades, a café or restaurant, or something related to agriculture.

The possibility of creating an agriculture hub or business incubator on the campus was mentioned multiple times. Most likely this hub/incubator would be built in coordination with local colleges and serve as a learning center for students or local residents.

Community gardens, parks, and sports facilities were all recommended as options that would increase the use of the campus by the broader community.

The viability of opening the campus for any of these suggestions would require consultation from Community Care Licensing and County Counsel.

Supporting Youth Through Change

As the path forward is shaped, there is a shared opportunity to ensure that youth are supported every step of the way. Academy youth, Academy and CFWB staff, and the youths' support people will need to work together to create individualized, trauma-informed transition plans for each youth, by:

- Conducting a deep dive into the case file of each youth,
- Increasing targeted training and exploring incentivizing foster homes that house older youth, and
- Considering moving youth to a more central location.

Deep Dive

A deep dive in family finding is a comprehensive review of the youth history, family, community connections, and placement options. Family finding is more than just identifying adults in the youth's life who may be willing to be a placement resource, it is also engaging those adults in decision making. This can include relatives or even parents whose circumstances have changed since the child went into care, or relatives that are unknown to the youth. In some situations, older siblings may now be adults and may be able to take in the youth with additional and ongoing support from CFWB. The goal of any family finding effort is to identify at least forty family members/supports per youth. Youth are involved in and apprised of the search; the result of which is sustainable relationships within a kinship system.

Recruiting, Training, Incentivizing, and Supporting Foster Families

Multiple ideas for how the County could increase the number of families that are able and willing to take older foster youth were discussed. Examples from other counties were shared including conducting targeted and ongoing recruitment campaigns specifically for older foster youth and providing eligible families with specific training prior to placement including trauma informed care, adolescent brain development, de-escalation, restorative practices, and positive communication. Participants shared the importance of ongoing support and help for foster families caring for older foster youth including requiring all Academy youth placed in a foster home have a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), and the Country to pay for additional and ongoing community supports such as

Community Wraparound. It was suggested that the County also investigate and implement financially incentivizing families to accept older foster youth and their siblings. This model would offer additional funding, above the state approved rate scale, and could support the diverse needs of older foster youth.

Central Location

Participants noted that the location of the campus itself creates barriers to accessing services, community resources, and maintaining connections with family. Finding a location closer to community services, partner organizations, and public transportation could benefit youths' access to internships, employment opportunities, community-based supports, and family connections. Participants highlighted how critical it would be for these youth to attend the public school in the neighborhood they are placed in in order to become part of the community.