Lawsuit Alleging Failure to Educate Jailed Teens Is Settled
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Civil rights groups and Los Angeles County have reached a deal to correct a lack of proper schooling for teenagers held at the county's largest detention center for children, it was announced today.

The settlement will see the county Office of Education and Probation Department collaborate with a team of educational experts to implement reforms at Christa McAuliffe High School, the county-run campus that serves teens accused of crimes, or convicted of crimes and locked up at the Challenger Memorial Youth Center in Lancaster.

About 2,000 past detainees of the facility will be schooled under terms of the deal, as well as the current population of about 525 teens.

The deal was approved by the Board of Supervisors on Wednesday and now awaits a federal judge's signature.

The complaint was filed last January by the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California and other groups in U.S. District Court in downtown Los Angeles. It accused county personnel of systematically denying the incarcerated youths access to appropriate instruction and the required minimum school day at the Challenger Memorial Youth Center in Lancaster.

"From its very inception, Challenger has been the black hole of Los Angeles' juvenile justice system - a hellish place where every child has been left behind," said Mark Rosenbaum, chief counsel for the local ACLU.

"This settlement represents a long-overdue promise to the young people at Challenger: a promise to ensure that they receive the tools to read and write, to have the opportunity to gain marketable skills, and to successfully transition back into their communities and schools," said Laura Faer, directing attorney of the Public Counsel Law Center.

"The County has taken an important step toward reforming a broken system that has been failing our children for far too long," she said, adding that the agreement will transform Challenger "from one of the worst education systems in the nation, to a model for other jurisdictions to follow.'

The lawsuit, brought by the ACLU of Southern California and other groups, cited the case of a young man who was given a high school diploma, even though he could not read or write.

It also told of instances where administrators and teachers had students leave classes to do manual labor, such as painting buildings and pulling weeds, while billing the state for instructional days as if these students were in class.

The reform will cover at least 13 areas, including literacy, instruction, transition, special education, and aftercare, said Shawna L. Parks, legal director for the Disability Rights Legal Center.

"Everyone (involved in the lawsuit) recognized that the kids at camp Challenger are at risk," she said.

The settlement will cost the county $500,000 for three years of work by the educational team, and also provides for intensive reading services for youth who were detained at Challenger since January 2008.

Youths who have passed through the system and been released without schooling will be offered
educational services at no cost in order to help them regain the educational ground lost while they were inmates at the camp, said Faer said.

The settlement "promises nothing less than a complete makeover of Challenger from a factory of despair to a school for hope," Rosenbaum said.

Also named in the lawsuit are the superintendent of the county's Office Of Education, the director of that agency's juvenile court schools, and Challenger's current principal.

The ACLU said the center was cited as having a "broken' school system in a 2009 Probation Department report.

The Challenger center consists of six detention camps and a single school that serves about 650 students.

Terms of the settlement include four years of monitoring to ensure the reforms are implemented.