



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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DATE: May 19, 2026

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TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

INITIATE TRANSITION OF SAN PASQUAL ACADEMY (ACADEMY) AND CONTINUE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO IDENTIFY FEASIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ACADEMY (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

San Pasqual Academy (Academy) was built on 238 acres of land and opened its doors in 2001, as one of the most innovative child welfare and education partnerships in the nation at the time. It was designed to serve as an alternative placement option for dependents of the Juvenile Court, ages 12–17 and non-minor dependents up to age 19.

Over the years, State and federal reforms have redefined how youth are served in care. These reforms reduce reliance on residential care and have steadily moved the system toward prevention, family reunification, and community-based services. This, in turn, has led to a steady reduction in residential placements statewide and in San Diego County. These evolving system reforms and modern requirements have created an opportunity to reimagine the Academy campus in ways that center youth well-being while exploring how it can serve and benefit the broader community.

In recent years, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, Child and Family Well-Being Department (CFWB) has responded to this evolution by engaging in strategic planning with current and former foster youth, key stakeholders, and the community in a collective effort to sustain the Academy's original vision and goals. This included exploring future campus uses that align with the changing statutory framework and community needs. While the Academy underwent early restructuring in 2021 to align with evolving child welfare policies and population needs, demand for this level of care continued to decline as systems increasingly prioritized prevention-focused, in-home, and family-strengthening supports.

On November 18, 2025 (5), the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board) directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to conduct stakeholder engagement and develop recommendations for best serving foster youth while maximizing the use of the Academy campus and ensuring fiscal sustainability of foster youth programming. Additionally, the Board directed the CAO to return in 180 days with recommendations for consideration.

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In response, CFWB, in partnership with the Children’s Initiative, initiated a broad and diverse communication and engagement effort. The engagement process brought forward thoughtful, community-driven ideas to support sustainable future uses of the Academy campus that reflect current community needs.

Today’s item requests the Board direct the initiation of a planned, phased wind-down of the Academy, including the development of thoughtful, trauma-informed, individualized transition plans for each youth at the academy. In addition, today’s item requests the Board direct the CAO to continue a broad, collaborative, and inclusive community engagement process to identify future uses of the Academy campus that reflect community needs and maximize public benefit, report back with a status update in 12 months and return in 18 months with recommendations for consideration.

This item supports the County vision of a just, sustainable, and resilient future for all, specifically those communities and populations in San Diego County that have been historically left behind, as well as our ongoing commitment to the regional *Live Well San Diego* vision of healthy, safe, and thriving communities. This new effort reflects a commitment to align with Board priorities and the current needs of youth in foster care as well as other needs that may exist for the broader community.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, or designee, to initiate a transition of the San Pasqual Academy (Academy) through a planned and phased wind-down; and develop thoughtful, trauma-informed, individualized transition plans with each youth at the Academy.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, or designee, to continue a broad, collaborative, and inclusive community engagement process to identify feasible and sustainable options for the future of the Academy campus that reflect community needs and maximize benefit to all residents to inform campus reuse decision.
3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, or designee, to report back to the Board within 12 months with a status update on the overall transition of the Academy and viable and sustainable use scenarios for the campus to inform development of actionable options; and to return to the Board within 18 months, or sooner if appropriate, with recommendations for consideration.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

San Pasqual Academy (Academy) provides a multipurpose continuum of care to meet the diverse needs of youth. This includes comprehensive resources to provide foster youth ages 12 to 19 with a stable and caring home, quality individualized education, and the skills needed for independent living. Additionally, the Academy provides strong linkages to permanent connections, transitional housing, and post-emancipation services. Its innovative vision and pioneering model have touched many lives and inspired strong advocacy from alumni, supporters, and community partners who have seen its impact firsthand.

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As State and federal policies evolve, there is a stronger focus on helping youth grow up in family settings, and fewer youth are placed at the Academy. This creates an opportunity to reimagine the Academy campus in ways that center youth well-being while exploring how it can serve and benefit the broader community. The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, Child and Family Well-Being Department, in partnership with the Children’s Initiative, initiated a cross-sector engagement effort to ensure broad, inclusive, and equitable participation and input from foster youth, individuals with lived experience, key stakeholders, and community partners. Feedback gathered through these efforts will guide next steps and planning, helping to shape approaches that promote equitable access, responsiveness to community needs, and continuity of support for youth and families.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today’s item supports the County of San Diego (County) sustainability goals #1 to engage communities and #2 to ensure just and equitable access to services. Through broad engagement and a participatory process, the County will commit to including those most impacted to identify service gaps and help shape a trauma-informed, culturally responsive system. This effort aligns with broader goals to expand system capacity and provide foster youth with equitable access to high-quality placements in the least restrictive settings. A community-centered approach, grounded in expanded outreach and inclusive engagement, will remain central throughout this process.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with today’s action. There may be future fiscal impacts, and those impacts will be considered upon return to the Board. There will be no change in net General Fund costs and no additional staff years.

The planned wind-down of San Pasqual Academy (Academy) will generate both near-term costs and longer-term fiscal benefits. In the short term, the County will continue to incur expenses to support youth transitions, adjust contracted services, and operate a large campus at reduced capacity. The costs associated with the transition are anticipated to be fully accommodated within the existing Academy budgeted appropriations. These transitional costs occur in the context of significant State and federal policy changes including Continuum of Care Reform and the Family First Prevention Services Act, which have reduced the use of congregate care and rendered the Academy’s educational-based residential model ineligible for foster care funding. As a result, the Academy operations have become primarily supported by existing one-time General Purpose Revenue each year in preparation for anticipated transition of the Academy. There is limited federal funding leveraged only for salaries and benefits.

Over time, discontinuing residential operations is expected to generate substantial local savings by ending an expensive and under-utilized program that is no longer aligned with modern funding structures. However, fiscal responsibilities will continue beyond the program’s closure and the County must secure and maintain the 238-acre campus until future uses are determined and may need to fund capital improvements required to repurpose the site. These ongoing obligations are partially offset by expected savings but remain significantly lower than the costs of continuing the

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current residential program. These financial impacts will be assessed and included in future return backs.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

This item was presented as an informational item to the Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board at its regular meeting on April 16, 2026.

BACKGROUND

San Pasqual Academy (Academy) was founded in 2001 as the nation’s first residential educational campus for foster youth. Through a public-private partnership, the Academy has supported more than 1,000 young people by providing long-term placement, an on-site high school, independent living skills preparation, therapeutic services, workforce readiness training, extracurricular activities, family connection and relational permanency support, and aftercare services for graduates. The Academy was built on 238 acres of land and was designed to serve as an alternative placement option for dependents of the Juvenile Court, ages 12–17 and non-minor dependents up to age 19.

Over the years, State and federal child welfare policies as well as the needs of youth and families have evolved, moving the system toward more preventive, community-based, and family-centered practices. These reforms have fundamentally reshaped both program expectations and how services are designed and delivered. There is now a stronger emphasis on prevention, keeping youth safely with their families, and supporting youth in home-like settings. Currently, there are 42 youth placed at the Academy, compared to nearly 200 at its peak. This decline in enrollment is reflective of the broader shifts in the child welfare service landscape.

The Academy’s original vision was pioneering for its time and reflects the leadership and commitment of those who shaped it. However, evolving youth needs, system reforms, and modern standards of care and regulatory requirements call for re-envisioning how support services are delivered to best serve children and families today.

Under the leadership of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors (Board), the County of San Diego (County) continues its commitment to improving outcomes for children and youth in foster care through investments and support of effective programs and services. Over the past several years, the County Health and Human Services Agency, Child and Family Well-Being Department (CFWB), has engaged in strategic planning to sustain the Academy’s original vision while determining how best to use the campus in response to changing statutory requirements and community needs. This work builds on the Academy’s success and seeks to maximize the campus’s value for all San Diego County residents.

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Key Actions, Decisions, and Milestones

The following is a summary of key actions, decisions, and milestones in the that have shaped the Academy’s redesign to date.

- 2015** California’s Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) initiates statewide reforms reducing reliance on congregate care.
- 2018** Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) further emphasizes prevention and family-based care.
- February 2021** State determines the Academy’s model is no longer allowable under CCR/FFPSA.
- March – May 2021** The Board secures extensions and directs exploration of expanded campus uses.
- December 2021** Court injunction enables continued licensure; State lifts placement restrictions.
- January 2022** The Board approves actions to transform the Academy into a multipurpose campus.
- August – October 2023** Rite of Passage Adolescent Treatment Centers and School, Inc. (Rite of Passage) selected as provider; competitive solicitations for Short-term Residential Therapeutic (STRTP) /Transitional Housing Program (THP).
- November 2025** The Board directs comprehensive stakeholder engagement for sustainable campus planning.

Beginning in 2021, the County initiated efforts to align the Academy with major State and federal child welfare reforms that emphasize prevention, family-based care, and community centered supports. In response, the Board directed CFWB to explore how the Academy could evolve while continuing to serve youth effectively.

As part of this work, and following the Board’s May 18, 2021 (30) direction, CFWB partnered with Harder + Company Community Research and the Children’s Initiative to engage a broad range of community stakeholders. Stakeholders shared insights into how the Academy could transition towards models more consistent with current policy and youth needs. This engagement informed early updates, including adding an on campus STRTP to support youth with higher needs and establishing Foster Family Agency (FFA) homes on the campus to help keep siblings together. These changes were intended to move the Academy closer to a family based model focused on timely transitions to home and community settings.

Despite these adjustments, the number of youth requiring a residential program like the Academy continued to decline. This trend mirrors statewide shifts in child welfare, where systems now place

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greater emphasis on prevention, kinship and family-based care, and services that help youth remain connected to their families and communities. As a result, fewer youth meet the criteria for, or benefit from, a large educational-residential campus model, even one adapted to modern requirements.

The Academy's adopted budget is \$18,866,740 per year. Historically, the Academy was funded through State and federal sources. However, the changes in State and federal child welfare policies and regulations also shifted funding availability. Because the Academy's current educational-based residential program does not meet updated foster care requirements under these legislative changes, it is now funded through local resources.

Youth Needs and Population Trends in a Shifting Landscape

In San Diego County, nearly half of youth in out-of-home care are now placed with kin. This reflects a broader shift towards family-based care, which has been shown to improve placement stability, strengthen connections to community and culture, and lead to better mental and behavioral health outcomes. Research indicates that youth placed in foster homes are more likely to experience poorer mental health outcomes, while children living with kin are significantly more likely to feel emotionally healthy. Children in kinship care also experience greater stability, with 71% remaining in their first placement for a full year, compared to 24% of those placed with non-relatives.

At the same time, the profile of youth entering care has become more complex. A greater proportion present with histories of severe trauma and significant mental and behavioral health needs that require more intensive, specialized supports than the Academy was originally designed to provide. As of Fiscal Year 2024–25, of the 555 youth eligible by age, nearly 70% (379 youth) were placed in family-based settings, including kin, guardians, foster parents, or foster family agency homes. An additional 95 youth with higher-level needs were served in specialized settings outside of the Academy. In contrast, only 49 youth were placed at the Academy during this period, compared to nearly 200 at its peak in FY 2009–10, reflecting a continued shift away from campus-based placement toward both family-based care and more specialized treatment settings.

As of March 30, 2026, 42 youth reside at the Academy, including 31 attending high school on-site, three attending high school off-site, and seven attending middle school off-site. Together, these shifts in placement preferences and youth needs underscore the importance of re-envisioning the Academy campus to better align with the current child welfare landscape.

Deepening Engagement to Align with Current Needs

In response to the November 18, 2025 (24) Board direction to engage stakeholders and develop recommendations to ensure the Academy campus can benefit individuals and families in the region through sustainable programs, CFWB, in partnership with the Children's Initiative, undertook an effort to gather input from youth, families, stakeholders, and residents on the future use of the 238-acre campus. The effort focused on ensuring foster youth programs are responsive and fiscally sustainable, and on how the campus can be maximized to benefit all residents in the region.

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Outreach and engagement opportunities took place from January through March 2026 and were multi-faceted and designed to be accessible and far-reaching. More than 270 engagement session participants and 184 survey respondents provided input on how to best serve foster youth across seven key areas. These areas include education, extracurricular activities, behavioral and mental health, campus environment, transportation, connections to families and communities, and location. Participants also offered perspectives on potential alternative uses of the campus to benefit the broader community. Outreach and engagement efforts included:

Community Voice and Engagement Sessions

- More than 270 participants took part in 13 virtual and in-person engagement sessions facilitated by the Children’s Initiative. Attendees included current and former foster youth; Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board; community partners; key stakeholders; juvenile justice partners; court, attorneys, and advocacy partners; Academy staff; a media representative; individuals representing special education, general education, and school district leadership; local farming and produce community; and county residents.

Community Engagement Survey

- Completed by 184 respondents, made accessible on the Engage San Diego County website and available in County threshold languages.

Focused Email Outreach to Child Welfare Partners

- Notified over 400 community members on the Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board Distribution List through email of opportunities and process to engage.
- Informed more than 80 child welfare community partners via email about engagement opportunities and encouraging participation.

Digital and Social Media Outreach

- Developed and deployed organic social media posts and a focused engagement messaging campaign across Google and Meta platforms that together resulted in 164,911 impressions.
- Shared County News Center Story informing and encouraging participation in engagement activities to 38,285 Gov Delivery subscribers.

Other Community Input Channels

- Additional community input and feedback was received through direct email correspondence and through CFWB leadership-led outreach, including direct engagement and in-person meetings with stakeholders and community members.

The Path Forward

The engagement process brought forward two consistent themes: enhance the current program by expanding the youth population and broaden community use of the campus for sustainable future uses.

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Community members identified three pathways to expand the youth population served by the Academy and its on-site school: 1) conduct outreach to neighboring counties to place youth with similar needs at the Academy; 2) allow nonprofit residential providers to refer youth in their out-of-county residential programs who could benefit from the Academy; and 3) expand housing options on the Academy campus, including resource family homes, group homes, STRTPs, and transitional housing for alumni and young adults ages 18–24 exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

Notably, participants in the engagement process indicated that without increases in both Academy placements and youth attending on-campus school, the Academy should close, alongside efforts to maximize the campus for expanded community benefit.

In line with this feedback, community members shared ideas for sustainable, broader community use of the Academy campus to include health and wellness services; housing and shelter options; education and workforce development; economic and commercial; and a hub for community and social services. Additionally, community members identified practical implementation considerations when reviewing the viability of pathways and ideas including licensing approvals and legal and funding considerations. Overall, community input reflects a recognition that a path forward is taking shape, and that continued collaboration will be essential to ensure youth are supported.

Although the County previously pursued efforts to enhance and expand the Academy, the number of youth in care and those eligible for placement at the Academy continued to decline. In parallel, the system has shifted toward prevention and supporting youth with relatives and in their communities. These approaches are producing positive outcomes and are where services and funding are now most effectively aligned.

Taken together, these factors along with the range of perspectives shared through community engagement indicate that it is now necessary to begin a thoughtful and phased wind-down of the program, while continuing to partner with the community to advance viable and sustainable future uses of the campus for Board consideration.

Transition of the Academy and Development of Transition Plans with Each Youth at the Academy
Transitioning the Academy will require a thoughtful, planned, and phased wind-down that is trauma-informed and centered on the well-being of each youth. With 42 youth currently at the Academy, a phased approach allows for stability and continuity during a critical period in their lives. Under this proposed approach, current seniors will be supported to complete the school year and graduate, and current juniors will be supported to graduate at the conclusion of the 2026-2027 school year. For the remaining underclass students, transitions will be carried out gradually and in a developmentally appropriate way that safeguards both academic continuity and emotional well-being. Each student will receive tailored support to minimize disruption to their schooling as their long-term plans are thoughtfully shaped.

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The youth-centered, family-driven transition process will be informed by and tailored to each youth's individual voice, strengths, and goals. Youth will work alongside their families and the people who support them to identify the placement, services, and supports that best meet their needs and promote their well-being. CFWB will support this work by coordinating the planning process and ensuring each transition plan reflects the youths needs and preferences. Many youth currently at the Academy are on a path towards reunification with their family. This approach is designed to empower youth and families to actively shape decisions they are invested in. It strengthens engagement, stability, and long-term outcomes. Consistent with the kin-first approach, placement decisions will prioritize keeping youth with family members, relatives, or trusted adults whenever possible. Youth will also be encouraged and supported to maintain connections with relatives and other supportive adults beyond mere placement, so that they ultimately achieve relational permanency that lasts far longer than their time spent in care. When appropriate, youth will be placed with culturally aligned families and community connections to reinforce identity and belonging. This equitable approach reduces disparities for historically marginalized youth affected by multigenerational family separation by increasing access to family-based care and improving long-term outcomes. This approach reflects community input emphasizing the importance of keeping youth connected to their families and community of origin, while ensuring they experience family and home-like environment with access to the same opportunities as their peers.

Ensuring access to comprehensive services and supports for youth is central to Academy transition efforts. This approach honors the original vision and goals of the Academy. It carries forward its focus on coordinated, holistic care. Simultaneously, it recognizes that the current model is no longer aligned with today's policies, regulatory requirements, and standards of practice, and provides a path to continue that vision in a way that better meets current expectations and needs.

Input gathered through the community engagement efforts provided clear direction on the comprehensive services and supports youth should have access to. This input will serve as a foundation to guide future efforts and ensure each youth is supported in ways that promote their successes. In alignment with community feedback, this approach also expands opportunities for youth to attend their local district schools. Youth will have access to a full range of academic courses, electives, and extracurricular activities. This ensures youth have equitable opportunities for learning, growth, and participation as their peers. Through this approach, the County is reinforcing a system that centers youth voice, strengthens families, and supports stable, community-based care. It reflects a commitment to minimize disruption, honor relationships, and ensure every transition is approached with thoughtfulness and compassion.

Comprehensive Community Engagement and Future Use Planning

Continued engagement with the community remains critical as decisions regarding the Academy campus could have region-wide impacts. Ongoing engagement will inform campus reuse decision making, ensuring the path forward is intentional, responsive, and grounded in solutions that are feasible, fiscally sustainable, and reflective of the diverse needs of children, youth, and families across the region. This community-guided approach integrates future plans a clear strategy that supports the long-term value, impact and sustainability of the entire campus. Throughout this

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effort, CFWB will provide the Child and Family Strengthening Advisory Board with regular updates, including at key milestones to ensure transparency.

Today's item requests the Board direct the initiation of a planned, phased wind-down of the Academy, including the development of thoughtful, trauma-informed, individualized transition plans for each youth at the academy. In addition, today's item requests the Board direct the CAO to continue a broad, collaborative, and inclusive community engagement process to identify future uses of the Academy campus that reflect community needs and maximize public benefit, report back with a status update in 12 months and return in 18 months with recommendations for consideration.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's action aligns with the County of San Diego 2026-2031 Strategic Plan initiatives of Sustainability (Economy and Resiliency), Equity (Health and Housing), and Community (Engagement, Quality of Life, Communications, and Partnership) as well as the regional *Live Well San Diego* vision. This is accomplished by providing equitable opportunities for youth to access a continuum of placements and services that meet their unique and diverse needs and achieve healthy and successful outcomes.

Respectfully submitted,



FOR

EBONY N. SHELTON
Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment A – San Pasqual Academy Report