

Accelerating Literacy for Justice-Involved Youth:



A Collaborative *SIPPS* Implementation in California's Juvenile Court Schools

Summary

This report documents the implementation and initial outcomes of the *SIPPS* program, a foundational literacy intervention, within California's juvenile court schools. Spearheaded by the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) in partnership with Collaborative Classroom, the initiative sought to close persistent literacy gaps among justice-involved youth. A 30-day pilot at San Diego's Youth Transition Campus (YTC) demonstrated that through intentional design, student-centered delivery, and robust system-level collaboration, detained youth can achieve gains in reading proficiency, with 100 percent of participants showing growth through completed lessons and mastery tests every five lessons. These early results underscore the potential for *SIPPS* to serve as a scalable, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate literacy model for marginalized student populations statewide. The pilot also revealed key insights into fostering positive identity formation, ensuring instructional continuity, and building sustainable cross-sector partnerships.

Context and Need

Youth entering the juvenile justice system frequently arrive with significant educational deficits, particularly in foundational literacy. National data reveals that approximately 70 percent of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level (Haigler, et al., 1994), and in California's youth justice system, a staggering 85 percent of students who were awarded a high school diploma between 2018 and 2023 could not pass a 12th-

grade reading assessment (Márquez Rosales & Willis, 2023). These significant gaps are more than academic shortcomings; they represent structural failures that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline and curtail access to social and economic mobility.

Following the closure of the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) under Senate Bill 823, the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) was established to realign juvenile detention with rehabilitative goals. Under the leadership of Director Katherine Lucero, OYCR has prioritized education as a transformative force. Recognizing the urgent need for age-appropriate, skill-aligned reading instruction, OYCR Education Subject Matter Expert Dr. Michael M. Massa strategically partnered with Collaborative Classroom to pilot the *SIPPS* program in juvenile court schools, beginning with San Diego County. This pilot aimed to provide targeted, evidence-based literacy support to a population historically underserved.

The core philosophy guiding this intervention is rooted in a holistic vision for the well-being and future success of every young person. As articulated by Dr. Massa, the ultimate goal is " ... to take them in, make sure that they're safe, and give them the tools to make sure they have the foundational skills that everyone needs to be successful in life, not just to do well in school. We know that all young people have the potential to be contributing members of society that we all want as our neighbors."

Program Stakeholders

The successful implementation of the *SIPPS* pilot was the result of coordinated efforts among a coalition of dedicated partners, each playing a crucial role in creating a coherent and student-centered approach.

At the forefront was the OYCR, which led the initiative with a vision to reimagine education for justice-involved youth. OYCR collaborated closely with Collaborative Classroom, a nonprofit curriculum provider known for its evidence-based, student-centered literacy programs. Collaborative Classroom played a pivotal role by providing the foundational instructional materials, comprehensive professional development for the instructional team, and ongoing coaching and technical assistance to ensure the high-fidelity implementation of the *SIPPS* program within the unique court school environment.

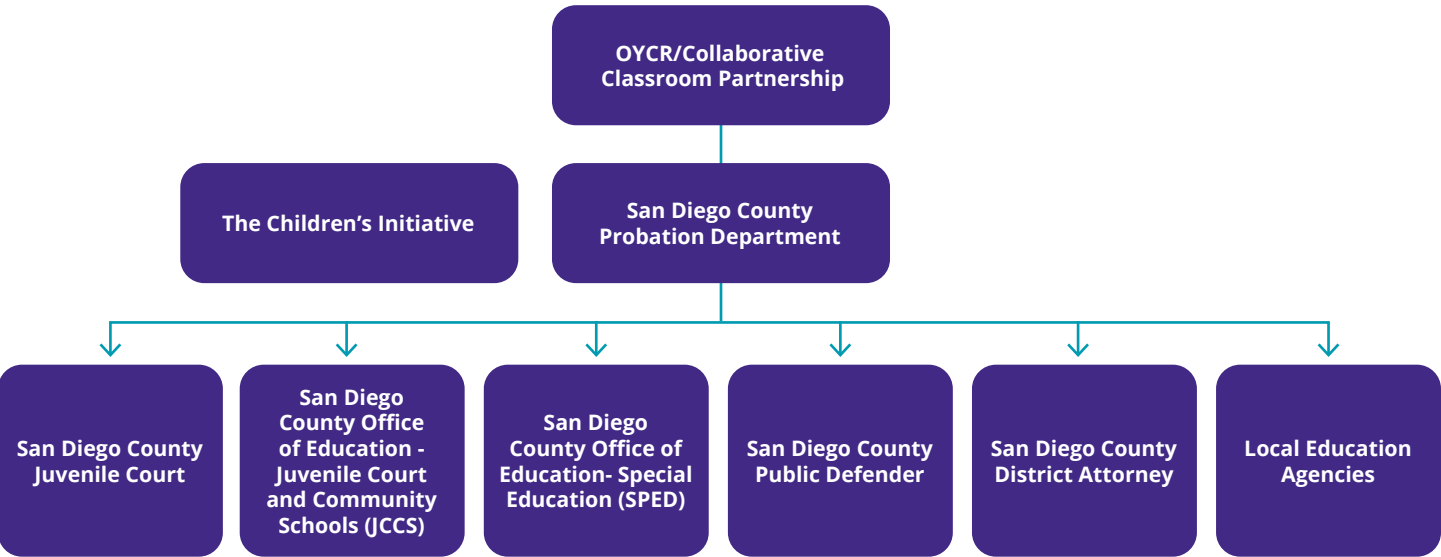
Instrumental support also came from the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), ensuring educational continuity and alignment within the

complex court school system. The Children’s Initiative, a local advocacy organization, provided invaluable guidance and community insight, with key leadership from its Chief Executive Officer, a longtime champion for vulnerable youth.

Judicial leadership also played a critical role. The Presiding Judge of the San Diego County Juvenile Court offered crucial support that helped integrate educational goals within the broader justice framework, fostering a receptive environment for the intervention.

Together, these partners formed a powerful alliance committed to restoring opportunity and literacy for some of California’s most underserved students. This collaboration emphasized the integration of educational, judicial, and community-based perspectives, creating a holistic and impactful student-centered approach.

PROGRAM PARTNERSHIPS



Participant Demographics

Understanding the baseline needs of the participants is crucial to appreciating the impact of the *SIPPS* intervention. Out of the 107 tested, 24 students placed into *SIPPS*. Stacy Storm, Collaborative Classroom's Manager of Educational Partnerships in California, notes: "The assessment quickly identified students that have yet to master foundational reading skills and placed them into *SIPPS* instruction at their points of need. Now, we knew who needed the instruction."

Of those 24 students, 14 were identified as Special Education students and 10 were classified as English learners. All 24 students had experienced higher-than-average suspension rates before they entered the court system.

Implementation Journey

The *SIPPS* pilot unfolded through strategic phases, adapting to the unique context of juvenile courts while maintaining fidelity to evidence-based practices.

EXPLORATION PHASE

In this phase, OYCR identified chronic absenteeism, low literacy rates, and overrepresentation of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and English learner status in juvenile court schools as urgent areas of concern. A review of existing literacy programs revealed a critical gap: no scalable literacy intervention was designed for older students reading at a K–3 level within this specific context. *SIPPS* was ultimately selected based on its alignment with developmental needs, its proven efficacy in foundational literacy, and the Collaborative Classroom's nonprofit status, which aligned with OYCR's commitment to ethical and student-centered service delivery. Dr. Michael Massa and partners from Collaborative Classroom presented *SIPPS* to the OYCR California Advisory Committee to gain multi-level buy-in and ensure statewide coherence for future expansion.



30-Day
pilot



Out of **107**
students tested,
24
placed into the *SIPPS* pilot.



60%
of those who placed into the
pilot were identified as Special
Education students.



42%
of those who placed into
the pilot were classified
as English learners.

INSTALLATION PHASE

Under the leadership of Collaborative Classroom's Dr. Jennifer McMahon, the instructional team (an interventionist and two instructional assistants) received professional development in *SIPPS* implementation, including decoding and correction procedures tailored for court schools. This direct professional development, combined with the following factors, proved integral to the successful installation phase.

Instructional materials were culturally relevant, with high-interest decodable texts bound in a novel-sized book to promote dignity and motivation. In addition, a photo version of the Spelling-Sound Cards was developed, which reflected the age and interests of older students. These cards will be available to use in the next phase of the implementation.

Strong relationships were built with county educators and probation staff through proactive visits and participation in student events, which built strong rapport and helped reduce resistance. The *SIPPS* Placement Assessment made it possible to quickly screen 107 students, placing 24 into the pilot program at their appropriate instructional levels. Flexible scheduling—utilizing staff buffer periods and weekends and even conducting lessons within the housing units instead of the designated classroom areas—was crucial for consistent instruction despite facility challenges. Continuous side-by-side coaching, data debriefs, and iterative feedback loops enabled instructors to refine practice in real time, ensuring high-quality delivery.

FULL IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Though the implementation of this program is still expanding, early implementation data and anecdotal feedback point toward sustainable system change:

Cultural Shift. By centering student capacity and consistently celebrating small wins, educators and probation partners began to shift their perspective, seeing students primarily as learners, not just detainees.

System Collaboration. The initiative highlighted how traditional silos between education, probation, and mental health services could be bridged through a shared focus on student needs.

Scalability. The program's flexible design and the lessons learned from the pilot lay a robust foundation for replication in other counties. OYCR is now positioned to expand the use of *SIPPS* in alignment with broader state equity goals for justice-involved youth.

Results

The *SIPPS* pilot demonstrated that justice-involved youth, often marginalized by conventional systems, can thrive with intentional and affirming literacy instruction.

Literacy Growth. According to Ellen De La Cruz, a reading teacher with OYCR, all *SIPPS* participants demonstrated consistent, literacy growth, as confirmed by completion of lessons and mastery tests. Qualitative data also affirmed progress across foundational reading skills. Beyond assessments, students showed improved engagement and self-efficacy (i.e., pride in completion, increased self-correction) by the end of the pilot.

Instructional Continuity. Crucially, intervention data, including *SIPPS* assessment results, was embedded into underutilized sections of the existing student information system and integrated into students' IEPs. This innovation ensured that upon transfer or release, instructional data remained visible and actionable, preventing unnecessary reassessments and preserving instructional momentum. The program was nimble and responsive enough to provide continuity of implementation for the three youths who left detention and returned within the duration of the pilot—they were able to seamlessly continue with the *SIPPS* intervention.

Motivation and Affirmation. Certificates and verbal affirmations were strategically used as powerful motivational tools. Students proudly shared their certificates with judges during court appearances. As Dr. Massa recounts: "The juvenile court judge knew about the certificates and made it a point to call them out. 'Oh wow,' the judge would say, 'I see you're doing so well in school, I'm so proud of you.' The word started to get back to the rest of the kids and then we had kids without reading and literacy issues asking, 'Hey, how do I get into that program so I can bring a certificate to court?'"

Student Self-Efficacy and Engagement. Student self-advocacy increased during Multidisciplinary Team Meetings, which evolved from being platforms primarily focused on behavioral or legal infractions into opportunities for affirming academic progress and identity development, with students confidently articulating their academic progress. Collaborative Classroom's Stacy Storm provides a compelling illustration of the program capacity to cultivate self-efficacy and a deeper engagement with the learning process through structured support: "A favorite moment of mine was when one student made a mistake during one of Dr. McMahon's lessons. The built-in *SIPPS* correction routines scaffolded him so that he was able to self-correct. He did all the heavy lifting on his own, and when he realized he got it right he exclaimed, 'That really worked!' He was so proud of himself and so motivated to continue learning."

Enhanced Collaboration. Success often hinges on more than just good intentions; it requires a deeply considered approach to stakeholder engagement. Dr. Massa emphasizes this point, stating, "... ultimately, the time we spent and the way we structured our approach to these professionals, working from the leadership level to the site level, overcame [obstacles] and helped us understand the environment in which we would be working." The result was enhanced collaboration between education and probation staff, fostered by shared student success.

Challenges and Limitations

The implementation of the *SIPPS* pilot, while successful, navigated several inherent challenges within the juvenile justice system.

Transient Student Population. The transient nature of juvenile justice placements leads to inconsistent access to students and frequent interruptions in instructional continuity. This makes consistent attendance and long-term progress tracking particularly complex.

Competing Priorities. Educators were tasked with balancing the critical need for structured literacy instruction with the equally urgent need for social skills development and behavioral support, often within a compressed time frame.

Data Tracking Complexity. Tracking critical data, such as IEPs and English learner status, across placements proved complex, requiring careful coordination to maintain instructional alignment as students left detention.

Need for Sustained Professional Development. The new intervention implementation highlighted the need for sustained professional development and the flexibility to individualize this support, emphasizing that all youth, regardless of background, are capable of academic growth when given the right support.

Key Insights and Recommendations

The *SIPPS* pilot yielded crucial insights that are directly translatable into strategic recommendations for effective, sustainable literacy interventions within juvenile justice settings. These insights also implicitly address the inherent challenges encountered during implementation, guiding the path forward for equitable and lasting impact.

1. REFRAMING LANGUAGE AND MOTIVATION

Insight: Adolescents in detention often resist interventions that highlight perceived deficits. Calling literacy instruction "appointments" reduced stigma, and public recognition (like judge-acknowledged certificates) powerfully motivated students, fostering pride and participation.

Recommendation: Reframe intervention language (e.g., "literacy appointments") to reduce stigma and consistently use symbolic, public recognition to celebrate student progress, building a culture of achievement.

2. CULTIVATING POSITIVE IDENTITY AND RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENT

Insight: While traditional Multidisciplinary Team Meetings (MDTs) often focus on infractions, they can affirm academic progress, fostering positive identity. Lengthy or retraumatizing diagnostics are counterproductive for youth in crisis; it is much better to conduct rapid, discreet literacy assessments. The positive impact of supportive interventions within the juvenile justice system can begin to reshape long-standing family dynamics. Dr. Massa illustrates this with a poignant example: “One young person was able to tell their mom with pride about all the progress they were making in school, something this parent would never have heard in their life before. It was such an emotional event because parents don’t expect to come to these jails for children and hear good things about their kids.”

Recommendation: Transform existing review processes (like MDTs) into platforms for affirming student academic achievements. Implement immediate, precise, and sensitive literacy assessments that avoid labeling and enable quick instructional placement.

3. SYSTEMATIC DATA PORTABILITY AND INSTRUCTIONAL CONTINUITY

Insight: A major challenge has been the lack of educational record portability. The pilot addressed this by integrating *SIPPS* assessment results into existing student information systems and IEPs, ensuring data remains visible and actionable upon transfer or release for a transient student population.

Recommendation: Develop robust cross-agency data protocols for consistent sharing and seamless instructional continuity. Critically integrate intervention data directly into students’ IEPs under Present Levels of Performance for visibility and actionability.

4. THE POWER OF TARGETED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND FLEXIBLE MODELS

Insight: The intervention’s success hinged on highly skilled instructional staff, especially given the diverse needs (Special Education, English Language Development) of justice-involved youth. Logistical realities of detention settings also demanded highly flexible instructional models.

Recommendation: Strategically invest in targeted professional learning for all instructional staff, building expertise in areas like Special Education and English Language Development. Ensure instructional models remain flexible to adapt to detention settings while maintaining evidence-based fidelity.

5. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND JUSTICE THROUGH EDUCATION

Insight: The pilot showed the profound impact of multi-sector collaboration (education, probation, community advocacy), affirming education as a restorative act. Sustaining new interventions requires thoughtful planning.

Recommendation: Foster and sustain robust cross-sector partnerships (education, judicial, community, health). Embed sustainability planning from the outset by supporting local literacy champions, aligning goals with budgets, and making literacy a core, non-negotiable component of juvenile court education. At its heart, the success of this initiative hinges on recognizing the inherent potential of every young person and providing them with equitable support. As Dr. Massa passionately states, “The bottom line: These are amazing young people. They just need the same care and attention that we give all kids. Once we are able to create that space for them, we can start looking at their needs. We can start providing them the tools to be successful. That’s when we begin making progress and start bringing justice into the juvenile justice system.”

Next Steps: Expanding Educational Justice

The *SIPPS* implementation in California's juvenile court schools demonstrates that justice-involved youth, often marginalized by conventional systems, can thrive with intentional, affirming, and developmentally appropriate literacy instruction. This initiative redefines reading not just as a fundamental right, but as a powerful tool for liberation and long-term opportunity. By embedding trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and flexible practices into a historically rigid system, *SIPPS* has begun to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and reimagine what's possible for detained youth. Its success underscores the power of cross-sector collaboration, systemic alignment, and seeing students by their potential, not their records. As a scalable and replicable model, *SIPPS* offers a blueprint for advancing educational justice rooted in dignity, data, and the unwavering belief that every child can read, succeed, and reclaim their future.

The next phase of the *SIPPS* initiative, set for late 2025, will focus on strategic expansion and knowledge sharing. Phase 2 involves scaling the program to three additional counties, building on insights from the initial pilot. A formal scope of work will guide this expansion, supported by state financial investment to deepen impact and ensure fidelity across diverse contexts.

References

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