**Edilberto Flores**

Good morning. My name is Edilberto Flores. I just graduated high school at the Youth Justice Coalition, and am also organizing to change things for youth inside lock-ups, in our schools and on the streets. We are here to push the LAUSD School Board to pass a budget where funds go directly to students for restorative justice, counselors, peacebuilders, and equal funding for continuation schools. We want to return money spent last year on school police to support the direct needs of students. The students struggling to stay in school are the same youth most often targeted and pushed out by aggressive policing and discipline in schools. I know, because I was one of those students.

My school never asked what was going on with me when I started getting into fights. My father was incarcerated and my mom was expecting me to help raise my younger brothers and sisters. But instead of counseling I got suspended, expelled and arrested from school.

I was first detained at Eastlake Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles at the age of 16. The unit I was in was on lock-down most of the time. The only time we had outside our cell was for two hours recreation. We ate breakfast, lunch and dinner in our cell. We had some packets thrown at us for school, but most of the time, we didn’t have paper or pencil to write our families. They would take the pencils away from us if we had one. We had no books to read – nothing to distract my mind. I had no one to talk to all day long – just a 5’ by 7’ room and a tiny little window to look out of.

When I was released from juvenile hall, I was far behind in school, and no longer used to studying. I needed to get into school as soon as possible. But, I was released without a connection to another school, without transcripts and without a birth certificate or California ID. Still, not being enrolled also made me look bad in front of my judge, and the judge and my Probation officer told me I had to enroll fast or I would get violated and sent to camp. But my judge and Probation gave me no help to find a school – not even a list of options.

I went to my home school, and they said I couldn’t enroll, because I had been expelled the year before and because I was coming from juvenile hall. I searched for a school for months, and finally found a continuation school that would take me. But by that time, it was already second semester. I was told I had to do twice as much work to catch up if I wanted to stay enrolled. During my first month, there was some tagging in the school, and even though I didn’t do it, the school suspected me because of my record. So I was suspended for two days, and when I returned, the school was being shut down for low enrollment. Once again, the school and my Probation officer did not connect me to another school. But my PO did say I would get violated if I didn’t get enrolled.

I found out about the Youth Justice Coalition from an intervention worker I met in the community. Ever since I have been at the YJC, it feels that I found a school that understands me, and they push me to do well and offer a lot of help to improve my skills.

Youth in the foster care and justice system should get more support to find and attend school. Instead, we are discriminated against - left on the street or thrown into schools that have no resources to teach us. It’s not surprising to me that 80% of the people in prisons across the United States have no high school diploma.

LAUSD must pass the Dignity in School’s Campaign for the Local Control Funding Formula. Protect the rights of all youth – whether or not we speak English, whether or note we are in foster care and/or have been arrested or incarcerated – to graduate and to prepare for college and a job. Education is the only hope we have to escape California’s streets and prisons.