



Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action

News You Can Use:

School Reentry of Juvenile Offenders

Youth returning to school following incarceration often encounter significant difficulties in transitioning back into their home school. Coordinated effective procedures and programs that promote successful transition are lacking in many states. School reentry, the return to school following incarceration, presents multiple challenges for youth and their families. Their return is often marked by resistance from the school system. In fact, zero-tolerance legislation may impede reentry altogether leaving these youth with limited education options. A collaborative effort between the schools, justice system, and families is needed to ensure a successful transition.

Many youth are affected by these transitional difficulties. Current estimates suggest that 100,000 youth are released from detention centers every day.¹ Returning to school and reengaging with the educational system is an important step in restoring the lives of these youth and their families and has been shown to be associated with reduced recidivism.² The benefits of school attendance suggest the importance of developing clear procedures and strategies to help smooth the transitional period. The reentry process needs to be a priority when developing after-care plans. In fact, the best reentry

programs begin coordinating the transition while the youth are still incarcerated.³

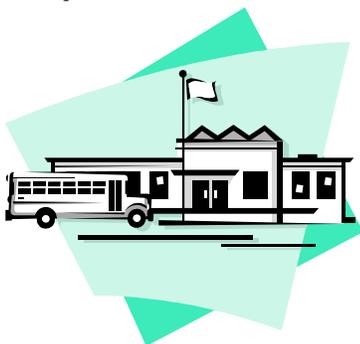
Even after the youth is reenrolled into school, other transitional problems may arise. The shift from a correctional facility with high levels of structure and control over daily activities to the more independent lifestyle experienced upon release may be difficult for many youth. He or she may have been following a different academic curriculum while incarcerated. Therefore, the current materials in school may be unfamiliar, causing the youth to fall behind. Research has shown that schooling in correctional institutions is associated with poor academic outcomes, with 75% of youth advancing less than one grade per year in custody.⁴ In addition, the problems that contributed to the youth's arrest, such as poor impulse control, peer pressure, and mental health concerns, often still exist.

School reentry for incarcerated youth must become a focus of research. While there is a wealth of information relevant to school reentry following medical procedures, there is relatively little literature on reentry following incarceration. School reentry programs can be cost-effective and can promote the health and well-being of children and adolescents and should be further explored through research and practice.

August 2006

Different Educational Philosophies Mainstream schools and correctional schools are marked by differing philosophies.⁵

- Teachers within correctional institutions may be more likely to focus on the basics and to subjectively grade students based on their efforts.
- When compared to juvenile facilities, mainstream schools may place more emphasis on grades, state assessments, and grade promotion.
- Correctional institutions may be less focused on following a traditional model with clear quarters or semesters and a definitive grading structure.
- It can be challenging for juvenile facilities to create a definite structure, as it is often not clear how long a student will be detained and what the post detention plans will entail.



Why are school reentry programs needed?

To increase communication

Reintegration into the community following incarceration may be a stressful process for both the youth and his or her family. Often, the difficulty of this process is amplified by a rocky transition back into mainstream schools. Educators often lack the necessary information to readmit the student, such as the

educational gains while incarcerated or court-mandated requirements related to schooling. Successful school reentry requires significant communication and collaboration between the correctional and educational fields. The transfer of records between the school and detention center may be problematic on both sides of the issue. The school may not provide

appropriate documentation explaining the youth's educational needs to the detention center. Upon release, the detention center may not provide the school the details of the educational gains that the youth made while incarcerated. The youth may return to school without any notice to the school and may be surprised that the school is not aware of the educational program he or she received while incarcerated. Often, students return to their home schools with incomplete or no educational records from the incarceration. When students and families try to bridge the communication gap between the educational system and the juvenile justice system, they can become overwhelmed and are unsure of how educational gains from the incarceration period can be translated to the school setting. These two systems need to work with youth and families to figure out how to integrate the educational records into one cohesive plan that will promote a successful transition back to the school setting.

To reduce recidivism

Without the appropriate assistance, youth may not even attempt reenrollment in school upon release from a correctional institution. Data from one study revealed that more than two-thirds of offenders did not return to high school following their release (see Footnote 5). When youth do

not reenter school, their incidence of recidivism increases (see Footnote 2). The costs of education are much less than the costs of incarceration.⁶ Therefore, transitional programs that promote effective school reentry are a cost-effective investment for helping greater numbers of youth achieve success.

To reduce school resistance to reentry

Schools may be reluctant to readmit youth who were previously incarcerated. There are often stereotypes and fears associated with including juvenile offenders in mainstream schools. For example, administrators and teachers may see these youth as problematic and disruptive to other students and may believe that they do not belong in mainstream educational systems.⁷ These attitudes may delay the reentry process or impede it entirely. The fears held by educators regarding the reintegration of delinquent youth must be addressed. It is recommended that educators acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to work with this group and also with the juvenile justice system. Certain teaching methods, such as hands-on learning, should be encouraged and special education and mental health needs of these youth should be acknowledged and addressed.⁸ Increased collaboration will promote the flow of information and may en-

courage the youth to feel more supported by both systems. Once educators have the opportunity to become acquainted with these youth and receive training related to best practice, they may be more open and willing to actively participate in the school reentry process and may have more empathy toward the youth.



Reentry and special education

Educational services within correctional facilities should aim to prepare the youth for reentry back into the community. In order to do so effectively, special education needs must be addressed. Prevalence rates of learning disabilities among incarcerated youth range from 25% (see Footnote 4) to 80%.⁹ Many of these youth may already be a part of the special education system and may have individualized educational programs in place prior to their arrest. These youth often require special services, such as vocational skills training and individualized curriculum, which may not be provided if their special education placement and services are not accurately reported. If that information is not conveyed upon admission, the youth may be inadequately served. Even when youth are entitled to specific special education services, these needs cannot be met if the correctional system is unaware of the child's placement and individualized educational program. It is imperative that records are transferred immediately upon incarceration. Increased collaboration between the justice and education systems could help facilitate the timeliness and effectiveness of this process.

Federal and State law requires that appropriate special education is provided for youth with learning disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Juvenile justice facilities are required to meet these standards. It has been shown, however, that many institutions are failing to comply with policies.¹⁰ Efforts need to be made to enhance the ability of juvenile facilities to fully comply with special educational needs of their students.

Role of Legislation

Laws relating to educational policies in correctional institutions vary state by state making any general discussion of such policies difficult.¹¹ Variance exists in the following areas:¹²

- Age required to attend school
- Compulsory school attendance laws may not require graduation.
- Provisions for compulsory school attendance in correctional education
- Length of school day in correctional facilities
- Length of school year in correctional facilities
- GED opportunities in correctional facilities
- Vocational opportunities in correctional facilities
- Teacher certifications

However, there is federal transition legislation regarding youth with disabilities for all educational institutions, including correctional facilities, that should remain consistent. These include:

- Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1978 - mandates free and appropriate education for all students; requires

IEP for disabled students

- Amendments to Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1983) - required transition services for handicapped youth from high school to adult living
- Individuals with Disabilities Act (1990) - required transition plan to be part of IEP at age 16; transition is defined as movement to vocational services or continuing education
- Educate America Act of 1993 as in Goals 2000 - reiterates the need for transition services among the disabled population
- Amendments to Individuals with Disabilities Act (1997) - transition needs must be included in IEP starting at age 14
- New Freedom Initiative (2001) - highlights current need for transition services
- Title 1, Part D (2002) - Funding provided to improve and expand transition services of delinquent youth; increase spending on transition services
- IDEA Improvement Act of 2004 - IEPs must include goals based on transition assessments and the youth's strengths; Must assist youth in reaching goals.

School reentry programs

In 2004, the Just Children Legal Aid Justice Center examined the current practices in school reentry in the United States as requested by the Commonwealth of Virginia Board of Education (see Footnote 6). This review summarized the programs, laws, and regulations of many states including West Virginia, Maine, Kentucky, New York, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Washington, Florida, California, and Virginia. It also included studies done by OJJDP and other research groups. As stated by OJJDP in 2000, there is no one agency that looks after youth after they are released (see Footnote 9). Not surprisingly, the procedures within each of these states varied significantly. The authors offered highlights from each state. A few of the model programs and practices for promoting successful school reentry are presented below.

Bridge coordinator. Kentucky has created the position of "bridge coordinator" within its school districts. This coordinator is responsible for interviewing the youth prior to reentry and collecting the necessary data for the

school. An "educational passport" is created in order to facilitate the transfer of educational information from the correctional facility to the mainstream school. In addition, the youth is provided with a mentor who will continually monitor the reintegration process.

CASES (www.cases.org). The Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES) in New York City was devised to build a partnership between educational and correctional services. CASES includes the following three programs:

- The Committee on Court Involved Students engages the multiple agencies that recently incarcerated youth have contact with. They work to identify barriers to reentry and remove them.
- School Connection Center is a high school guidance office staffed by employees from both the justice and educational systems. The goals of this center are to reenroll the youth in school, ensure that the youth's records are transferred, and monitor the youth's progress on reentry.
- Community Prep High School is a transitional school designed for youth who

are not ready to reenter mainstream education. This school offers services that may be needed by youth who were recently released from detention centers such as social skills training, rolling admissions, family involvement, collaboration with the justice system, and Saturday classes.

Preliminary analyses of the CASES program have yielded promising results.

In-school probation officers. In order to facilitate collaboration between schools and the probation departments, Pennsylvania places a school-based probation officer on the school campus for every adjudicated youth. (This is in addition to the court-based probation officer). The school-based officer serves to monitor daily activities of the youth.

The three examples provided here are but a small sample of the programs and policies that exist. The characteristics of best practices devised from multiple reentry programs are discussed in the following section.



Characteristics of Best School Reentry Practices

The following summarize the current best practices in school reentry.^{13, 14} (Also see Footnote 3, 6)

Linkages between all agencies involved

If more links between the educational, justice, and familial systems existed and were used effectively, greater numbers of youth would be successful in their school reentry efforts.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities

The need for interagency collaboration between the educational and justice systems has been stated multiple times. However, if collaboration is to increase, the roles and responsibilities of each system and of each relevant staff member must be clearly stated. These responsibilities include: sharing of information, monitoring of the youth, coordination of curriculum, and development of a treatment plan. Defining roles and responsibilities will enhance accountability.

Individualized wraparound services

The coordination of a wraparound program that fits the youth's and family's lifestyle would ensure that all of the youth's needs are being met. The wraparound service should contact the youth and the family frequently in order to approach transitional problems as they may arise.

Youth and family engagement

The youth and family must be active participants in the reenrollment process. This includes the development and execution of a treatment plan. The youth and family should be involved in creating a treatment plan and should receive copies of the plan and the contact information for those who will be assisting in the reenrollment process. Including the youth and family increases the odds that all stakeholders are informed and invested in the treatment goals. In addition, this process will encourage the parents/guardians to be collaborators rather than consumers.

Immediate transfer of records

Many of the current criticisms of reentry programs call attention to the inefficient transfer of records. Successful programs require records to be transferred from one

jurisdiction to the next, prior to the youth's arrival back into the school.

Pre-release training

Youth who receive social skills, life skills, or vocational training before release are better prepared to successfully reintegrate into the community.

Pre-release transition plan

To ensure a smooth transition, planning for reentry should take place before the youth is released to prevent a lag between release and reenrollment in school.

Speedy placement

The youth should be reenrolled immediately upon release from the detention center. If the youth does not quickly engage back into the school setting, the likelihood that he or she will end up engaging in illegal activities greatly increases. Therefore, an expedited reentry process helps to prevent recidivism.

Appropriate placement

It should be determined which environment is best suited to meet the youth's needs. An alternative or transitional school, rather than mainstream schools, may be most appropriate for some youth.

These interim environments gradually reduce the amount of supervision and support that these youth receive. Upon release, youth tend to require high levels of supervision due to their previous experience with the highly structured and controlled environment within the justice system. Some youth must be gradually conditioned to the lower levels of supervision typical of mainstream schools.

Availability of support services
Delinquent youth may also be facing issues requiring substance abuse treatment, individual therapy, group therapy, family

therapy, or parent training. Successful programs offer services to meet presenting psychosocial needs.



Many schools and detention facilities lack:

- Collaboration and communication with one another
- Trust for one another
- An understanding of the goals and mission of each system
- Transitional services
- Parental involvement

Communities of Practice

The Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action and the IDEA Partnership housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education are helping to build a National Community of Practice on School Mental Health that addresses issues related to school mental health. According to Etienne Wenger, the original founder of communities of practice, “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”.¹⁵ In other words, “a community of practice is a group of people who voluntarily come together because they care deeply about the same issue.”¹⁶ They agree to interact routinely to improve practice around that issue. After the formation of a

community of practice, smaller practice groups interested in specific topics form. The community of practice focuses on the large issues, while the practice groups work on specific issues.

One of the practice groups within this larger National Community of Practice on School Mental Health community specializes in school mental health, juvenile justice, and dropout prevention. This practice group believes collaboration between school, justice, and educational systems is necessary for improved delivery of services to youth. The group is dedicated to engaging all concerned community stakeholders in increased dialogue, collaboration, and effective programming in an effort to improve the academic, mental health, and post-school outcomes for youth and young

adults. Identified areas of interest include: when and how to implement prevention efforts, coordinating efforts for effective outcomes, successful transition, why invest in juvenile justice and dropout prevention, and a youth panel focusing on what works in juvenile justice and dropout prevention. Children are frequently falling through the cracks between the systems. Better communication and collaboration is needed to ensure a successful transition back into school and to significantly reduce recidivism. For more information or to become involved in this practice group, please contact the group’s co-facilitators:
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Exemplary School Reentry Web Resources

Research information regarding reentry: <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/resources/library/transition.asp>

CASES—designed to facilitate a partnership between educational and correctional systems: <http://www.cases.org/>

The National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice—offers resources relevant to these three areas: <http://www.edjj.org>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention—provides information regarding a variety of topics pertinent to juvenile justice, including reentry: <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/>

Justice4all—Provides a summary of the best practices for school reentry: <http://www.justice4all.org/foryou/>

Endnotes

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Recommended citation:

Matvya, J., Lever, N. A., & Boyle, R. (August 2006). *School Reentry of Juvenile Offenders*. Baltimore, MD: Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action, Department of Psychiatry, University of Maryland School of Medicine

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Support for this project (Project # U45 MC00174) is provided by the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal, and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services.

