

Information *Brief*

Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education
and Transition



National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth
With Disabilities to Achieve
Successful Futures

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The Voices of Youth: Perspectives and Recommendations from Young Adults Involved in Juvenile Corrections

by Pam Stenhjem

Introduction

In the 1980s, the juvenile justice system and many state legislatures began to focus heavily on chronic juvenile offenders who were committing serious and/or violent crimes. The public demanded more accountability and more severe punishment. Reassurance of public safety became a top priority. The U.S. juvenile correction system has continued to support and implement punitive, zero-tolerance-based solutions to juvenile crime. However, research shows that 80-90% of juvenile offenders fall into low-risk crime categories and might benefit greatly from treatment and rehabilitation within a community-based program (National Crime Prevention Council, 2000; Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 1999; Wright & Jaworsky, 1998).

According to Meisel, Henderson, Cohen, and Leone (1998), implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) within juvenile detention and confinement facilities today is comparable to the state of special education delivery and services 20 years ago. Both access and equity issues remain unresolved. Young adults with a background of poverty, parents who are not well educated, and homes

What I do not understand, is how people's lives . . . are not important enough to be given the help they need and deserve . . . people with anger and violence issues, drug and alcohol addictions, self-injurious behaviors, low self-esteem not dealt with, family problems, traumatic incidents, grief, and the list goes on. For me, and I know many others, this is too much. Yet somehow, in some aspect, and to somebody, it just isn't enough. Why does it need to take robbing a bank, stealing a car for your third time, or nearly killing someone in a fight or a drunk-driving incident to get the help you need?

—Student #1,
Woodland Hills Residential Facility

in which academic skills such as reading are neither valued nor modeled are heavily represented within correctional settings (Leone et al., 2003). Research shows that improvement in literacy skills leads to better outcomes; however, special education programs within correctional facilities often fail to meet legally required special education standards. According to Leone and Meisel (1997), lack of educational services and minimal service provision to delinquent youth are commonplace. Funding is limited and must be spread across priority areas such as education programs as well as security. Furthermore, inaccurate reports regarding the type and level of youth violence may contribute to a lack of public support for appropriate educational programs and services. For adjudicated young adults with disabilities, this often results in lack of access to educational programs that can prepare them for reentry into their communities as responsible, contributing citizens.

Despite the problems and issues facing the juvenile corrections system as a whole, certain programs and states are providing exceptional programming for adjudicated youth with disabilities. Those working with juvenile offenders still believe in rehabilitation for the majority of youth, although a tremendous amount of work must be done to reform our juvenile corrections system in order to allow this to happen. Nevertheless, there are model programs where services are provided in a proactive, supportive, and progressive manner aimed at constructive, fundamental change and rehabilitation. Woodland Hills Residential Facility in Duluth, Minnesota and the Minnesota Correctional Facility-Walter McGinnis High School in Red Wing, Minnesota are two such programs. This brief will share best practices from research about these programs as well as in-

sight, commentary, and recommendations from three young adults living at these residential facilities.

When I was 10 years old I broke into two houses, and I know it was extremely hurtful. Two years later when I went to court, the prosecutor began his case by saying, "This kid is a menace to society, and he is going to grow up to be a career criminal, and there is not much hope." Those words, heard at 12 years old, have always stuck in my mind. I think they set kids up for failure when they describe them like that.

—Student #2, Walter McGinnis High School

What Schools and Communities Can Do

Schools and communities have many opportunities to prevent youth with disabilities who are at risk for incarceration from being incarcerated and to enhance the protective factors that will build their resiliency. Protective factors can be developed on multiple levels (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999):

- **Individual:** foster self-esteem, optimism, hope for the future, and belief in abilities and skills;
- **Family:** support attachment to a healthy family member, hold high expectations for youth behavior and performance, communicate shared values, believe in the young adult and his or her skills and abilities;
- **School:** provide a safe learning environment, hold high expectations for youth behavior and academic performance, foster positive social/peer group interactions through school clubs or organizations;

Woodland Hills, in many cases, is the last stop before prison if [young offenders] choose not to take advantage and learn all that Woodland Hills offers. To us, they are not just staff who are there to enforce the rules and lay into us when we make mistakes. They live with us day after day for months, sometimes years. They are there to give us praise when we do well and accomplish things, and to correct us and help us learn from our mistakes when we make poor decisions. When we feel like there is no end and just want to give up, they are there to encourage us and push us along. They refuse to give up on us, even when everyone else does. They see the potential in each and every one of us, though it may be buried deep beneath all the other junk. They see through the attitude and the hurtful behaviors. They see through the front. They work with us continually to restore all those morals and values that we once or perhaps never lived and abided by.

—Student #1, Woodland Hills Residential Facility

- **Community:** provide mentors to reinforce positive behavior; help link school and family to support the young adult in positive behavior and decisions; provide employment, recreation, and volunteer opportunities.

When I first got here I thought that this place was the same as all the other ones that I've been to. But here, there was something that I never had before. I had teachers putting their necks out for me to help me out—teachers who took the time to help me understand things. The teachers here talk to you when you're mad and try to calm you down. They listen to you. I mean really listen to you and talk to you like a real human being.

—Student #3, Walter McGinnis High School

Research shows that utilizing proactive approaches to working with high-risk youth is more effective in preventing adjudication and reducing violent and aggressive behaviors than punitive methods. Schools can adopt a number of approaches to prevent youth with disabilities who are at risk of incarceration from entering the corrections system, including (Skiba & Peterson, 2000):

- conflict resolution training for staff, students, and families;
- social skills instruction;
- strategies to address disruptive behavior;
- family involvement;
- identifying students at-risk for school failure;
- crisis and security planning;
- school-wide discipline and individualized behavioral plans that are consistently used and reinforced; and
- a functional assessment.

I am currently in the program at MCF-Red Wing. I think it is an unbelievable program. It focuses on everything that has gone wrong in your life. It teaches you how to internalize things, make amends, repair damages, give back to the community, and be someone. It helps you identify your cycle that you go into when you fall into substance abuse and/or criminal conduct. It teaches you interventions so you can stop yourself before you fall into negativity. This program has been a lifesaver and life changer for me.

—Student #2, Walter McGinnis High School

Educators and community members must utilize proactive methods for teaching academic and social skills and to promote success rather than failure. Proactive means:

- including all youth in school and community programs;
- providing a wide array of educational and community opportunities;
- teaching, modeling, and reinforcing proactive, positive, and appropriate behavior;
- promoting academic success;
- promoting social success; and
- establishing partnerships with shared responsibilities for including and supporting young adults with disabilities.

As for facilities . . . they should focus less on behavior and punishing people for their mistakes and focus more on the treatment area, the underlying issues in a juvenile's life. Issues such as: chemical dependency, family issues, education issues, sexual issues, cognitive/behavioral, peer relationships, individual trauma, psychiatric issues, etc. All these areas play a part in why a kid chooses a criminal and/or chemical path. They affect kids on a day-to-day basis but most facilities focus strictly on behavior while you're at the facility and punish or reward you accordingly. Juveniles need to change beliefs and attitudes to truly change our lives.

—Student #2, Walter McGinnis High School

Conclusion

Young adults with disabilities serving time within a juvenile corrections facility must try to beat the odds when they leave this system and reenter the

community. Without appropriate supports, services, and education, their chances of succeeding outside the correctional system are almost nonexistent. The juvenile corrections system can offer several important things to young adults with disabilities in order to encourage their success (Center on Crime, Communities, & Culture, 1997).

Individualized education, services, and supports: Provide appropriate education, related services, and individualized supports as outlined within IDEA. This must begin when juveniles with disabilities are first charged with an offense. Juvenile justice professionals must begin working with education professionals, families, and service providers to utilize the vast amount of information contained in education records and other service-related documents. When juveniles first come before the court, judges need to understand and be aware of any disability-related issues, needs, or circumstances that may have relevance to the outcome or decision made by the court. Courts also must begin making arrangements for evaluation and placement of youth who show signs of having a disability and have not previously been identified with a disability. Moreover, professionals working within juvenile justice facilities need to be made aware of the impact a disability may have on behavior. They must also begin ensuring that young adults have access to the services, support, counseling, and medical resources they may need while incarcerated (Burrell & Warboys, 2000).

Post-release support services: Post-release support services need to be in place during the first several months after release from a corrections setting. Young adults need proactive guidance and assistance as they try to reintegrate into the community, gain employment, and begin living independently.

Evaluation of education programs: Education programs within adjudicated settings need to be evaluated and funding must be designated to ensure this happens, including long-term follow-along/fol-

low-up to find out what impact the correctional program actually had on each individual.

The young adults who shared opinions and feedback for this brief have since been released from their respective facilities. Much can be learned from their insights, comments, and concerns. Hopefully, this brief will help those in education, social services, corrections, and the community to rethink the way in which we address the needs of juveniles with disabilities who are incarcerated. We need to change the system from a reactive, zero-tolerance, punitive-based model to a proactive, prevention-based approach.

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Programs need to get people involved in schooling and other areas instead of simply treating them like cold-blooded criminals, because when they're treated like hopeless criminals they don't see any reason to go back to a responsible life . . . Show people a better life—some people only know the criminal life, but when they see the better option they will usually pick the responsible life.

—Student #2, Walter McGinnis High School

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Wright, A., & Jaworsky, J. (1998, October). *White paper report: The standardization of juvenile offender program evaluation*. KCI: The Anti-Meth Site.

Recommended Reading

Education

Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk
<http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar>

"Special Education in Correctional Facilities" Article
http://www.edjj.org/Publications/pub05_01_00.html

Prevention

Blueprints for Violence Prevention
<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints>

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
<http://www.fightcrime.org>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Publications
<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/publications>

Open Society Institute's Criminal Justice Initiative
<http://www.soros.org/crime/about.html>

Resources on Prevention of Delinquency from the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice (EDJJ)
<http://www.edjj.org/prevention>

Transition/Aftercare

Transition/Aftercare Information from EDJJ
<http://www.edjj.org/focus/TransitionAfterCare>

Projects Related to Transition at PACER Center
<http://www.pacer.org/tatra>

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