

# School Personnel Perceptions of Youth With Disabilities Returning to High School From the Juvenile Justice System

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## Abstract

Little is known about the perceptions of teachers of their students returning from the juvenile justice system, which can influence student relationships and student engagement, both of which are critical to reduce recidivism rates. This study utilized an online survey to examine the perceptions of a convenience sample of 283 school personnel (e.g., special educators, administrators) from across the country on available transition services, school climate, self-efficacy, barriers faced during reentry, and supportive strategies. Findings indicate transition services are implemented inconsistently; personnel believe they have the ability to positively influence youth, yet they have low expectations for youth after graduation. Findings suggest opportunities for professional development on holding high expectations for youth, services to prevent negative outcomes. Implications for future research call for examination of wraparound services and analysis of transition services utilized across different states and regions of the country.

## Keywords

teacher perceptions, juvenile justice, high school, transition

Students involved in the juvenile justice system have a higher likelihood of continuing criminal behavior and have decreased work and school outcomes after release (Zhang, Hsu, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Ju, 2011). Wilson, Lipsey, and Soydan (2003) report that at least 45% of youth offenders will be arrested for another crime in the weeks, or months following their release. Additional research suggests that the risk of dropout is quite high for the students who do return to the public education setting (Keith & McCray, 2002).

There is an even greater risk for individuals with disabilities to be involved in the juvenile justice system. Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, and Poirier (2005) found that prevalence rates of youth with disabilities in state-run juvenile and adult facilities ranged from 9.1% to 77.5%, and that the most common disabilities described were specific learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. In addition, Foley (2001) found that students in need of special education services reported receiving less time in special education while in a correctional setting, 7 to 7.5 hr, compared with 19 to 19.5 hr in a public school setting.

Vacca (2008) suggests that school and crime are interconnected, and common academic engagement variables such as poor achievement, grade retention, attendance, and graduation rates are related to juvenile criminal activity. In contrast, students who have higher rates of education achievement

during incarceration are more likely to enroll in school post release (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011). Youth who become engaged in work and/or school immediately after leaving the correctional system tend to remain positively engaged in the community compared with their peers who are disengaged and not enrolled or employed 6 months upon leaving the correctional facility (Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002).

Anthony et al. (2010) posit that the educational needs of youth returning from the juvenile justice system can be categorized in the following three ways: “1) circumstances related to reintegration into the educational system after disruption, 2) special education needs related to learning disabilities, and 3) the immediacy of developmentally appropriate re-engagement with academic and/or vocational programs” (p. 1273). If youth returning from the juvenile justice system do not demonstrate proficiency of

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the expectations of the classroom, school, and teacher, there could be negative consequences—such as being suspended and missing school—potentially leading to more serious outcomes including continued criminality. Unfortunately, after release from the correctional facility, few receive services from community-based social service agencies, and only a portion—about 35%—become engaged in either school or work (Bullis et al., 2002).

Current research is focused on finding practices that support post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities. These practices and transition services can be implemented in classrooms, and many may help youth returning from the juvenile justice system (Griller Clark, Mathur, & Holding 2011). Unruh, Gau, and Waintrup (2009) also found that reentry services needed to be customized and individualized to the unique risks and needs of each returning young offender with a disability. In addition, community engagement (i.e., an ongoing relationship that involves planning and collaboration to achieve a shared goal; Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014) is a critical piece to ensure youth offenders stay engaged, reducing a youth's chances of recidivism.

In the recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), specific provisions in Title I, Part D, mention broad goals that include improving youth transition from institutionalization into education or employment settings, preventing youth dropout, and providing reentry support to ensure continued education and involvement of families and communities (ESSA, 2015). School personnel are expected to be part of the process to help student reentry and prevent student dropout. Little is known about teacher perceptions and expectations of youth returning from the juvenile justice system, yet associations have been found between high-quality teacher–student relationships and engagement, and socio-emotional, behavioral, and academic achievement (Ang, Chong, Huan, Quek, & Yeo, 2008; Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010); therefore, depending on the teacher or school personnel perceptions may affect their relationships with those students and affect their instruction.

To gain further insight into the individuals facilitating the reentry process, this pilot study sought to examine school personnel's perceptions of students returning from the juvenile justice system. The researchers asked four basic research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are school personnel's perceptions of youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system to high school?

**Research Question 2:** What is the level of implementation of transition services for youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system?

**Research Question 3:** Is the school environment supportive for school personnel helping youth returning to high school from the juvenile justice system?

**Research Question 4:** What are the barriers to supporting youth returning from the juvenile justice system, and what strategies do you use to overcome those barriers?

## Method

A national sample of 283 high-school education and community professionals was surveyed. The intent of the survey was to explore the perceptions of individuals who work with students involved in the juvenile justice system in a high-school setting, practices that young offenders may receive in school, and how the school climate may affect these individuals' success in school.

## Participants

**Recruitment.** The survey was administered through two national listservs, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center and the IDEA Partnership's Community of Practice on Transition. These listservs are portals for State Education Agency staff to forward newsletters from these entities that included our survey recruitment to all districts within their state. The recruitment email specified survey respondents should be special education teachers, transition specialists, and school staff who work with transition-age youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system. All surveys were collected within a 6-week period. Respondents who completed the survey were given the opportunity to be entered into a random drawing for one of eight US\$25.00 gift cards or one iPad mini.

**Survey respondents.** A total of 283 out of 684 survey responses fit our criteria. Responses were excluded from analysis because (a) participants did not agree to the informed consent ( $n = 17$ ); (b) participants did not indicate they worked with transition-age youth from juvenile justice ( $n = 266$ ); (c) participants did not respond to any other questions besides the first question, "Do you work with transition-age youth from the Juvenile Justice System?" ( $n = 45$ ); and (d) participants did not complete 80% or more of the survey ( $n = 73$ ).

As described, due to the nature of sampling (i.e., convenience sampling through listservs), and the chance that emails and survey links could be sent outside the designated listservs, a response rate could not be calculated. However, Dillman (2000) articulates that a sample size of 283 (with a sampling error  $\pm 5\%$  at the 95% confidence interval) is sufficient power for a homogeneous group that has likely completed a survey.

Survey participants consisted of transition specialist (25.8%), special education teachers (23.3%), school staff (22.3%), school administrators (15.2%), community professionals (12.4%), and general education teachers (1.1%).

Approximately 85% identified as female and 15% male. Approximately 71% identified as White, 7% as African American, 4% as Asian, 4% as Hispanic/Latino, 3% Native Hawaiian, 1% American Indian, 4% multiracial, and 6% preferred not to specify. The majority of the survey participants worked in a traditional public school (71%). Thirty percent of the respondents reported spending most of their time in a special education classroom, while 12% worked in a resource room or learning center, 12% worked in a community-based training program, and the remaining worked in alternative school settings, general education classrooms, or treatment-based school setting. Most participants (70%) worked in an urban setting (city population of 2,500 or more). Almost half (47%) responded that on average, they work with one to five youth returning from the juvenile justice system annually, 24% reported working with six to 10 youth, 11% reported working with 11 to 15 youth, and 18% reported working with 16 or more youth.

## Measures

The authors used a variety of methods to identify current measures that aligned with the four research questions. Authors used multiple databases including PsychNet, PsychTests, and ERIC to find different measures. Keywords included teacher efficacy, juvenile justice, perceptions of students, achievement, and school climate. In addition, the authors reached out to leading researchers in the area of special education and juvenile justice to inquire about any additional measures. The following are measures that were adapted for this study.

**Perception of Students scale.** The Perception of Students scale is a survey created and conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; see Wolfe, Ray, and Harris [2004]) for the original full scale). The measures included in the current adapted survey originally had a reliability value of .90 for Perceptions of Students subscale. The Perception of Students scale is a part of a group of surveys in the School and Staffing Surveys. The Perceptions of Students scale focuses on students' behaviors and challenging home situations. The scale asks, "To what extent is each of the following matters a problem in this school?" Example behaviors examined in this scale are "Student Absenteeism" and "Student Drug Abuse."

**Perceptions of adult success.** The Perceptions of Adult Success scale is used to assess adolescents' prediction of his or her future adult success (retrieved from <http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu/codebook/perceptions-of-chances-for-success-cf.html>). The survey was adapted for school personnel to answer according to the perceptions of future achievement for their students returning from the juvenile justice system. The answer options were reduced from a

5-point Likert-type scale to a 4-point Likert-type scale to provide consistency of scaling across all of the adapted measures. Items on this scale include, "Students chances of having a good job or career, having a good relationship(s) with his/her family."

**Teacher Efficacy Scale.** The Teacher Efficacy Scale was modified by Deemer and Minke (1999). The modified scale by Deemer and Minke (1999) had an internal consistency of ( $\alpha = .81$ ). The Teacher Efficacy Scale was adapted to give context by adding the words "from the juvenile justice system." The adapted scale includes questions such as, "Even a good teacher with good teaching abilities may not reach students from the juvenile justice system" and "Most students from the juvenile justice system in my school are capable of mastering grade level academic objectives."

**Predictors of post-school success.** At the time of survey administration, the National Secondary and Transition Technical Assistance Center had completed a comprehensive systematic review of in-school academic and nonacademic interventions that, utilizing correlational research, showed positive relations with post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009). The authors identified 16 predictors of post-school success. Thirteen of the 16 predictors were incorporated into our survey to identify what transition services were available and the level of implementation for each service.

**Creating a great place to learn.** The creating a great place to learn survey is used to determine a school's learning climate (retrieved from <http://www.search-institute.org/survey-services/surveys/creating-great-place-learn>). For this study, we adapted the "Staff" portion of the survey. The survey focuses on relationships, organizational attributes, and personal development. The survey was adapted to frame questions toward the juvenile justice population. Adapted items of this survey include, "Staff work together to improve instruction in their classroom for students from the juvenile justice system" and "Administration treats collaborative work for students from the juvenile justice system as a priority."

## Procedure

**Measure adaptation and instrument design.** An extensive literature search found no commonly used or adequate assessment to identify teacher perceptions of youth returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. Therefore, an iterative development process was used to create a new measure to answer our research questions by adapting existing measures and scales aligned with the research questions. To create a pilot measure on the perceptions of teachers of transition-age youth returning from the juvenile justice system, measures that pertained to teacher perceptions, teacher

behavior, teacher beliefs, teacher attitudes toward their school environment, student behavior, student skills, and transition services were identified and reviewed. Experts (e.g., individuals from multiple universities, with 20 plus years of experience, who have participated in research focused on examining and implementing interventions to support youth involved with and transitioning from the juvenile justice system) in the field were consulted during the adaptation of the original measures to the juvenile justice measures used for this survey. The majority of adaptations made included providing context to the population of study (i.e., youth returning from the juvenile justice system) by inserting contextual words such as “students from the juvenile justice system.” After seven revisions, a final pilot measure was created and distributed to an expert panel of researchers in the transition and juvenile justice fields for review. The experts reported the survey to have strong potential for identifying potential barriers in successful transition into school. The final survey consisted of 124 items.

The survey contained 10 sections: (a) demographics, (b) teacher perceptions of youth from the juvenile justice system skills, (c) teacher perceptions of youth from the juvenile justice system opportunity to achieve post-school success, (d) teacher perceptions on external influences from the youth’s life on post-school outcomes, (e) teacher perceptions of youth’s behavior and its impact on youth outcomes, (f) teacher perceptions of the youth’s academics and post-school outcomes, (g) teacher efficacy, (h) transition services available to students with disabilities, (i) teacher perceptions of the school environment for youth from the juvenile justice system toward youth returning from the juvenile justice system and their impact on student outcomes, and (j) teacher perceptions of strategies that help youth returning from the juvenile justice system and barriers that persist and prevent intervention for youth returning from the juvenile justice system. Contact first author for complete survey.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 for Mac. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted for the eight survey sub-measures to ensure some construct validity of the measures used in the survey. Principal axis factoring method with promax rotation, scree plot visual analysis, Bartlett’s test of sphericity, and Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used to determine whether an EFA was appropriate and factor loadings for each sub-measure. The use of these particular statistical analyses will be described in more detail in the “Results” section of this article. Due to the exploratory nature of the survey, descriptive data will be presented by sub-measure. In addition, the open-ended responses for each question were coded following thematic analysis described by Miles,

Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Thematic coding consisted of two independent researchers finding emergent codes from respondent answers. The two researchers discussed any discrepancies in codes and came to consensus. Once respondent answers were individually coded, they were organized by theme. Due to the overall number of codes for each question, codes were then combined to create major themes, which are presented.

An EFA was conducted for each sub-measure. Although this particular survey was given in whole, each sub-measure assesses different aspects of the experience of school personnel who interact with youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system, providing a rationale for different EFAs. For each sub-measure, KMO was used to determine the appropriate use of EFA, scree plots and eigenvalues were considered to interpret the number of factors, communalities were analyzed, and principal axis factoring with a promax rotation was used.

Cronbach’s alpha, a measure of internal consistency, was calculated for all eight sub-measures and resulted in a range of .81 to .93. Chi-square analysis resulted in significant differences on multiple demographics variables when controlling for work capacity (i.e., special education staff and non-special education staff). These demographic variables include participant years teaching in highest level of education,  $\chi^2(5) = 23.61, p < .01$ ; race/ethnicity,  $\chi^2(7) = 17.01, p < .05$ ; race/ethnicity of the youth the personnel work with,  $\chi^2(7) = 39.34, p < .01$ ; and number of juvenile-justice-involved youth the personnel work with,  $\chi^2(3) = 12.25, p < .01$ .

## Results

### School Personnel’s Perceptions of Youth

*Juvenile offender skills.* A PAF analysis was conducted on the nine items with a promax rotation. The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .87$ , and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all nine items were equal to or greater than .35 except for one, which was greater than .20. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. One factor had an eigenvalue over Kaiser’s criterion of one and explained 43.32% of the variance. The scree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining one factor. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .87.

The juvenile offender skills sub-measure required school personnel to think of specific youth from the juvenile justice system with whom they work. Respondents answered each item on a 4-point Likert-type scale as to whether or not they agreed that their students possessed certain transition skills. School personnel agreed that their students were able to complete tasks (56.9% strongly agree or agree) and had

independent living skills (52.0% strongly agree or agree). The same respondents did not agree that their students had the ability to self-manage (21.9% strongly agree or agree) or show empathy (36.5% strongly agree or agree), or had social skills (36.3% strongly agree or agree), and were unable to strongly demonstrate self-advocacy skills (33.7% strongly agree or agree).

**Juvenile offenders' future achievement.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the eight items with a promax rotation. The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .92$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all eight items were equal to or greater than .35. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. One factor had an eigenvalue over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and 61.48% of the variance. The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining one factor. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

The juvenile offender future achievement status sub-measure asked respondents to rate the opportunity to achieve future goals for their students involved in the juvenile justice system. Respondents answered using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *highly likely to not likely* they will achieve a certain outcome. For example, respondents indicated that the youth they work with were only 3.6% highly or very likely to graduate from college. Similarly, 6.1% indicated their youth were highly or very likely to stay out of trouble with the law. In addition, only 6.4% of the respondents indicated that their youth were highly or very likely to achieve financial stability. School personnel overwhelmingly answered that their students were only somewhat or not likely to achieve any of the items posed.

**Juvenile offenders' external influences.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the nine items with a promax rotation. The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .81$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all nine items were equal to or greater than .35 except for two, which were greater than .20. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Three factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and, in combination, explained 48.57% of the variance. The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining one factor. One item reported having a factor cross loading of greater than .40. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .81.

The juvenile offender life outcomes sub-measure required participants to answer how much environmental factors affect the outcomes of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Participants answered the items using a

4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *has no impact to has major impact*. The majority of the participants perceived that all of the environmental factors affected students on a moderate to major level. For example, respondents indicated that "consistent housing" had moderate to major impact on a youth 97.9% of the time. Similar results were found for items such as community poverty (has moderate to major impact 90.1% of the time), home environment (has moderate to major impact 98.3% of the time), and lack of strong adult mentor (has moderate to major impact 98.2% of the time).

**Juvenile offender behavior.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the 16 items with a promax rotation. While the determinant value of the correlation matrix was equal to .000, the KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .88$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all 16 items were equal to or greater than .35 except for two, which were greater than .29. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Three factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 54.75% of the variance. The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining one factor. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

The juvenile offender behavior sub-measure asked respondents to consider their students involved in the juvenile justice system and what kind of impact certain behaviors have on their outcomes. Respondents answered each question using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *has no impact to has major impact*. The majority of the respondents perceived that the given behaviors had moderate to major impact on student outcomes. Items that respondents indicated had moderate to major impact 90% of the time or more included (a) tardiness, (b) attendance, (c) dropping out, (d) cutting class, (e) physical conflicts, (f) verbal aggression, (g) robbery or theft, (h) alcohol use, (i) drug use, (j) disrespect for teachers, (k) confrontation with administrators, and (l) motivation.

**Juvenile offender academic performance.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the seven items with a promax rotation. The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .86$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all seven items were equal to or greater than .35 except for two, which were greater than .20. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. One factor had an eigenvalue over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and explained 47.68% of the variance. The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining one factor. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .86.

Survey respondents answered similarly to the juvenile offender academic performance sub-measure as the juvenile offender behavior and juvenile offender life sub-measures. The juvenile offender academics sub-measure asked how individual academic characteristics affected outcomes for young offenders. Participants answered each item on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *has no impact* to *has major impact*. Most participants reported that the given academic characteristics had moderate to major impact 90% of the time or more included the following: (a) Students come to school with the mind-set to learn, (b) performance below grade level, (c) low reading levels, (d) assignment completion, (e) employment readiness skills, (f) lack of learning strategies, and (g) credit deficiency.

**Juvenile offender teacher efficacy.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the 31 items with a promax rotation. While the determinant value of the correlation matrix was less than .00001, the KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .85$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all 31 items were equal to or greater than .35 except for five, which were greater than .16. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Seven factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and, in combination, explained 47.61% of the variance. The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining five factors. Three items reported having a factor cross loading of larger than .40. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

After initial analysis of this sub-measure was completed, item reduction procedures were conducted due to multiple items with high cross loading values, items with low factor values (e.g., values  $< .20$ ), and items with low communalities (e.g., values  $< .20$ ). Items 4, 8, 10, and 14 were excluded from the second analysis. Using the same method, the determinant value met criteria of greater than .00001; KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .87$ , and Bartlett's tests of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . Secondary analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Twenty one of 27 items obtained communality values of greater than .35. Three factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and, in combination, explained 38.68% of the variance (approximately 10% less variance explained than prior to data reduction). The skree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining three factors. Two items reported having a factor cross loading of greater than .40. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported Cronbach's alpha of .87.

The juvenile offender teacher efficacy sub-measure asked survey participants to consider their own efficacy and individual actions, as well as school factors, and the impact

made on young offenders. Participants answered each question using a 4-point Likert-type scale with answers ranging from *strongly agrees* to *strongly disagree*. School personnel believed that they were well prepared to work with youth returning from the juvenile justice system, were accepting to students from the juvenile justice system (95.3% strongly agree or agree), could make a difference in the lives of young offenders (95% strongly agree or agree), and can affect academic achievement for youth involved in juvenile justice system (93.2% strongly agree or agree). However, participants were less agreeable to believing that young offenders were likely to meet grade-level academic standards (19.8% strongly agree or agree) and/or expect that young offenders will perform at the national academic achievement levels (35.3% strongly agree or agree), and that their classes had influence on the behavior of juvenile justice youth (25.5% strongly agree or agree).

### **School Personnel's Perceptions of Transition Service Implementation**

**Predictors of post-school success.** A PAF analysis was conducted on the 13 items with a promax rotation. The KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis,  $KMO = .90$ , and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant;  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all 13 items were greater than .35. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Two factors had eigenvalues values over Kaiser's criterion of 1, and, in combination, explained 52.67% of the variance. Contrary, the skree plot showed inflexions that would justify retaining one factor. Only one item reported having a factor cross loading of larger than .40. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

The transition service sub-measure is a 13-item sub-measure identifying the implementation of identified in-school predictors of positive post-school outcomes. Respondents answered using a 4-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *fully implemented* to *not implemented*. Implementation of transition services for youth returning from the juvenile justice system was inconsistent and implementation of services ranged. Social skills, interagency collaboration, and transition planning were implemented the most consistently from the available transition services to select from. Social skills were fully or somewhat implemented 64.1% of the time, interagency collaboration was fully or somewhat implemented 60.7% of the time, and transition planning was fully or somewhat implemented 63% of the time. Contrary, paid employment/work experience was fully or somewhat implemented only 28.8% of the time, work study was only fully or somewhat implemented 32% of the time, and occupational coursework was only fully or somewhat implemented 41.2% of the time.

### **School Personnel's Perceptions of the School Environment**

*Creating a great place to learn.* A PAF analysis was conducted on the 16 items with a promax rotation. While the determinant value of the correlation matrix was equal to .000, the KMO measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .88, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . All communalities after extraction for all 16 items were equal to or greater than .35. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Four factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and, in combination, explained 55.24% of the variance. The scree plot showed an inflexion point that would justify retaining three factors. Five items reported having a factor cross loading of greater than .40. Reliability analysis was conducted and reported a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

School environment assessed how school personnel perceived their current place of employment and how well it supports them and supports students returning from the juvenile justice system. School personnel agreed that their place of work cares about students returning from the juvenile justice system (83.4% strongly agree or agree), that staff work well together to improve instruction for juvenile offenders (70% strongly agree or agree), and that Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for youth involved in the juvenile justice system are reviewed and modified appropriately once they transition back into high school (81.2% strongly agree or agree). Staff were less agreeable on items such as receiving transition plans from the facility that are usable in the public or private school setting (28.9% strongly agree or agree), having enough support staff to give students from the juvenile justice system the attention they need (33.9% strongly agree or agree), and believing that their employment curriculum (36.3% strongly agree and agree) and community programming (33.4% strongly agree or agree) were appropriate for the needs of youth returning from the juvenile justice system. School personnel were split (45.2% strongly agree or agree, 64.8% disagree or strongly disagree) on whether there was enough administrative support to give students from the juvenile justice system the attention they need.

### **Barriers and Strategies to Support Youth**

In open-ended questions, respondents were asked what were common barriers they faced when working with youth returning to high school from the juvenile justice system as well as what were common strategies they used in schools to overcome those barriers. The following section presents major themes across participant responses to these two questions. Due to the breadth of responses, only the most salient sub-themes will be reported for each major theme.

*School factors as a barrier.* The major theme of "school factors" as a barrier includes eight sub-themes. These eight sub-themes are (a) lack of consistent services; (b) academics (e.g., reading proficiency below grade level, need for academic credits to graduate); (c) attendance; (d) lack of transition services; (e) teacher preparation, knowledge, and attitudes; (f) lack of resources; (g) stigma and stereotypes; and (h) lack of support from the district and school. Consistently, participants noted a lack of resources and services in their school to address the specific needs of their students returning from the juvenile justice system. One participant reported, there is a "lack of coordinated services, due to varying quality of probation and parole personnel" and "it sometimes takes a long time to get services in place due to procedural and political reasons." In addition, many participants reported that "Academics" were a barrier for youth returning to high school from the juvenile justice system. One individual noted,

Most [students] return to school with academic levels well below grade level (9th grader with 3rd grade reading or math). They are so behind academically that they cannot compete with their peers, and do not want the "shame" of having to stay past age 18 in order to receive a diploma.

*Student factors as a barrier.* The major theme of "student factors" as a barrier includes five sub-themes. These five sub-themes are (a) mental health, drug issues, and behavior issues; (b) environment; (c) student motivation; (d) student's attitudes and beliefs; and (e) poverty. Mental health and drug use issues were a concern for multiple participants. One participant reported, "students with significant drug and alcohol issues did not have enough support and were returning to heavy drug use." Another individual noted, "we have nothing in our state that offers these kids a follow-up program where they can go back and check-in with their residential staff and re-assess their successes." Another sub-theme was the student's environment. Many participants were concerned that "students were returning to the same peer set that they left from." A participant continues, "even those kids who want to do better regularly find themselves getting sucked back into the old ways because they are so immersed in it."

*Family and home environment as a barrier.* Family and home environment was coded as its own major theme. Participants identified family and home environment as a barrier for many reasons. One prominent reason was a lack of family involvement in the student's school life. One participant explained, there is a

lack of positive, consistent family involvement; parents of these adolescents are difficult to get a hold of, have issues of their own, and are unable/unwilling to show up in a supportive role for their child. Parents are often overwhelmed, either

financially or with substance abuse or domestic issues for themselves. Grandparents are more reliable . . . but it seems that struggling teens are the most disrespectful to the ones that care about them the most—likely as a defense mechanism.

Lack of family support or involvement was such a salient barrier that 50 out of a total of 78 responses coded for family and home environment specifically stated, “lack of family involvement” or “lack of family support.”

*Stakeholder communication as a barrier.* The last major theme coded was “stakeholder communication” with three sub-themes. The three sub-themes include (a) communication between stakeholders, (b) support from juvenile probation, and (c) inconsistent information sharing. One barrier was the “lack of coordination and communication with outside agencies and their staff during treatment/incarceration and transition.” Another participant reported, “We have difficulty receiving transcripts and records about formerly incarcerated adolescents. As a result, students who come back often have gaps in grades resulting in failures in classes that they ‘passed’ in the detention center.” Participants indicated that inconsistent information sharing surrounded academic records (e.g., courses completed) and behavior plans.

*Transition services as a strategy.* A transition service was coded as a major theme and includes two sub-themes. The two sub-themes are (a) reentry services and (b) drug, behavior, and mental health support. There were a myriad of transition services that participants used as a strategy to help students returning from the juvenile justice system. One comprehensive service that a participant reported included,

a “step down” into an intensive learning center which provides a structured and modified schedule to accommodate a student’s transition back into the public school setting. The program is leveled with a five tier structure that allows the students to earn their way out by demonstrating behavioral and social appropriateness.

Another individual commented,

My curriculum is highly focused on social skills, becoming a productive citizen, community service, gratitude, acts of kindness and treating each other with respect, a community of caring. These type of skills MUST be taught before the academic skills can be successful.

Furthermore, another individual noted, “set realistic goals for transition planning, within a strength based collaborative approach, especially if multiple agencies are involved.”

*School factors as a strategy.* Participants identified that school factors could be used as a strategy to support

students returning from the juvenile justice system. This major theme has two sub-themes: (a) academics and (b) appropriate education setting. The academic sub-theme consisted of responses such as “scaffolding instruction,” “Extra support time before and after school,” and “Allow for credit recovery at an accelerated rate using online classes.” One participant responded,

Service learning can also be a good way to create opportunities for career exploration. Planning services projects that are driven by the interests of the youth allows them to express their interests and areas of passion without the pressure of “picking a career.”

Appropriate education setting was coded as participants suggested having students in the least restrictive environment. One individual responded,

We conduct an IEP meeting as soon as students are placed at our facility and make necessary changes to the IEP to ensure success for the student. We have meetings with staff to discuss how to implement the IEP and what resources are needed for the student to be successful.

*Student-focused planning as a strategy.* The major theme of student-focused planning consists of two sub-themes: (a) person centered and (b) mentors. Participants reported that it was extremely important to be focused on identifying students’ strengths and abilities. One strategy is to ensure wraparound services are in place for the student to reduce the risk of student recidivism. Another participant’s strategy included “helping [the student] understand they still can have a positive future, and to encourage them to move forward in life rather than looking back on what moved them to enter the juvenile justice system.” An additional strategy was to connect students with an adult mentor to build positive, caring, and loving relationships. One individual commented, “we assign a teacher mentor and a student buddy to help build relationship and engagement. We welcome kids back with open arms and lots of opportunities for success.”

*Participation of stakeholders as a strategy.* Participation of stakeholders was the final major theme and consists of two sub-themes: (a) identification of key stakeholders and (b) interagency collaboration. Participants reported the importance of “meeting early with a parent for an IEP meeting to determine the services the school can provide and what supports are necessary in the home.” Another participant reported they have “weekly staff review meetings to track and document IEP or other services for youth.” Participants commented meetings consisted of “social worker, classroom teachers, instructional assistance, school nurses and administrators . . . discussing what is known about the student, what the student has been doing, and what needs to be done differently.” One school psychologist stated, “as the



psychologist I contact the parole officer and the family and keep them involved in positive aspects of what the student is doing socially, academically, and vocationally.” Furthermore, participants stressed interagency collaboration noting the need to collaborate with the juvenile justice system and vocational rehabilitation. More strategies included connecting with the “US Department of Labor Disability Employment Initiative Grant” and “integrated DOE and DOH services on campus.”

## Discussion

Schools are faced with high dropout rates among youth returning from the juvenile justice system as well as uncertainty on how best to help their students, specifically, with the new ESSA requirements related to supporting youth reentry back to school systems. This uncertainty and lack of understanding regarding teacher’s perceptions and the school environment in which students are returning were the reason for this pilot survey. This survey was administered to answer four research questions. Results from the first research question, “What are school personnel’s perceptions of youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system to high school?” suggest that school personnel have a variety of perceptions of youth returning from a juvenile justice setting. Respondents of the survey reported that their students were lacking in self-management skills, social skills, empathic skills, and self-advocacy skills. In addition, school personnel perceived their students to not have successful futures, reporting that they did not agree their students would graduate from college, achieve financial independence, or stay out of trouble with the law. Furthermore, respondents reported that students had behavioral concerns that affected their education, including tardiness, dropping out, motivation, and drug and alcohol problems. Respondents also reported their students had issues regarding academic preparedness, coming to class with a mind-set to learn, and being behind grade-level ability and/or credit deficiency.

Results from the second research question, “What is the level of implementation of transition services for youth with disabilities returning from the juvenile justice system?” suggest that transition services for youth returning from the juvenile justice system are being implemented but to varying degrees, depending on the specified transition service. As indicated by Bullis et al. (2002), it is important to ensure students are engaged in the school and community after release. Setting up transition services (e.g., vocational education, work study) may help youth stay engaged and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

Results from the third research question, “Is the school environment supportive for school personnel helping youth returning to high school from the juvenile justice system?” suggest that school personnel are confident to support the

learning needs of youth returning from the juvenile justice system, after acknowledgment of the challenges that their students might face inside and outside the classroom. Respondents also indicated that they perceive their school environment to be welcoming to students returning from the juvenile justice system and that their school was working well procedurally to ensure students receive necessary services. Respondents were concerned that they they did not have enough personnel to provide the services and attention necessary for their youth. Additionally, they were concerned if the curriculum used in their school was sufficient to support the diverse academic needs of youth returning from the juvenile justice system.

Last, respondents answered the fourth research question, “What are the barriers to supporting youth returning from the juvenile justice system and what strategies do you use to overcome those barriers?” Respondents indicated a variety of barriers including lack of transition services, teacher preparation, and attitudes; lack of resources; and lack of support from the district and school. In addition, student motivation, involvement with drugs and alcohol, and lack of consistent family involvement were also barriers identified by respondents. Strategies to support youth returning from the juvenile justice system included ensuring proper transition services were available from the facility to the school including “step-down” type reintegration, and drug and behavioral health support. Respondents indicated that utilizing student-focused planning and involving multiple stakeholders during the reentry were also successful strategies.

## Limitations

There are limitations that should be identified prior to interpretation of the results in this section. First, no response rate can be calculated due to the method of survey distribution. Furthermore, due to the sample size, findings from this pilot study should be represented within a confined context, and generalizations from the data should be cautioned. Second, because this was a convenience sample, those who chose to participate in the survey could potentially be different from those who did not participate and/or those who are not actively connected to a listserv on topics such as transition and students in the juvenile justice system.

## Implications for Practice

Results from the survey can be helpful in evaluating school supports and practices to ensure positive outcomes are achieved for all students. First, schools can begin to evaluate the current procedures that are in place when students return from the juvenile justice system. Participant responses indicate they have found success with a designated team in place to make quick decisions and the appropriate academic

placement for students. In addition, schools should evaluate current transition services being implemented to ensure students with disabilities are engaged and on track to reach their individual life goals after high school. Consistent use of evidence-based practices associated with positive outcomes for at-risk students potentially could act as a protective factor of reducing future recidivism.

At the classroom level, teachers can make curricular decisions that address not only content but also nonacademic skills (i.e., social skills, self-management). These findings indicate that students may lack basic nonacademic skills to be successful in school and adult life post school. Yet, providing real-life opportunities to demonstrate skills is one way to keep students engaged in school (Brophy, 2010).

At the school personnel level, respondents indicated a very low expectation of future success for students involved in the juvenile justice system. It is unknown whether these low expectations are attributed to individual bias, societal bias, or what participants may consider the "reality" of the situation. Yet, what is known is students who feel related to their teachers and peers tend to be perceived as more engaged in school than those who do not (Danielsen et al., 2010). Although these results may not be encouraging, respondents believe they can have a positive impact on a student's academic progress and that the impact will last.

### *Implications for Research*

The contrast between respondents' expectations of future achievement for their students and ability to make a long-lasting positive impact is one of the pivotal findings of this study. Future research should examine the discrepancy between low respondent expectations and the belief in their abilities to make positive change in the youth's lives. Research should further examine school personnel's self-biases of youth offenders.

In addition, findings from Bullis et al. (2002) suggest youth offenders who receive mental health services, among other transition services, are twice as likely to stay engaged in the community and out of juvenile detention. It would also be beneficial to gain a greater understanding of best practices to ensure youth offenders receive services as soon as possible upon reentry into school or the community. This may include additional research regarding teacher awareness utilization of specific services in their district or wrap-around service models for schools, communities, and families, similar to the Intensive Aftercare Program developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Transitional Living Program (Abrams, Shannon, & Sangalang, 2008), Project STAY OUT ([Strategies Teaching Adolescent Young Offenders to Use Transition Skills] formerly known as SUPPORT [Service Utilization to Promote Positive Outcomes in Rehabilitation and Transition for Adjudicated Youth on Probation]; Unruh,

Waintrup, & Canter, 2010). Furthermore, research on transition services should focus on the wide variety of services available and long-term outcomes. Griller Clark, and colleagues (2011) found that students who received enhanced transition services compared with basic transition services were less likely to return to the juvenile justice system between time of release and 30 days out, yet comparisons between groups were not statistically significant past 30 days out. Moreover, another research opportunity is to examine services available across states or regions and youth engagement after reentry.

Last, Bullis and Yovanoff (2005) found differences between youth offenders with and without disabilities. Findings included youth with disabilities disproportionately failing classes and having more crimes and persons over property-related crimes. These findings suggest the need for further practices to increase academic skills for youth offenders with disabilities returning to high school as well as increasing social skills and/or decision-making skills. Further evaluation of youth offenders with and without disabilities would be beneficial as well so school personnel can begin to target teaching specific skills and providing individualized services for an offender's optimal chance to stay engaged and out of correctional system.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers and school personnel have the ability to make a positive impact on all students. Students returning from the juvenile justice system face additional learning and social challenges suggesting additional attention and resources should be allocated to address the needs of this specific student population. This pilot study illuminates some interesting trends in the United States and should be used as a start to self-evaluation for schools and teachers working with youth returning from the juvenile justice system.

### **Authors' Note**

Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education, and such endorsements should not be inferred.

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