

1-1-2014

## Education Connection: A Prison to School Pipeline: Preparing Incarcerated Youth for Reentry into Society and Public School

Jade Gary

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj>

 Part of the [Education Law Commons](#), and the [Juvenile Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jade Gary, *Education Connection: A Prison to School Pipeline: Preparing Incarcerated Youth for Reentry into Society and Public School*, 34 CHILD. LEGAL RTS. J. 241 (2014).

Available at: <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol34/iss2/7>

This Featured Practice Perspectives is brought to you for free and open access by LAW eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Children's Legal Rights Journal by an authorized administrator of LAW eCommons. For more information, please contact [law-library@luc.edu](mailto:law-library@luc.edu).

# **Education Connection: A Prison to School Pipeline: Preparing Incarcerated Youth for Reentry into Society and Public School**

*By Jade Gary*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education has proven to be a tool that affords great opportunities for all who pursue it. This maxim also applies to incarcerated youth in the juvenile justice system. Providing youth with an appropriate education while in detention centers has been linked to reducing recidivism and effectively rehabilitating juvenile offenders. Nevertheless, for decades, the system continues to serve as a barrier rather than a path to rehabilitation. Data indicates that higher levels of educational achievement correlate with lower rates of recidivism. Most efforts to rehabilitate incarcerated youth, however, have failed and continue to fail in helping ex-offenders transition into adulthood, because pathways to educational attainment are often undermined.

## II. COOK COUNTY JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The Illinois Juvenile Court Act of 1899 fostered the idea of rehabilitating, rather than penalizing, juvenile offenders. However, it was not until 2005 that the Illinois legislature created a juvenile division separate from the Illinois Department of Corrections. Today, this division, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ), operates eight juvenile correctional facilities, referred to as Illinois Youth Centers. These facilities, which include the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, Cook County Jail, and the Illinois Department of Corrections juvenile facilities, all house publicly operated schools on their grounds, including Healy North Alternative High School, Healy South Alternative High School, and Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) corrections office personnel review the criminal and academic backgrounds of their juveniles to determine where youth offenders will serve sentences. These programs are targeted to students who have some involvement in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) in an effort to prevent court-involved youth from falling behind academically.

Unfortunately, youth who enter the juvenile justice system typically experience academic setbacks in school, and a disproportionate number of incarcerated youth are identified as having learning disabilities requiring special education services. Today there is often a disconnect between correctional education programs and local school districts that creates complications in helping ex-offenders transition back into public schools.

In theory, given its pioneering efforts as the earliest established juvenile justice system in the United States, Cook County should be the model for the rehabilitation of young offenders, preparing them to reenter the public school system upon release. However, recent data shows otherwise. A 2013 American Sociological Association study revealed that a mere twenty-six percent of juveniles detained in Cook County graduate high school after reentering CPS. Furthermore, youth who have experienced the juvenile

justice system have only a sixteen percent chance of enrolling in a four-year college. The study concluded that essentially, youth arrests lead to high dropout rates because arrested students are involuntarily pushed out of school through enforcement mechanisms.

### III. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AGENCIES

One example of the legal system driving ex-offenders out of the education trajectory is misinterpretation of legislation. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) mandates the confidentiality of juvenile educational records in an effort to protect children from unauthorized disclosure of a child's school record. Unfortunately, this legislation is often misinterpreted in the juvenile justice system, causing agencies to delay or refuse the transfer of school records. As a result, students remain out of school for extended periods of time or may even be placed in inappropriate programs that fail to meet their academic needs.

Too often, a lack of coordination with educational transcripts and records prevents youth from receiving credit for courses they completed in juvenile facilities. Because educational records are sometimes unavailable or incomplete, ex-offenders are barred from attending classes upon reentering the public school system.

A 2008 juvenile justice study, conducted in the Cook County juvenile courts, revealed that youth were regularly denied reentry into CPS district schools once advocates revealed that they would not receive academic credits for any detention schoolwork unless they were enrolled at the detention for a full semester. Furthermore, parents were never informed of the necessary paperwork for reenrollment.

In other cases, students had to repeat certain coursework because public schools were merely suspicious of the quality of detention education programs. Such suspicion likely arose from the fact that juvenile justice agencies were not designed to provide or monitor educational services, and therefore failed to properly manage and document child academic performance.

### IV. QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Without any accountability to ensure and track student progress, the educational services offered in detainment lack the necessary rigor to compete with the public school system. The Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, through the Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School and in collaboration with CPS, provides a curriculum comprised of various subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Computer Education, Health, and Physical Education based on the CPS district-wide curriculum plan. Likewise, all CPS alternative schools, utilize the core district academics plan, spanning between six months to one year depending on the youth's sentence and grade level. In addition, each day, youth are allotted two and a half hours of supplementary services.

Special education services in these alternative schools are the responsibility of CPS and led by itinerant teachers employed by the district. However, it is unclear if these services are actually provided. Facilities often have few qualified staff members with

professional credentials and staff sometimes fail to develop and implement individualized education plans (IEPs) for students with special education needs or those simply in need of one-on-one attention.

According to an annual report by the John Howard Association, Cook County juvenile detainees are also required to receive vocational training as part of educational services, such as technical computer skills; however, only one of Cook County's alternative schools, Center Factory, offers vocational training in its curriculum. In addition, most of the instructors assigned to teach vocational-based courses are not certified.

Furthermore, resources are scarce. For the past two years, Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School has been unable to fill department supply orders for course textbooks. Teachers working in Cook County's Juvenile Detention Center consistently report that they do not assign homework because students are not allowed to bring supplies (textbooks, paper, writing instruments, etc.) outside of the school facilities for safety reasons.

## V. PROPOSAL

Implementation of effective re-entry programs between public schools and detention centers remains an essential component in ensuring that ex-offenders have the appropriate guidance when re-entering the public school system. This may include monitoring student growth prior to and after re-entry into the public school system. In addition, programs should provide counselors and clinical social workers within juvenile detention centers as well as the public school system who can help address each student's individual mental and emotional needs. These additional measures must be taken to ensure that youth offenders are prepared to pursue greater opportunities upon their release from incarceration.

### Sources:

- David Kirk et al., *Juvenile Arrest and Collateral Educational Damage in the Transition to Adulthood*, 86 *SOCIOLOGY OF EDUC.* 36 (2013).
- Jennifer A.L. Sheldon-Sherman, *The Idea of an Adequate Education for All: Ensuring Success for Incarcerated Youth with Disabilities*, 42 *J.L. & EDUC.* 227 (2013).
- Kimberly Thielbar, *Education in Juvenile Detention Centers*, The Loyola University Chicago ChildLaw and Education Institute Forum (2011).
- Laurence Steinberg et al., *Reentry of Young Offenders From the Justice System: A Developmental Perspective*, 2 *YOUTH VIOLENCE JUV. JUST.* 1 (2010).
- Lindsay Bostwick, *Policies and Procedures of the Illinois Juvenile Justice System*, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (2010), available at [http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/ResearchReports/IL\\_Juvenile\\_Justice\\_System\\_Walkthrough\\_0810.pdf](http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/ResearchReports/IL_Juvenile_Justice_System_Walkthrough_0810.pdf).
- Peter Leone, et al., *Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare System*, GEO. U. CENTER FOR JUV. JUST. REF. (2012), available at <http://cjr.georgetown.edu/pdfs/ed/edpaper2012.pdf>.
- Robyn Beth Gordon, *Inter-agency Coordination: The Key to Successfully Transition Juvenile Offenders Back into the Education Mainstream*, Lindenwood University School of Education (2013).

Susan Mayer, *Educating Chicago's Court-Involved Youth: Mission and Policy in Conflict*, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago (2005), available at [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old\\_reports/209.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/209.pdf).