



TRANSITION SERVICES FOR YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The passage of recent legislation, including the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, has played a major role in focusing added attention on the transition of juvenile offenders from correctional facilities to appropriate school, work, and community settings. Historically, few transition programs have proven successful for adjudicated youth. However recent research and practical experience have yielded evidence regarding best practices in this area, and have highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to transition services for youth within the juvenile justice system.

Transition, from a correctional education perspective, is a process which promotes the successful passage of a juvenile offender from the community *to a correctional facility and back again*. This article begins by outlining some of the challenges facing correctional employees and educators in providing transition services to youth, and particularly to youth with disabilities, within the juvenile justice system. A successful transition program in Arizona is then described, and the article concludes with a listing of promising practices.

Transition Challenges

Although there is a consensus in the literature that education programs containing effective transition components aid in the post-release success of both juvenile and adult offenders, it is a challenge to provide these services within a correctional setting. Correctional organizations and the people within them frequently have different philosophies about incarceration, education, and transition which shape the ways in which individuals view troubled youth and the interventions developed to help them (Leone, Walter, & Edgar, 1990).

There are three types of theories or philosophies on delinquent youth (Leone et al., 1990). "Micro" theories focus on the behavior of the individual, and states that the responsibility for change resides with that individual. "Systems" theories shift the attention from the individual to the relationship between the individual and his/her environment. Finally, "macro" or "ecological" theories

examine the institutions, culture, and other social forces active in the environment of a youth.

A knowledge of these theories is essential in understanding why different education and transition programs exist within the same field. Leone points out that "an understanding of how professional roles and institutional forces support or inhibit successful transition of youth to community settings can suggest how to remove institutional barriers that interfere with successful transitioning." For example, the most important aspect of transition for a parole officer may be a reduction in the amount of delinquent or criminal behavior, while the most important aspect of transition for an educator may be the academic or vocational transition of the student.

In addition to dealing with competing theories, there are several other challenges facing correctional employees and educators in successfully providing transition services to youth within the juvenile justice system. For example, some have argued that the amount of time covered by transition is arbitrary. It is not clear when the regular public school district's responsibility to provide services has ended and when the correctional facility's services have begun. Still others maintain that the successful transition of a student in one area, such as employment, is not correlated with success in other areas like education. Furthermore, the agency responsible for correctional education differs across states, making it difficult to enact standard guidelines and responsibilities. Finally, there is often no clear consensus on who should provide transition services.

Providing transition services to youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system is even more difficult. For example, although the delivery of appropriate transition services to special needs youth is mandated by law, the role of special education programming in corrections has only recently been recognized (Rutherford, Griller-Clark, & Anderson, 2001). In 1985, it was reported that less than 10% of all state departments of juvenile and adult corrections were in compliance with relevant regulations (Rutherford, Nelson, & Wolford, 1985); and although programming for special needs juvenile offenders has since increased in both

quality and quantity, transition programming continues to be critically neglected for incarcerated youth with disabilities. This continued lack of services may be due to several factors. First, youth with special needs have greater social, emotional, and learning needs than their peers (Pollard, Pollard, & Meers, 1994). Second, special needs youth do not receive the transition services they need (Kochhar & West, 1995; Taymans, Corbey, & Dodge, 1995). Third, there is great diversity in the types of transition services and interventions delivered (Halloran & Simon, 1995; Kochhar & West, 1995; Taymans et al., 1995). Finally, a continuum of care, including partnerships between schools, families, communities, and businesses has not been fully established (Halloran & Simon, 1995).

Arizona's Transition Program

In 1996 the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections Education System began providing extensive transition services to youth. Initially, all correctional education teachers provided transition services one day per week to youth that had been released from their program and were now in the community. Although this delivery system was successful in increasing the number of youth employed and in school post-release, it was redesigned for a number of reasons (Griller, 1996). One of the problems identified with the system was that there were too many individuals involved in the outreach to schools and the community. As a result, each teacher was required to have a working knowledge of the all school districts, employers, and community programs in the Phoenix area.

Since 1996, the concept of a transition specialist has evolved into Arizona's present practice, in which full-time transition specialists have been hired and function as the educational component of a broader transition team housed at each parole office. The Transition Specialist is responsible for meeting with the youth within the first thirty days of incarceration, assisting in developing an Individualized Vocational Transition Education Plan (IVTEP), attending a transition staffing thirty days prior to release, and finding appropriate educational or vocational programs for the youth upon release.

Promising Practices for the Transition of Juvenile Offenders

Despite an increase in compliance with federal mandates, the need for effective implementation of transition programming for youth with and without

disabilities in the juvenile justice system continues to be at the forefront of much discussion. As a response to this need, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) produced a body of research in 1994 entitled *Documented Effective Practices in the Education of At-risk and Delinquent Youth* (Coffey & Gemignani, 1994). This research outlines fifteen effective practices in the area of transition that have proven to be pragmatic through research or practical application. These effective practices have been reviewed, expanded, and classified into promising practices for long-term and short-term correctional facilities by The National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice (Rutherford, Mathur, & Griller-Clark, 2001). While the successful transition of juvenile offenders back to the community is not easily accomplished, we can now have some confidence that correctional education programs containing these effective elements will increase the post-release success of juvenile offenders.

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Promising Practices for Youth in Juvenile Justice System Long Term Correctional Facilities

- ◆ Staff awareness of all county, state, local, and private programs that receive and/or send youth to/from long-term correctional facilities.*
- ◆ Individualized pre-placement planning prior to the transfer of youth from jails, detention centers, or other programs to long-term correctional facilities should exist.
- ◆ The immediate transfer of youth's educational records from jails, detention centers, or other programs to long-term correctional facilities.*
- ◆ A variety of specific educational programs are provided including: academics, vocational and job related skills, social skills, independent living skills, and law-related education.
- ◆ A variety of support services are provided including: work experience and placement, alcohol and drug abuse counseling, anger management, vocational counseling, health education, and training for parenthood.
- ◆ External resources such as speakers, tutors, mentors, vocational trainers, substance abuse counselors, employers, volunteers, and job counselors.
- ◆ Students in long-term correctional facilities should have access to a resource center, which contains a variety of materials related to transition and support.*
- ◆ Special funds are earmarked for transition and support services.*
- ◆ Interagency meetings, cooperative in-service training activities, and crossover correctional and community school visits are held regularly to ensure awareness of youth and agency transition needs.
- ◆ A process exists for the immediate identification, evaluation, and placement of youth with disabilities.*
- ◆ An individualized education program is developed for each student with disabilities that includes a transition plan.*
- ◆ An individual transition plan is developed with all students which includes the student's educational and vocational interests, abilities, and preferences.*
- ◆ A transition planning team is formed upon student entry into a long-term correctional facility to design and implement the individual transition plan.
- ◆ The immediate transfer of youth's educational records from long-term correctional facilities to community schools or other programs.*
- ◆ Coordination with parole to ensure a continuum of services and care is provided in the community.*
- ◆ Coordination with public and private school educational program personnel to ensure that they advocate for these youth, cultivate family involvement, maintain communications with other agencies, and place students in classes with supportive teachers.*
- ◆ A community based transition system exists for maintaining student placement and communication after release from a long-term correctional.
- ◆ The existence of a system for periodic evaluations of the transition program and all of its components.*

*indicates items also appearing on the list of promising practices for youth in short term jails and detention centers. The complete list is available at www.edjj.org.