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New York Jails Implement an Education Program for Incarcerated Youth

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In October 1986, the New York State Legislature enacted laws requiring school districts to provide educational services for incarcerated youth. The goal of the program is to help young inmates obtain skills and credentials that will help them function more effectively, both during incarceration and after release.

To establish the program, the legislature amended existing education and corrections laws to mandate that the school districts in which local correctional facilities are located offer educational services to all eligible offenders. Eligible are inmates under 21 years of age who do not have a high school diploma and who have been incarcerated for at least ten days and are expected to remain in jail for another ten days or longer.

Before the law went into effect, agencies were required to offer educational services only to sentenced youth. The legislation, therefore, affected many offenders

and put significant new responsibilities on the state's school districts and correctional facilities.

Under the law, the correctional facility must provide a staff liaison, classroom space, teacher orientation, and classroom supervision. Facility staff must also advise eligible inmates that the program is available and explain procedures for participating and for continuing their studies after release, if they choose to do so.

The school district provides teachers for the program. The program is funded through the state Department of Education, which reimburses the providing school district for its costs and charges back the daily cost per student to the students' home districts. All reimbursement is based on the number of full-time equivalent students in the program.

The law requires that educational services be available for three hours each day when district schools are ordinarily in session. Instructional time is scheduled to accommodate teachers but without conflicting with other required programs or services, such as

recreation, visitation, and legal, religious, and health services.

Basic Education Program

Eligible inmates choose whether to participate in the educational services program. Participating inmates are screened to determine their abilities in reading, mathematics, and language and then are placed in an appropriate group.

Most instruction is provided in small groups of eight or fewer students. Instruction focuses on reading, mathematics, and written and oral communication; its main goal is to prepare students to pass the high school equivalency diploma examination.

The majority of participants (75 to 80 percent) are high school dropouts who have been out of school for

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several years. The program must provide special assistance in speaking or writing English, if participants need it.

Participation in the program may be denied or restricted if the facility's chief administrative officer determines that an offender's presence in the program would threaten the safety of other inmates or facility staff or if an emergency situation exists within the facility that interferes with the program.

The growing statewide network of participating teachers is evidence of their commitment to the program's success.

When participants are ready for release, correctional staff must inform them that further educational services may be available through their home school districts. If a participant would like further services, the facility must contact the inmate's district regarding his or her wishes. Unless they are considered disruptive, inmates from the incarcerated youth program are eligible to return to school on release, no matter how long they have been out of school.

Challenges to Implementation

Correctional facilities provide a brief orientation for instructors, including information on security procedures to be followed in the facility. Many of the teachers have never worked in an environment designed primarily for security rather than instruction, and many of the inmates have had difficulty completing a traditional education. Teaching in a correctional setting, therefore, may be particularly challenging.

The incarcerated youth education program has been established at fifty-nine facilities in New York state. At these sites, the primary problem has been lack of suitable classroom space due to crowding. Implementing the program has been especially difficult for smaller jails, which have very little space and few

inmates. In addition, the requirement to work with school districts on

behalf of the inmates has generated additional paperwork; one facility had to hire additional staff specifically for the program.

The Monroe County Jail Experience

The experience of the Monroe County Jail in Rochester illustrates the program's progress. Approximately ninety youths per day are enrolled in the program, out of the jail's average population of 900-1,000 inmates. About thirty participants pass the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) examination each year.

Most instruction takes place in the day space of the thirteen-cell housing area. Other classes have been conducted in a holding cell, an interview room, a line-up room, and a conference room. The cramped space has contributed to somewhat sporadic attendance, and the facility coordinator is always looking for better space.

Seven teachers lead two three-hour sessions per day; an eighth teacher supervises and coordinates the program. Most teachers have previously worked in the school district's home and hospital tutoring program and, therefore, are accustomed to working in a non-traditional education environment.

Statewide Network

The incarcerated youth education program has led concerned teachers to seek more information on working with the corrections population. A statewide conference was convened in May 1989 for teachers participating in the program, and a second conference is scheduled for May 1990. The state Department of Education is active in the conferences and offers regular staff development for the teachers.

Because the average jail stay is sixty-two days, this program is meeting a real need for inmate education. The majority of the program's fifty-nine sites have managed to implement the program, despite the difficulty in finding instructional space. School districts have risen to the challenge of providing instruction, and the growing statewide network of participating teachers is evidence of their commitment to the program's success.

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