

Access to a High-Quality Education

Overview

Institutional education plays a critical role in reducing recidivism and increasing post-release success for youth in correctional facilities. Because education is so important, correctional facilities that are administering programs using Title I, Part D funds must ensure that youth who are incarcerated have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) with the same opportunities as youth who are not in secure settings.¹ This can be challenging considering that youth with disabilities are disproportionately represented in correctional facilities;² however, these youth can experience success when they receive the special education services they are entitled to combined with research-based, effective instructional practices.³

Key Principles of Practice

The following principles were identified in a review of *Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings*.⁴

Implementing a High-Quality Curriculum With Rigorous College- and Career-Ready Standards

To ensure access to a high-quality education for all youth who are incarcerated, teaching and learning must be aligned to rigorous college- and career-ready standards that prepare youth for success.^{5,6} Unfortunately, correctional facilities often do not meet State standards for the operation of public schools.⁷ These facilities often face unique challenges that can make meeting high standards difficult, including (1) disruptions during the instructional program or school day by institutional activities; (2) overreliance on worksheet-based “drill and practice” rather than instructional practices that are engaging and research based; (3) not matching instructional delivery methods, such as online computer programming, to students’ areas of deficit; (4) inadequate fiscal and administrative support; and (5) philosophical and mission differences between agencies.^{8,9} Despite these challenges, a youth’s placement should not dictate the curriculum to which he or she has access.¹⁰ Therefore, the curricula should meet students’ needs and be aligned with a State’s academic and career and technical standards.¹¹

Employing Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Instructional Methods and Materials

Classrooms in secure care facilities should be characterized by contemporary materials and engaging work. Teachers must consider a student’s age and his or her developmental/functional, academic, and social-behavioral skill levels when determining instructional methods and materials.¹² In addition, a student’s culture, language, heritage, and previous educational experiences must be considered to ensure that instruction is appropriate¹³ and incorporated to help facilitate learning. For youth with disabilities, the services they receive and the need for assistive technology must be considered. However, teachers must be careful when using technology-enhanced learning; using computer-based programs without teacher support or programs that are not aligned with a student’s reading and skill levels will not be effective.¹⁴ For youth with disabilities who are not making adequate progress toward individualized education program (IEP) goals, the use of data-based individualization (DBI) to intensify instruction can lead to an increased rate of progress.¹⁵ A combination of progress

monitoring and academic and behavioral diagnostic assessment data can support educators in identifying the appropriate, individualized interventions that are intensified and matched to student need. In addition, educators must provide instruction aligned with their State’s college- and career-ready standards, and, therefore, educators will need to be creative when selecting appropriate materials and methods for teaching their students.

Setting High Educational Expectations for All Students Researchers have found that successful correctional facilities do not lower the bar or “water down” the curriculum for youth with disabilities; rather, they set clear and high academic standards and expectations.¹⁶ To do this, educators within these settings must move away from a deficit-based approach and toward strengths-based approaches.¹⁷ Although this can be a major shift in thinking for correctional facilities, the use of positive youth development approaches has been associated with safer, healthier climates that foster youth success.¹⁸ In addition, it is important that learning is relevant to future education and work opportunities. Research has found that students with a high school diploma have more earning potential and are more likely to pursue postsecondary education than those with a general equivalency diploma (GED).^{19,20} At the same time, however, some students will have more success pursuing an alternative curriculum. Therefore, it is critical that educational programs in correctional facilities offer a full continuum of programming, including options that lead to a high school diploma, a GED, career and technical training, and postsecondary education.²¹ A program of instruction that does not lead to a high school diploma should be considered only after carefully reviewing a youth’s records and assessments, plus input from the youth and his or her family.²²

Requiring Youth to Participate in the Same Curriculum and State Accountability Systems as Students in Traditional Schools State educational and juvenile justice agencies should develop policies that require youth in correctional facilities to have access to the same curriculum as those not in secure settings.²³ In addition, youth in correctional facilities should participate in the same State assessment and accountability systems that are used to evaluate all public schools in a State.²⁴ Considering that correctional facilities often have large populations of youth with disabilities and English learners, the responsible public agency must ensure that these youth receive appropriate instructional services and accommodations so that they have equal access to the curriculum.²⁵

This document was retrieved from a Web-based resource on the topic of juvenile corrections. For more information and additional resources, please visit <http://osepideasthatwork.org/jj>.

Endnotes

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19. Leone & Weinberg (2012).
20. U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice (2014).
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24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.