

Preparing Youth for Productive Futures

*Patrick Griffin and Mary Hunninen
National Center for Juvenile Justice*

Here’s something you probably didn’t need criminologists to tell you: there’s some kind of connection between failing to learn and getting into trouble with the law. Poor academic performance is a “risk factor,” as researchers put it, for delinquency—meaning there’s a statistical correlation between the two that can’t possibly be a coincidence. Certain kinds of negative attitudes about education—not feeling committed, not caring, not having long-range plans—are good predictors of delinquency too. Probably it’s all interdependent:

kids fail, then they doubt themselves, then they give up. Then they fail some more. Maybe they get reputations, they acquire deviant friends, they experiment with other kinds of

trouble. Maybe they leave school altogether—at which point the risks really multiply. Dropouts are said to be three and a half times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates.

That could have something to do with the kind of kids who drop out, but the direct economic effects of interrupted education (lack of skills and credentials needed to access the legal job market), as well as the incidental social effects (unstructured time on your hands, alienation from pro-social peers, loss of mentors, etc.), probably combine to make matters much worse.

It’s a spiral, in other words. It goes down. And Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system recognizes the urgent need to reverse it—to address offending by doing something about the deficits, the lessons not learned, the missed opportunities and lost connections that have contributed to offending. “Competency development”—helping juveniles “acquire the knowledge and skills that make it possible for them to become productive, connected, and law-abiding members of their communities”—is one of the system’s primary goals.

In Philadelphia and elsewhere around the state, counties are experimenting with new ways to ensure that delinquent youth are educated, trained, and connected with school and work opportunities.

The problem is *doing* it. It’s not what you’d call a traditional justice function. It’s certainly not something court or probation staff are trained for. And it seems a little too open-ended: where

do the teaching and training responsibilities of the juvenile justice system end, and those of other systems—not to mention the learning responsibilities of delinquent youth themselves—begin?

Pennsylvania has lately begun to tackle these issues more directly than ever before. One big step was the recently issued White Paper on Competency Development, which fleshed out “the least understood of Pennsylvania’s three juvenile justice goals”—articulating basic principles and identifying research-supported practices, outcomes, and

COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT: THE FIVE DOMAINS

Competency development is the process by which juvenile offenders acquire the knowledge and skills that make it possible for them to become productive, connected, and law abiding members of their communities. While all sorts of knowledge and skills may be useful in life, research suggests that there are five core competency domains or skill areas that contribute most to success. These are the areas that must be strengthened if juveniles are to avoid further delinquency:

- **Pro-Social Skills.** Everything you need to achieve better social interactions, better self-control, and better problem-solving, including the ability to take responsibility for your behavior, regulate impulsive behavior, resolve conflicts peacefully, and manage anger.
- **Moral Reasoning Skills.** Whatever you need in order to make the right decisions for the right reasons, including the ability to identify with others, to connect thoughts and actions, to think and behave pro-socially.
- **Academic Skills.** Basic proficiency in reading, writing, and math as well as the general study and learning skills needed to advance to the highest possible academic level.
- **Workforce Development Skills.** The general and specific knowledge and skills needed to get and keep jobs, to advance in them, and to achieve economic self-sufficiency.
- **Independent Living Skills.** The miscellaneous daily living skills everyone needs to be self-sufficient adults.

Sources:

Torbet, P. and Thomas, D. (2005). *Advancing Competency Development: A White Paper for Pennsylvania*. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.

Allegheny County Juvenile Court. *Competency Development Needs and Strengths Assessment*. (Forthcoming).

measures that courts and probation departments can adopt to improve their approaches to competency development.

But counties have been taking concrete action on competency development too—particularly those involved in Pennsylvania’s widespread and still growing aftercare reform movement. Ensuring the successful reintegration of juveniles discharged from placement facilities is impossible if those youth aren’t *prepared* for success in the community. So counties seeking to improve their aftercare results—particularly Philadelphia, which is in the midst of the state’s most thoroughgoing and rigorous aftercare reform effort—have found themselves looking for mechanisms and partnerships that will improve the way delinquent youth are educated, trained, and connected with school and work opportunities.

This issue of *Pennsylvania Progress* will describe the innovative work being done, in Philadelphia and elsewhere around the state, to equip delinquent youth with the knowledge and skills they need to make the transition to productive adult lives.

Philadelphia: Background of Reform

There’s no question that the biggest changes in pursuit of this goal have been made in Philadelphia, where an ambitious multi-agency collaborative effort led by the Philadelphia Family Court and the Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS) is completely revamping the way Philadelphia youth in placement are prepared for productive lives in their communities and reconnected to the worlds of school and work. It’s

called the Philadelphia Reintegration Initiative, and it’s essentially a fender-to-fender redesign of Philadelphia’s aftercare system. Developed under the direction of Administrative Judge Kevin M. Dougherty and launched early in 2005 with support from a variety of sources, including grants from the U.S. Department of Labor and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as well as redirected Juvenile Probation and DHS funds, the Reintegration Initiative has instituted new pre-placement assessment practices, new case-planning tools and protocols, new placement monitoring requirements, new mechanisms for collaborating and sharing information during transitions, and new forms of “step-down” structure and support for returning youth. (See sidebar, “Philadelphia’s Reintegration Initiative: A Rough Schematic.”) But some of the most interesting—and still evolving—work

of the Reintegration Initiative is aimed directly at the core problems of many of the city's delinquent youth: academic failure, disconnection from school, and lack of job preparation and marketable skills.

These problems don't affect only delinquents, of course. Reintegration reform in Philadelphia is taking place in the context of a larger youth dropout crisis that is getting unprecedented public attention.

According to an eye-opening study of the problem commissioned by city leaders from researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins University—*Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005*—only about half of the city's public school students have been graduating on time, and even six-year graduation rates don't reach 60%. Philadelphia public schools have been permanently losing something like 8,000 kids a year.

But while most drop-outs are not delinquent, seriously delinquent youth fare particularly dismally in the schools. The study found that being ordered into a juvenile justice placement facility was among the strongest predictors of dropping out: in one cohort analyzed, 90% of those with a juvenile justice placement never graduated from the Philadelphia School System. (While some of them completed school in placement, the

Philadelphia's Reintegration Initiative is taking aim at the core problems of many of the city's delinquent youth: academic failure, disconnection from school, and lack of job preparation and marketable skills.

vast majority simply dropped out.) And this scenario was really not that uncommon: among those who dropped out of the class of 2000, almost a quarter of the males had in fact spent time in placement. The study's authors concluded that Philadelphia's juvenile justice agencies "need to be deeply involved in the effort to stop the dropout crisis in Philadelphia."

Focus on Preparation

The leaders of the effort to rethink Philadelphia's aftercare system were on the same page. Their own data showed failure rates that were every bit as discouraging. About 1,300 delinquent youth were returning to Philadelphia from residential placements each year, and far too many were walking straight back into trouble. More than one-fourth were being rearrested within six months of release. And about a third were back in placement within a year.

"The Reintegration Initiative forced us to turn our attention back to what we were doing to *prepare* kids," says Candace Putter, who is the Manager of the Reintegration Initiative. In order to address reintegration failure, Philadelphia reformers had to ask questions—about the *beginning and middle* as well as the end of the placement process—that had never really been asked before. Like: were Philadelphia youth in commitment facilities receiving education and career training that was adequate and appropriate? Did it line up with the expectations of Philadelphia schools? Did it prepare youth to succeed in Philadelphia's economy?

There were certainly indications that Philadelphia youth passing through placement were not getting whatever it was they needed to succeed back

Philadelphia reformers have enlisted the active cooperation of some of the state's biggest and best-known private residential facilities.

home. In fact, the data showed that re-arrests following discharge usually occurred quickly—within the first 90 days. And the most common re-offense for returning youth—regardless of the reasons they were originally committed—involved selling drugs. That suggested some of the youth may have been acting from purely economic motives, that they saw no other practical options. "The very clear bells ringing told us that we had to focus on sustainable employment as well as on all the more traditional supports like supervision and treatment," says Putter. Which in turn meant they had to look at academic preparation as well. "Kids can no longer get jobs that are life-sustaining and family-sustaining without education," Putter points out. "It's not either/or. They're not going to get a life-sustaining job if they don't get more education. But [education] has to be related to a job plan. They need the job. But they also need the vision."

To help them get a handle on the quality and content of the academic offerings and job training programs available to Philadelphia youth in placement, the leaders of the Reintegration Initiative enlisted the active cooperation of the six placement providers that housed the majority of Philadelphia's delinquent youth. This group—which included some of the state's biggest and best-known private residential facilities—had already begun working with the Reintegration Initiative to improve communication, planning and reentry services for

PHILADELPHIA'S REINTEGRATION INITIATIVE: A ROUGH SCHEMATIC

It's an unusually ambitious effort to redesign a complex system. It involves a multitude of partners and funding sources. But the Reintegration Initiative ultimately boils down to a handful of working principles:

- *Early planning.* Philadelphia Juvenile Probation and DHS begin focusing on projected reintegration needs as soon as the decision to place a youth in a residential facility has been made. Individualized assessment occurs immediately (see below), detailed reintegration plans are drawn up soon after the youth is admitted to placement, and the plans are revisited on a monthly basis and at each subsequent court review.
- *Assessment-driven intensity of supervision/services.* All youth headed to placement are assessed using a standardized instrument—the CANS-JJ or “Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths —Juvenile Justice”—in order to determine their needs, their strengths, and the level of aftercare supervision and support (“standard” or “intensive”) they will eventually receive.
- *Partnerships with placement providers.* Under contracts with DHS, the six placement providers that handle the majority of Philadelphia youth—Cornell Abraxas, George Junior Republic, Glen Mills Schools, Saint Gabriel’s Hall, Summit Academy, and Vision Quest—employ “reintegration workers” whose job, in partnership with probation officers, is to prepare youth in placement for their eventual release and support them in the community following discharge. (Youth from all other placement sites are provided reintegration services by two additional agencies.)
- *Multi-system coordination.* DHS, Philadelphia Juvenile Probation, the School District of Philadelphia, Community Behavioral Health (Philadelphia’s public managed care organization), the big placement facilities, and various service providers and workforce development groups are all involved in the Reintegration Initiative. The “hub of everything,” as Deputy Director Jay Schrass of Philadelphia Juvenile Probation puts it, is the Reintegration Initiative’s Manager, Candace Putter. “That’s what has made this work,” Schrass says. “Having somebody who is not part of any of these systems, but who speaks their language. Who has knowledge and independence. Who doesn’t hold allegiance to any one of them.”
- *Focus on practical preparation for success.* More systematically than ever before, the Reintegration Initiative has taken steps to improve the quality, content and fitness of the academic and technical education being provided to Philadelphia youth in residential placement, and has worked to smooth transitions from institutional to community schools and create post-release job-training and employment opportunities.
- *Family focus and support.* While youth are in placement, reintegration workers visit their extended families in their homes, and connect them with services designed to improve their capacity to provide support and monitoring when their children return home.
- *Use of home passes to prepare for discharge.* “In the past, the home pass was a vacation,” notes Schrass. Now, he says, whenever possible, the groundwork for successful reintegration is laid during home pass visits—including enrollment in school and after-school programs, filing of job applications, making of health and drug and alcohol appointments, and all the other practical arrangements needed to pave the way for a youth’s return to the community.
- *Transitional community-based structure and support.* Through the E3 Power Centers, returning youth are getting the kind of step-down support, training, and structure that supplements probation monitoring and services and makes successful adjustment more likely.
- *Ongoing review and oversight.* A multi-disciplinary Reintegration Oversight Committee regularly reviews the cases of returning youth who are noncompliant with aftercare conditions or are otherwise not successfully reintegrating, in order to find collaborative solutions before recommitment becomes necessary. According to Schrass, it’s “a vehicle to ensure that everybody’s talking.”

For more information, contact Jay Schrass, Deputy Director, Philadelphia Juvenile Probation, at Gerald.Schrass@courts.phila.gov, or Candace Putter, Manager, Philadelphia Reintegration Initiative, at Candace.Putter@phila.gov.

Philadelphia youth. Now they agreed to confer with the School District of Philadelphia on improving and aligning their educational offerings, and to cooperate with expert consultants in an assessment of their occupational skills programming.

This was something new. It's not as though Pennsylvania juvenile courts and probation departments have never cared about the schooling, skill-training and career preparation that delinquents receive while they're in residential care. But other priorities—safety and security, treatment services, rehabilitative approaches and philosophies—have gotten a lot more attention. Demand for high-quality education and training services has been inconsistent. And authority to enforce a certain minimal level of educational quality has been fragmented. The result has been—as is often the case in Pennsylvania—wide variation, and mixed results.

But now, the state's biggest “consumer” of juvenile placement services was asking for more—more rigor, more consistency, more tangible progress and documentation. And the placement providers working with the Philadelphia Reintegration Initiative were eager to respond, Putter says. “They want to do it. They looked at this thing and they recognized this is right.”

Educational Collaborations

One set of reform activities focused on youth in placement as *students*. It was clear from the School District of Philadelphia's data that these students were falling through the cracks—if you can even call it a “crack” when 90% of those with placement histories fail to graduate.

Were they just missing school connections? The Reintegration Initiative began by working to improve the management of educational transitions at the beginning and the end of placement. A streamlined records-transfer process was established, under which placement facilities would receive a newly placed youth's academic records within 30 days of the beginning of a placement, and would send back updated records to the School District two weeks before the youth's release date. To eliminate confusion, inconsistency and delays, a single School District official was given power to make prompt determinations regarding academic

How well do academic curricula in placement facilities match up with the expectations of school districts back home?

credits to be awarded for work done in placement, and to make grade-level assignments reflecting the progress made during the placement period.

Since Philadelphia has its own statutorily mandated two-week transitional program for committed youth returning to the city's public schools—the Reentry Transition Initiative-Welcome Return Assessment Process, or “RETI-WRAP”—Probation and DHS both agreed to post full-time representatives at the high school building where RETI-WRAP operated, and probation officers and youth workers connected to the Reintegration Initiative have become a constant presence and support at the program. The School District in turn agreed to assign social workers to seven big schools around the city, to

help deal with returning youth and the challenges they faced.

But there were more fundamental issues that could not be resolved by working on transition procedures alone. They called for a closer look at what was happening during the placement phase.

For instance, academic curricula in placement facilities—did they match up with those of Philadelphia schools? In educational terms, sending a school-age delinquent to a placement facility is just temporarily transferring him or her to another school district—the one in which the facility happens to be located. But strange as it sounds, in Pennsylvania there is no assurance that what a youth is taught in one school district will be transferable—or will count towards graduation requirements—in another. So when youth in placement are discharged, it's up in the air whether the academic progress they've made will be recognized back home.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is currently working to address this problem, calling on schools to award credit for documented work done in placement as long as it is aligned with the state academic standards that are used as the basis for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. In the meantime, the placement providers participating in the Reintegration Initiative agreed to submit their educational curricula for review by the School District of Philadelphia's Curriculum Office. Specialists there laid out changes the curricula would need in order to be aligned with state standards and the city's graduation requirements, and all six placement providers have now undertaken complete curricular overhauls in response to those recommendations.

But those involved in the Reintegration Initiative also recognized that youth in placement are not traditional students, by a long shot. Many have significant remedial work to do, but cannot afford—because they are too old and have too few credits towards high school graduation—to put their progress on hold while they do it. Accordingly, the School District of Philadelphia has been providing training for educators at the placement facilities participating in the Reintegration Initiative, on techniques for weaving remedial help into the teaching of credit-bearing material. And the School District has also begun to make changes back home, expanding what it calls its “alternative pathways” to graduation—including special accelerated high schools for older youth who need to get credits quickly, evening high schools for students with daytime jobs, and a dual enrollment program with Community College of Philadelphia that enables a student to work towards a high school diploma and an associate degree at the same time.

Career Training

In addition to working to improve the academic preparation of Philadelphia youth in placement, the Reintegration Initiative brought in expert consultants from the Lehigh Career and Technical Institute (LCTI) to assess career and technical training programs at residential facilities participating in the initiative. LCTI, one of the nation’s largest and most progressive secondary vocational schools, offers more than 40 programs of study at an immense modern campus near Allentown, PA. Its 3,000 students repair cars, build houses, operate businesses—a bakery, a restaurant, a commercial print shop, a 500,000-square-foot distribution center.

According to its founder and director, Dr. Clyde Hornberger, the school’s facilities and all its programming have been designed in consultation with the industries that employ its graduates. All of its machinery and equipment meet current industry specifications. All its teachers hold industry-recognized master skill certifications or licenses. There is nothing improvised or second-rate here—and yet LCTI works with all kinds of students, with all sorts of interests and learning capacities, including many with disabilities, in alternative education and on probation. This is the future of what used to be called “vo-tech”—and there is clearly a lot the juvenile justice system can learn from it about effective competency development.

All sites should offer practical training in the building trades, auto body repair, culinary arts, clerical and custodial services and a handful of other areas of consistently high employer demand.

Hornberger and Jackie Cullen, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators, conducted the assessment of career and job skills training at the placement facilities participating in the Reintegration Initiative, and found some things to like. Most of the facilities were offering some sort of formal vocational training, including “soft skill” training, and some had extensive and varied programs. Work opportunities were available to youth in some facilities as well. But many of the things that make LCTI effective—teaching to industry-approved

curricula, offering industry-recognized skill certificates, employing instructors with current knowledge and up-to-date credentials in their fields—were missing. And good opportunities to teach useful skills and provide valuable work experiences—by partnering with local area vocational schools, for example, and by employing youth as supervised apprentices in the day-to-day clerical, grounds-keeping and food service operations of the facilities themselves—were being lost.

The assessment resulted in detailed recommendations for each provider, but also a set of core recommendations applicable to all. Among the most important was that, at a minimum, all sites should offer practical training in the building trades, auto body repair, culinary arts, clerical and custodial services and a handful of other areas of consistently high employer demand. The message, Candace Putter says, was that “you should decide what you’re going to offer based on what the jobs are.” And then structure your training around standardized competency-based curricula and award skill certificates employers will recognize, like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s Safety Card for construction workers and the ServSafe food handlers’ certificate. In many cases, providers were already doing it, Putter says, or something like it. “But they weren’t teaching to a certificate. So kids would come out with the skills but no proof.” The good news was that changing providers’ approaches to training along the lines recommended in the final assessment report “was all very doable,” Putter says. For the most part, refocusing and reorientation were required, not big new investments. And it helped that six of the state’s biggest placement providers were being invited to change at the same time. “We did it with them, not against

them,” Putter explains. But, she adds, “we also benefited from a little inter-provider competition.”

Others in Pennsylvania are likely to benefit too. At the completion of the assessment, representatives of all six providers assembled at LCTI to discuss its recommendations and work out action plans for implementation with Reintegration Initiative officials. Significantly, representatives of the Allegheny County Juvenile Court—the state’s *other* big consumer of juvenile placement services—were at the table as well. “We understand that we can’t solve these problems in Philadelphia without also working with others in the state,” Putter points out. “It’s going to be difficult for any one county to crack this nut. But if Allegheny and Philadelphia are saying the same thing, we’ll get what we want.”

Allegheny County Juvenile Court Assistant Administrator Russ Carlino adds, “The Allegheny/Philadelphia efforts present a clear and consistent message to providers that education and workforce development opportunities for youth in placement must be geared toward successful reintegration. I believe the joint effort

will benefit all youth in placement, not just those from Allegheny and Philadelphia.”

As assessment co-author Jackie Cullen puts it, “The key is consistent demand.” Placement providers in Pennsylvania are being called upon to step up their career and technical training services to juveniles, and they recognize it.

They also welcome it. “They saw it work” at LCTI, Cullen says. “‘Your kids,’ they told us, ‘look a lot like ours.’”

Structure, Support and Connections Back Home

In addition to partnering with providers to ramp up education and career training while youth are in placement, and working with the School District of Philadelphia and others to improve the management of educational transitions at the time youth are released, the Reintegration Initiative is also providing an array of post-release educational and employment supports to returning youth through five “E3

“E3 stands for—in this order—education, employment, empowerment.”

Power Centers” located throughout the city.

E3 Power Centers are free-standing, neighborhood-based programs that provide young people with tutoring and educational support of various kinds, job readiness and job search help, and occupational and life skills training. They originated in 2000 as “Youth Opportunity Centers,” serving residents of several of the city’s “empowerment zones” under five-year Youth Opportunity Grants from the U.S. Department of Labor. Their grant funding was winding down just as the city was coming to grips with its dropout crisis and launching its Reintegration Initiative. It was obvious that, with a little retooling, the centers could be helpful in both efforts, according to Janine Wright of Philadelphia Youth Network, a youth workforce development intermediary agency that contracts with local youth-serving organizations to operate the centers. The idea was to use what

ASSESSING FOR COMPETENCY IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

A team of juvenile probation supervisors in Allegheny County, with help from the National Center for Juvenile Justice, is working to develop a standardized Competency Development Needs and Strengths Assessment instrument for the county’s use. The group, which is known as the Competency Development Committee and is led by Assistant Administrator Russ Carlino, has been working since March of 2006 to improve Allegheny County’s approach to competency development, including the planning, monitoring and documenting of competency development activities. One of its tasks has been to design an assessment protocol that will help a juvenile probation officer determine a youth’s needs and strengths in the five competency development domains and prioritize the problem areas most closely associated with the youth’s offending behavior. Armed with the results of the assessment, the probation officer will be in a better position to develop a case plan that directly addresses prioritized needs and builds on identified strengths.

The Competency Development Needs and Strengths Assessment protocol includes a set of questions for interviewing juveniles with regard to each of the five recognized domains of competency, accompanied by some guidelines for interpreting, assessing, and drawing conclusions from their answers and a summary sheet to help the PO select and rank skill deficits related to the youth’s offending behavior that can be addressed during the term of supervision. It’s still being tweaked, but is scheduled for roll-out during the first part of 2008. For more information, contact Russ Carlino at RCarlino@court.allegheny.pa.us.

had been learned under the DOL grants, draw on new funding from DHS and other sources, and retarget the centers to help out-of-school youth in general—and youth returning from juvenile justice placements in particular—continue their schooling and/or find long-term jobs. At first the plan was to have special “Welcome Home” services for the returning youth, but over time that idea was dropped, and clients who were court-involved—between a quarter and third of the total served—were simply blended in with the majority who came to the centers on their own. “The kids’ needs were identical,” Wright says.

E3 Power Centers are now located in five of the city’s highest crime neighborhoods. Among their other functions, they serve the Reintegration Initiative as essential “step-down” programs, providing daily structure and tangible support to youth returning to the community after extensive commitments. At a minimum, returning youth who are assessed at the highest risk to re-offend and be recommitted—the “intensive” cases—are mandated by the Philadelphia Family Court to attend a center five or six days a week for three months. In individual cases, some returning youth

who are assessed at lower risk levels may also be required to attend, as a condition of aftercare probation. But

“What we’re working on right now—we’re hoping—can be expanded into every county in the state.”

anyone may attend voluntarily, and for as long as they like. That’s the whole idea, says Candace Putter: “Their mandate is to figure out how to *hold onto* kids.”

“E3 stands for—in this order—education, employment, empowerment,” says David Johnson, Director of the E3 West Center. E3 West is operated by The Bridge, an affiliate of the Philadelphia Health Management Corporation, in a modest, three-story red brick building surrounded by bars, restaurants, pawnshops, vacant lots and storefront churches on a commercial street in West Philly. Nearly 80 young people attend it on any given day, and more than 300 are formally enrolled here annually. They are served individually and in small groups, in a half-dozen airy, brightly painted classrooms and

conference areas, by a staff of GED instructors, teachers from the Center for Literacy, and career advisors/case managers.

What they get from E3 West depends on what they need. For some, it’s educational assessment and very basic instruction, especially in math and reading. “Maybe forty percent of the kids that come through here are reading at fourth grade or below,” Johnson says. “A few can’t read at all.” So they get literacy classes, tutoring, help with homework or GED preparation.

Others need help finding and keeping jobs. For Rafiq, a dour, skull-capped 19-year-old with a pretty serious juvenile history, E3 West turned out to be a vital link to the world of legitimate work. “The job readiness program showed me how to present myself,” he says. How to prepare a resume. How to interview for a job. How to build positive relationships with bosses and coworkers. A few of the centers run their own experimental businesses—E3 West has a little snack shop—but all offer job-counseling and job-matching services, sheltered “work exposure” experiences, and subsidized and unsubsidized clerical, landscaping,

A COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE GUIDE FOR PENNSYLVANIA

Juvenile courts, probation departments and providers looking for help identifying useful competency development resources will soon have a comprehensive guide. *Advancing Competency Development: A Resource Guide for Pennsylvania* will describe competency development-supportive resources that exist in communities around the state and provide examples of skill training curricula that can be implemented in probation departments, community-based programs or residential placement facilities. Organized by the five competency development domains, many of the nearly 50 listings have been independently evaluated and shown to produce positive results. All of them focus on increasing protective factors and meet stipulated criteria for inclusion in the guide.

For each curriculum, resource or program listed, the guide will provide detailed information on background and history, basic approaches and settings, skill sets targeted, facilitator training requirements, tools available, costs and provider contacts. For ease of use, the guide will also include a handy chart arraying all of the resources by various dimensions and an index. The guide is being prepared by the National Center for Juvenile Justice, with PCCD funding. Dissemination in print form is scheduled for Spring 2008, with a searchable web-based version to follow. For more information, contact Mary Hunninen at hunninen@ncjj.org.

A PARTNERSHIP WITH GOODWILL INDUSTRIES

When the Cambria County Juvenile Court agreed to partner with Goodwill Industries of the Conemaugh Valley on an employment training and paid work experience program for juvenile offenders returning from residential placements, it made sense on both sides. The independent affiliate of Goodwill Industries International, which serves six counties in South-Central Pennsylvania, had a mission to help people achieve self-sufficiency through work. And the court had youth under its supervision who needed just that kind of help.

The result was “Learn to Work I,” under which, with help from Goodwill’s certified career and workforce development professionals, Cambria County youth on aftercare set employment goals, learn work skills, and find and keep jobs in the community. The project has been funded as a model aftercare program since 2005, through a Drug Control and System Improvement grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. It takes youth—all of them court-ordered into Learn to Work as a condition of aftercare probation—through a series of steps that includes assessment of basic skills and interests, career research and exploration, career planning and goal-setting, classroom-based skill-building and work-readiness training, and paid “Earn as You Learn” work experiences at Goodwill business sites or those of Goodwill’s community partners. For youth at least 16 years old, Learn to Work culminates in individualized community job search help from a full-time Goodwill job developer, followed by on-site job coaching and follow-up support for up to one year.

According to Cambria County Chief Juvenile Probation Officer Cindy Wess, Learn to Work has been “a match made in heaven,” although the number of youth eligible for the program—in a small county that orders placement rarely, and so has few aftercare cases at any one time—has been small compared with Goodwill’s capacity. Wess and Goodwill are looking for alternative funding that would permit expansion of Learn to Work to cover a broader range of young offenders. And Goodwill has held preliminary talks with juvenile court representatives of nearby Blair, Indiana, and Somerset counties to discuss broadening Learn to Work’s reach geographically as well.

For more information about Learn to Work, contact Ann Torledsky, Vice President of Workforce Development for Goodwill Industries of the Conemaugh Valley, at atorled@goodwilljohnstown.org. To get contact information for your local affiliate in the Pennsylvania Association of Goodwills, go to the map at <http://www.goodwillpa.org/>.

retail and other employment opportunities with community businesses, in addition to in-class job readiness training. Occupational skills classes of various kinds—computer programming and maintenance, photography, video and music production, driver’s education—are available too. And all the centers mount ambitious restorative service projects that help teach practical skills and connect youth with the economic life of the community. Of necessity, E3 Centers offer training in “life skills” as well—how to take care of your health, how to manage your anger, how to find an apartment, care for a baby or balance a checkbook. “For a lot of the kids who come here,” David Johnson explains, “we act as an extended family, and in some cases their primary family.” For

Sha’mese, a poised young woman with tightly coiled braids and a turbulent past—she has been, she says, “locked up numerous times”—E3 West has been an important source of this kind of help. Before her probation officer insisted that she come here, she says, “I wasn’t focused.” But the staff here have helped with practical advice, support, and motivation. “I have a lot of mentors here. They push me to make myself better. They taught me how to present myself, how to avoid acting out. They helped me with that *a lot*.” Now she’s working on her GED in preparation for community college, she says. After that, Penn State.

Last June, Sha’mese was one of 70 young people who crossed the stage at Philadelphia’s New Freedom Theater,

as part of a cap-and-gown graduation ceremony recognizing formerly “disconnected” youth who had got themselves back on track with the help of the E3 Centers. Jim Sharp, Chief of Juvenile Probation for the Philadelphia Family Court, was there. “I had the pleasure and the honor of speaking at their graduation,” he remembers. “It gave a real vision of the hope that we have for the youth of Philadelphia.”

Something New

Philadelphia’s efforts to make “competency development” a reality for youth in its juvenile justice system are still just beginning. It may be too early to tell how well they’re working.

Jim Sharp notes that the Reintegration Initiative is tracking a “slow but steady” decline in short-term re-arrest and recommitment rates among youth coming out of placement—“And in Philadelphia,” he adds, “I’ll take slow but steady”—but everyone recognizes that that could change.

Anyway, as Candace Putter points out, the initiative’s goals are much larger than that—not just crime-free juveniles, but successful, productive, connected adults. So measures of success should be more expansive. “From our standpoint, we have to look at much more than recidivism,” she says. “Are they going to school? Are they getting jobs?” The Philadelphia Family Court, DHS, the School District and others involved in the initiative are currently developing a multi-systemic data bank that should shed light on the results of the reform along multiple dimensions. “We expect within a year or so to have much richer data on outcomes,” Putter says.

After that, who knows? “What we’re working on right now—we’re hoping—can be expanded into every county in the state,” says Deputy Director Jay Schrass of Philadelphia Juvenile Probation.

But in the meantime, the rest of the state is already beginning to stir. In addition to collaborating with Philadelphia to speak with one voice to providers regarding education and workforce development expectations for youth in placement, Allegheny County is developing its own standardized instrument to assess the competency-related needs and strengths of youth on probation. (See sidebar, “Assessing for Competency in Allegheny County.”) Education and employment experts have begun showing up at probation forums and training events, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education recently got a sizable grant from the MacArthur Foundation’s Models for Change initiative to enable it to get involved in tracking and improving educational

outcomes for youth in placement. A comprehensive “Resource Guide” of promising skill-training curricula and community resources is currently in production, and will soon be available to Pennsylvania juvenile courts and probation departments. (See sidebar, “A Competency Development Resource Guide for Pennsylvania.”) And an affiliate of Goodwill Industries—a multi-billion dollar player in workforce development, with over a century of experience connecting people with work—has begun providing court-involved youth with training and paid work experiences as part of a pilot project in Cambria County. (See sidebar, “A Partnership With Goodwill Industries.”) Goodwill is already considering expansion to surrounding counties, and has expressed interest in partnerships with juvenile courts elsewhere in the state.

Why not? There has never been a better time to rethink the old approaches to education and workforce development, and try something new.

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National Center for Juvenile Justice
3700 South Water Street, Ste. 200
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
412-227-6950
www.ncjj.org

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Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency

P.O. Box 1167

Harrisburg, PA 17108-1167

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