



STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

New Jersey School Reentry

Strategies to Support Students Returning to
School After Confinement



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The New Jersey Department of Education is committed to supporting school districts and youth returning from confinement as they work together for successful reentry. When students are reenrolled in schools and performing well, they are less likely to reoffend and more likely to have success in college and careers along with better economic stability in the future (Cusick et al., 2009; Nellis & Wayman, 2009; Seigle, 2014). Quality educational programs and services are critical for the positive development of all youth. The planned and timely transitioning of youth into the appropriate educational program upon exit from a correctional facility is needed for the greatest likelihood of sustainable success (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

The purpose of this document is to provide information to New Jersey school districts regarding the needs of students entering and exiting confinement. Research on best practices for transition back to school emphasizes a collaborative, supportive process to improve education and reduce recidivism.

Based on research, the following practices are recommended:

- Smooth transitions;
- Appropriate placement;
- Therapeutic support;
- Multi-system collaboration with an identified transition coordinator; and
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress.

In New Jersey during the 2015-16 school year, over 2,000 youths under the age of 21 were served by juvenile detention centers, while about 1,500 were served by the following state agencies for delinquent youth: the Juvenile Justice Commission, the Department of Children and Families, or the Department of Corrections. The majority of these students should be reenrolling in school, as just eight percent of the youth obtained a GED or high school diploma while in confinement (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016).

Many of these youth encounter barriers to school reentry in both reenrollment and reintegration. Reasons for reenrollment challenges include the following: delays in the transfer of education records; barriers to data and record-sharing; differences in credit transfer policies between the school district and juvenile justice system; and reluctance on the part of school staff to welcome youth back due to their previous behaviors or serious school problems before confinement (Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, 2010; Nellis & Wayman, 2009; Seigle et al., 2014). The path to reenrollment differs for these students, as some may have only been confined for a short time, while others are completing lengthy stays. Even after reenrollment, these youth often have additional barriers making school reintegration more complicated, as they are likely to be dealing with mental

health issues, poverty, health troubles, past childhood trauma, and home instability (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

Smooth Transitions

To soften the often abrupt transition after release, planning for release must begin well before the transition occurs (Ferieman, 2010; Müller, 2011; Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, 2010). Districts should ensure that a key contact person is identified so that the detention center or state agency where the student is confined is able to inform them of pre-release plans and can immediately notify them when the student is released from confinement.

Districts should document the process for re-enrollment to share with youth and their families, including the process of awarding credits earned while the student was in confinement and credit recovery options available in the district. The transition process between confinement and school re-enrollment is often not clear to parents or guardians, and their role in this process needs to be understood, particularly in regard to the steps involved in their child's re-enrollment in school (Wojcik, 2008).

In addition to facilitating the student's transition and reintegration back into school, districts assist the education staff in the juvenile justice and correctional system by providing necessary educational information such as transcripts, state assessment results and Individual Education Plans when the district is notified that the student has entered confinement. Within 10 school days of receipt of a request for a copy of the student's educational records by a State facility, the school district receiving the request is required to provide the State facility with the student's educational records and other relevant school district information to assist the transition, for appropriate placement during confinement (N.J.A.C. 6A:17-3.6(a)). A smooth transition into the academic setting while in confinement assists the student to engage in school activities without delay and supports reentry after confinement.

Appropriate Placement

One important charge of the transition team is to evaluate the appropriate educational placement for the student after confinement in the environment that will comprehensively support the student's needs. In addition, there should be consideration of each student's placement based on the presumption that a young person has been rehabilitated, not automatic placement in alternative programs intended for students with discipline problems (JustChildren, 2004; Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, 2010).

Therapeutic Support

Frequent post-release mental health services for youth exiting a state or county facility has helped to lower rates of reoffending. Inclusion of mentoring into the array of re-entry services has been

seen to have some long-term, positive effects (Nellis & Wayman, 2009). A therapeutic approach to behavioral change (as opposed to behavioral control) has been shown to improve outcomes in therapeutic intervention studies (Evans-Chase & Zhou, 2014). Though districts may aim to treat students re-enrolling after confinement in the way they would treat any students in the re-enrollment process, care should be taken to offer extra supports to students who demonstrate that need. For example, a school that has developed a multi-tiered system of supports may find that more intensive interventions (Tiers 2 or 3) are needed for students returning from confinement (New Jersey Department of Education, 2017).

Multi-System Collaboration

Communication and collaboration among school staff, correction system staff, the youth, and their families are critical components to help students reenter school after confinement. Transition experts advocate for an inter-agency transition team including the above members who have clear roles and responsibilities and who work together in the best interest of the youth (Ferierman et al., 2010; JustChildren, 2004; Leone & Weinberg, 2012; National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice, 2016; Seigle, 2014; Wojcik et al., 2008). Other members of the team who are commonly included are the: school counselor, parent advocate, parole/probation officer, and/or an assigned school mentor. Child study teams and intervention and referral service teams may overlap in membership with the transition team as well. Community Program Specialists with the Juvenile Justice Commission handle case management for youth re-entry and are also available to support the work of the transition team.

As part of their work, the transition team should develop a transition plan and oversee its implementation, set goals, and provide appropriate educational, vocational, and related services to the students. To this end, the team should review the returning student's learning, behavioral, and health needs, determine desired outcomes, and advise on appropriate placement.

Identify a Transition Coordinator

A team member should be assigned to lead the transition as a coordinator or facilitator. The coordinator works across the juvenile justice and education systems to facilitate youth's re-enrollment and reintegration into school. The coordinator can also serve as an important point of contact for youth and families during the re-enrollment process, while also helping to identify and coordinate other support services needed (DeFur, et al., 2000; Müller, 2011; Seigle, 2014; Stephens & Arnette, 2000; Wojcik et al., 2008).

Monitor and Evaluate Progress

Youth re-entry in school does not end with re-enrollment. The goal should be reintegration (Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, 2010). In order to achieve this, youth progress should be evaluated

in how they are achieving transition goals and outcomes. This may include, for example, weekly check-in meetings with an assigned school mentor, counselor, or case management team. In addition, the transition process itself should undergo periodic evaluation (National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice, 2016). Overarching tracking of student outcomes, including employment and school enrollment statistics, is critical in order to understand which features of re-entry programs support success (Leone & Weinberg, 2012; Müller, 2011).

Conclusion

By focusing on the integrated and coordinated supports and services recommended in this guide for re-entry of formerly confined youth, school districts have the opportunity to ensure successful outcomes for students and their school community. For additional support, the [Transition Toolkit 3.0](#) has been released by the National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth.

Prepared by the New Jersey Department of Education in collaboration with the Juvenile Justice Commission, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, and Joanne Butler, school board attorney. In addition, information was incorporated from administrators in nine New Jersey school districts identified as having established or emerging re-entry processes to include their perspectives.

For more information, please contact the Office of Student Support Services at (609) 633-1752.

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