
II. OVERVIEW OF TRANSITION

Transition has been defined as “a coordinated set of activities for the youth, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes successful movement from the community to a correctional program setting, and from a correctional program setting to post-incarceration activities.”¹ This definition identifies three elements of successful transition:

1. It is coordinated.
2. It is an outcome-oriented process.
3. It promotes successful movement between the facility and the community.^a

The first element, coordination, requires individuals from multiple systems to work together to ensure that a youth involved in the juvenile justice system receives appropriate support services at all stages. The primary individuals involved are, of course, the youth/student and his or her family or adult advocate. An assigned point of contact, such as a transition counselor or specialist, school placement specialist, or staffing coordinator, is also extremely important in leading and coordinating the process. Others who should be involved in the process include court and probation personnel, administrators and staff from detention and corrections institutions, and personnel from a student’s community school (e.g., principal, guidance counselor, and teachers). Additional involvement may come from representatives of agency-based service providers in the areas of mental health, substance abuse, child welfare, and employment services. Ultimately, the individuals required to support a specific youth will depend on the unique needs of that child and his or her transition plan, and they will need to be identified case by case.

The second element, an outcome-oriented transition process, focuses on the goals of successful youth engagement with school and/or employment, avoidance of recidivism to the juvenile justice system, and reduction of the likelihood of future entry into the adult criminal justice system.

The third element, successful movement between the facility and the community, requires the youth to become positively engaged with his or her community by acquiring appropriate academic, vocational, behavioral, social, and independent living skills. Therefore, an effective transition process and high-quality support services within that process are essential for a youth to successfully live in the community following incarceration.

COMPLEXITY OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

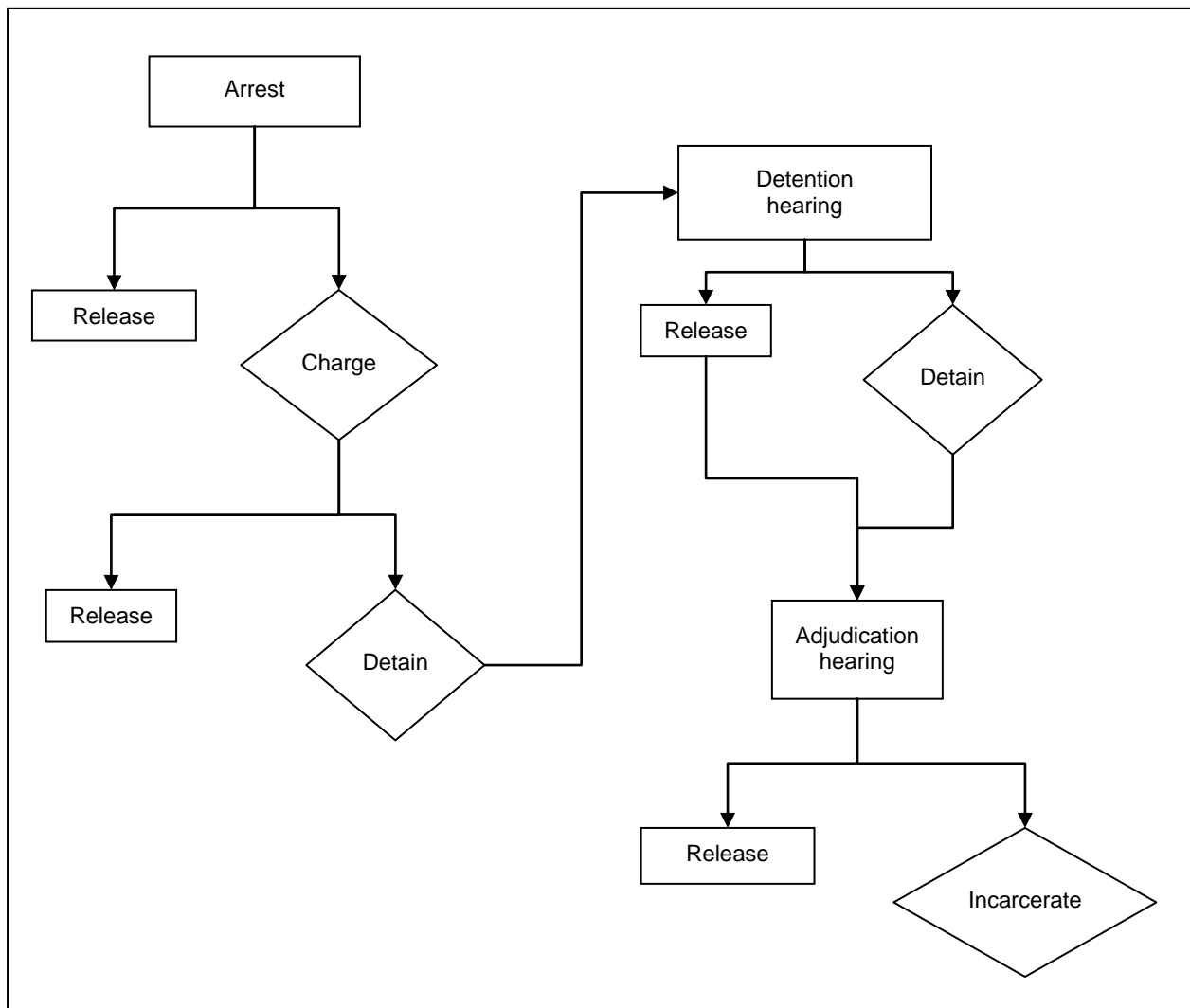
There is no uniform route that all youth follow as they move into, through, and out of incarceration. A youth’s path depends on many decisions, choices, and rulings made by law enforcement agencies and the courts (e.g., whether or not to prosecute; whether or not to detain between court hearings). See Figure 1 for a simplified overview of the process.^b Although having many options allows the justice system to respond to each unique situation, the complexity of the

^a This concept of transition was originally articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990. It continues to appear in current statute under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004.

^b For an education-focused flowchart of the transition process between an LEA and local detention center, see Nebraska Department of Education’s Pathfinder Education Transition Plan, here: http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/docs/NDE_fLowchart.pdf

system can also create issues. Each pathway has different needs and challenges associated with it. For example, a youth who is released to his or her home and returns to the usual home school while awaiting adjudication requires different supports than a youth who is detained and educated in an institution. Also, each step along the way can entail a new transition for a youth and his or her family or adult advocate. For school placement issues alone, each decision made by the courts may require a student to adjust to a new educational environment, including new teachers, new rules, and a new curriculum. On a practical level, each move requires coordinating information and transferring academic records between and among different agencies, which if not done properly can impede a student's progress and rehabilitation.

Figure 1. The Juvenile Justice System and the Path to Incarceration



Helping a youth move through this complex system and make an eventual transition to the community requires a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach. The matrix in Figure 2 identifies

key players who may be involved in the transition process, and where in the process their involvement is most beneficial.^c

Figure 2. Key Players Involved in the Transition Process by Stage

Key Players	Stage			
	System Entry	Residence	System Exit	Aftercare
Youth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parent or guardian	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mentor	✓	✓	✓	✓
Institution				
Assessment specialist	✓	✓	✓	
Transition specialist or coordinator	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guidance counselor or academic advisor	✓	✓	✓	✓
Treatment and/or mental health counselor/clinician	✓	✓	✓	
Instructional personnel	✓	✓	✓	
Behavioral staff	✓	✓	✓	
Person(s) responsible for sending, receiving, and maintaining youths' records	✓	✓	✓	✓
School District				
Registrar	✓		✓	✓
Records keeper	✓		✓	✓
Guidance counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or academic advisor	✓		✓	✓
Principal or assistant principal			✓	✓
ESE specialist (when appropriate) ^d	✓	✓	✓	✓
Classroom teacher(s)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community				
Juvenile probation officer			✓	✓
Conditional release or reentry counselor, when appropriate		✓	✓	✓
Alternative education and Vocational education services, when appropriate		✓	✓	✓
Family and/or youth counselors	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other community service providers (mental health, child welfare, and youth development agencies)	✓	✓	✓	✓

CHARACTERISTICS OF INEFFECTIVE AND EFFECTIVE TRANSITION SYSTEMS

A variety of factors can impede successful transition back into the community. Common features of **ineffective transition systems** follow:²

- **Lack of coordination and accountability** between agencies and other relevant individuals due to
 - **Communication barriers**
 - **Policy variations and misalignments** from agency to agency
 - **Information-sharing restrictions** and lack of knowledge about student privacy rights and allowances
 - **Variations in individual and agency commitment** owing to caseload sizes, agency policies, and jurisdiction issues

^c For Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice's DJJ Student Transition Model, which delineates the type of staff responsible each stage of transition, go to: http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/docs/transition_model.pdf

^d An Exceptional Student Education (ESE) specialist teaches students with disabilities and/or gifted students

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- **Transition plans created at the *end* of residence**, rather than at the beginning, which result in inadequate preparation of the youth for release
 - **Lack of youth, family, or agency involvement in planning, monitoring, and rehabilitation**
 - **Lack of youth, family, or agency involvement in the transition process**
 - **Lack of cultural and linguistic competency** by agencies in the provision of services
 - **Weak involvement from the court**, which places undue burden on juvenile justice facilities to provide transition supports
 - **Resistance to reintegration from the community, including community schools**
 - **Inadequate systems and policies for re-enrolling the youth in school** (e.g., no plan for the summer months), which can create undesirable circumstances for a youth who needs to remain engaged
 - **Inadequate professional development and specialized transition training** for agency staff, which lead to ineffective, and potentially harmful, practices
 - **Inadequate funding** for implementing an effective transition process, especially for stages other than exiting the system
 - **Poor tracking and monitoring systems** that do not link information across entities and limit the ability of responsible personnel to transfer records and to track a youth's progress upon release

In contrast, effective systems support collaborative relationships, communication, and cooperation among a youth, his or her family or adult advocate, schools, courts, and agencies that provide support to youth involved in the juvenile justice system. They have the following characteristics:

- **Coordinated service offerings** that reflect systemwide alignment and accountability across multiple agencies
- **A transition coordinator or specialist** to direct and organize the transition process^e
- **Transition plans created at first contact** that include the input of all relevant individuals and lay the groundwork for a youth's progress and eventual community reintegration
- **High levels of youth involvement** in the approach to rehabilitation

^e For a Transition Coordinator job description from Louisiana, go to: http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/docs/transition_coordinator_job_description.pdf. For Transition Personnel Competencies from Louisiana, go to: http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/docs/transition_personnel_comp.pdf

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- **High levels of family involvement** in their child’s treatment, education, and transition
 - **Culturally and linguistically** sensitive practices to promote youth and family involvement
 - **High levels of agency involvement** to address the needs of the “whole child”
 - **Strong court involvement** that holds all parties, not just justice agencies, accountable for serving a youth and his or her needs
 - **Agencies and schools that work together** to support community reintegration by changing and adapting practices to serve the youth
 - **Knowledgeable and well-trained staff** who can directly serve the needs of a youth or take steps to engage more-appropriate service providers
 - **Sufficient funding** to develop transition plans and processes that focus on community integration starting when a youth first comes into contact with the juvenile justice system
 - **Well-designed tracking and monitoring systems** that allow agencies to share up-to-date information about a youth’s past, recent accomplishments, needs, and goals

OVERVIEW OF INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN TRANSITION

This section presents an overview of innovative practices for transitioning a youth through his or her involvement with the juvenile justice system. Key elements of these strategies also appear in sections III through VI of this document, which address innovative practices for each stage of transition in detail. Here, five overarching strategies for successful transition are presented.

Strategy One: Communicate Openly and Strategically With Other Individuals Involved in the Transition Process

Communication among everyone involved in the transition process plays a critical role in ensuring a successful transition for a youth moving through the juvenile justice system. A youth and his or her family have a diversity of needs and goals and may be involved in multiple education, health, and social service systems. Therefore, providers (educators, community service agency workers, juvenile justice officials, and others) must work together, and they must seek out and incorporate the input of the youth and his or her family (or adult advocate) to ensure that needs are being met.

Innovative practices in communication follow:

- **Ensure interagency/inter-system collaboration** among all entities involved in the transition process, including juvenile justice, workforce development, education, social services, health and mental health services, community-based organizations, and employment service providers.

- **Use team-based transition planning**, led by a transition coordinator or specialist, which includes the youth and his or her family (or adult advocate) and a team that operates under a youth-guided and family-driven approach.
- **Establish formal agreements** among agencies (e.g., contracts or “memoranda of agreement”), that assign roles and responsibilities, specify accountability, and delineate communication channels.
- **Establish regular and consistent communication with the youth and family** to get their input into treatment and transition activities.
- **Establish strong linkages with community, businesses, and professional organizations** that can help reintegrate the individual into the community.

Strategy Two: Develop a Transition Plan and Monitor Progress

Tracking a youth as he or she progresses toward a successful transition from the juvenile justice system to the community should begin at the point of entry into the system, should be maintained throughout the entire period of involvement, and should guide long-term follow-up. An effective transition plan includes ongoing, systematic assessments of the youth’s strengths, needs, and progress (academic, vocational, social, emotional, behavioral, and therapeutic).

Innovative planning and monitoring practices include the following elements:

- **Create a transition plan** when the youth enters the system and update it throughout the process according to assessments of the youth’s current strengths, challenges, and needs. This plan identifies required support services and follows the youth to each subsequent placement.
- **Provide students with educational programming that focuses on academics, social skills, independent living skills, vocational skills, and the legal system** so they are prepared for the challenges they will encounter.
- **Maintain ongoing monitoring** of needs and student progress (e.g., academic, social, behavioral, vocation) based on systematic evaluation. The monitoring and tracking process both informs and is informed by the transition plan.
- **Provide long-term wraparound services** during aftercare, in which a transition specialist (ideally one representing multiple service providers) maintains contact with the youth and his or her family/adult advocate for at least six months after release to minimize the risk of recidivism.

“A consistent transition planning process, curricula to support transition planning, databases to track and monitor student progress, and a planned sequence of services after release are the key ingredients of successful transition.”

National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice³

Strategy Three: Provide a Range of Supports

A youth involved in the juvenile justice system needs a comprehensive approach to providing adequate supports for a successful transition back into the community. These supports include counseling and treatment, appropriate educational placements and supports, mentoring, and vocational training and support. The transition plan should identify these needs, provide a plan to address them, and continually monitor and update them throughout the transition process.

Innovative practices in providing supports include these elements:

- **Assign a mentor/adult advocate** to provide guidance, advice, and individualized, positive attention. This mentor serves as a role model as well as an advocate for support services and is ideally part of the transition team.^f
- **Provide pre-release training** in social skills, independent living skills, and employment training to prepare for engagement in school and the community.
- **Conduct pre-release visits and “admission interviews”** at schools where future enrollment of the youth is planned or under consideration.⁵
- **Offer social and emotional learning and supports** to help the student learn to understand and manage his or her emotions and relationships.
- **Provide special education and/or English language development (ELD) programming**, if appropriate.
- **Develop youth-guided and family-driven wraparound approaches that provide strengths-based services** and supports at all stages of transition.
- **Provide transitional counseling**, supplied by the transition specialist, to establish appropriate goals and objectives.
- **Use youth development services** to build the youth’s capacities and enhance his or her engagement.

“Juveniles who receive training in social skills, career exploration, and vocational education are more likely to succeed after release from juvenile correctional facilities.”

National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice⁴

Strategy Four: Conduct Regular and Comprehensive Evaluation of Transition Programs

To ensure that programs meet the transitional needs of students, facilities should establish an evaluation system to collect data on the transition services provided. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education shifted its focus from a compliance-based system to one that focuses

^f See NDTAC’s guide, [The Mentoring Toolkit: Resources for Developing Programs for Incarcerated Youth](#), for more information.

on outcomes as assessed through program evaluation.^g Research⁶ has identified three primary purposes for transition program evaluation:

- To inform program improvement efforts;
- To establish a reason to regularly communicate with probation officers and post-incarceration service providers and agencies, as they will be informants of the evaluation process; and
- To demonstrate ongoing commitment to improving student progress and outcomes.

Reliance on multiple sources of data (e.g., self-assessments, independent program evaluations, monitoring reports) provides a broader perspective, which can increase the usefulness of evaluation results. In addition, using multiple methods (e.g., questionnaires, surveys, checklists, interviews, documentation review, observation, and focus groups) makes for a more comprehensive approach.

A critical element in program evaluation is the collection of post-release outcome data. While such data can be difficult to obtain, they are crucial to gaining insight into program effectiveness and guiding future activities. One example of an ongoing evaluation initiative is Florida's Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program (JJEED), which annually provides program reviews and technical assistance to nearly 200 Florida juvenile justice education programs. JJEED also publishes an annual report that assesses each of the participating programs across a variety of elements, including post-release outcome data.^h

Strategy Five: Allocate Adequate Funds to Transition Services

Even the best intentions can fall short if adequate resources are not provided to fund transition services. Programs should gauge what is needed in terms of staff and materials to establish a comprehensive transition service and to sustain it. When budgeting for transition services, it is imperative to not only consider those who solely focus on transition (e.g., transition specialists), but also the time commitments of others involved in the process, as identified throughout this document. The State Agency Program (Subpart 1) of Title I, Part D requires that each State agency that receives funding reserve 15–30% of its total allocation specifically for transition services. State agencies and facilities subject to this requirement can use this amount to help fund some of the ideas presented in this toolkit. These funds may also help agencies and facilities leverage funding from other sources.

RECORDS TRANSFER AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO TRANSITION

Throughout the transition process, the efficient transfer of records is vital to a youth's academic success because it allows continuity of learning and supports. Effective records transfer gives

^g ED's shift of thinking, along with four types of program evaluation, is described at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2002/04/evaluation.html>.

^h To access the reports, see <http://www.criminologycenter.fsu.edu/jjeep/research-pubs-presentations.php>.

program staff essential information to evaluate and accommodate the needs of a student as he or she transitions through the juvenile justice system and different educational settings (e.g., detention center schools, education programs within temporary and final corrections placements).

This section presents an overview of practices related to records transfer and maintenance. Key elements of these strategies also appear in sections III through VI of this document, which address innovative practices for each stage of transition in greater detail. Here, four overarching strategies are presented.

Strategy One: Ensure Accurate, Complete, Useful, Timely, and Confidential Records and Records Transfer

For records transfer to be effective, the following practices should be in place:

- **Ensure that records are accurate and complete.** Service providers need to have a complete and accurate set of records (including a youth’s academic and social and emotional background, strengths, and needs) to determine the appropriate academic placement and to identify what the youth needs to move forward.
- **Ensure that the data collected are useful** and provide information necessary to inform decisions.
- **Ensure that records are transferred in a timely manner.** Timely and effective transfer of records allows continuity of educational services and other needed supports. Timeliness is particularly important in an institutional setting given the highly transient nature of the placements.
- **Ensure that information is handled discreetly and confidentially** to protect the youth’s and family’s privacy.

Strategy Two: Identify Pertinent Federal, State, and Local Laws

Agency staff should understand the Federal, State and local laws governing the transfer and sharing of youth records as well as general policy regarding youth confidentiality. It is essential that everyone involved in the records transfer process understand the statutory requirements to avoid placing unnecessary limitations on their ability to share a youth’s information. In some cases, lack of effective records transfer and information sharing is the result of *perceived* Federal and State legal constraints on the agencies involved.ⁱ

“Collaboration is the process by which multiple stakeholders make a formal, long-term commitment to sharing resources to accomplish their vision.”

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention⁷

ⁱ For more information on laws that govern records transfer, please see NDTAC’s article “Legislation and Interagency Relationships Aid in the Successful Transfer of Student Records” at <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/resources/spotlight/spotlight200701a.asp>.

Strategy Three: Collaborate and Communicate with All Involved Individuals and Agencies

Agency staff and personnel from other districts, schools, agencies (e.g., mental health or substance abuse services), courts, family members and/or adult advocate or mentor, and community partners (e.g., employers, non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, youth and parent advocacy organizations) should work collaboratively to coordinate transition planning and share information. By learning how different organizations work, personnel can communicate more effectively and identify procedures to promptly and effectively transfer records to ensure that the youth and his or her family receive the services they need during transition.

Agency stakeholders can encourage open and ongoing communication among organizations by holding regional and State meetings that bring together representatives of those organizations that should collaborate. Allowing vested parties to meet in person or by teleconference to provide their input on procedures may make them more willing to cooperate and coordinate the sharing of a youth's records when that youth leaves the care of one county or district and transitions to another. These meetings also promote discussions about possible barriers to transferring records, such as privacy restrictions, and strategies for overcoming these barriers. Below are a few ideas that facilities can use to begin collaborating with other agencies.

- **Establish what information to include and create a timeline.** Some key academic items to include are course credits earned and attempted, the youth's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), assessment data (State and district), copies of any certificates earned, and the youth's portfolio/work.
- **Delegate responsibilities.** Identify who will be responsible for
 - coordinating the collaborative activities between partnering facilities,
 - receiving the youth's records,
 - maintaining the youth's records, and
 - releasing the youth's records.
- **Enlist the help and support of family members.** The family can be a helpful source for obtaining academic data. Very often, the youth and his or her family know an IEP has been developed and can provide valuable information to guide placement in the absence of previous records. If they do not have this information, they can help identify the appropriate school contact. For this reason, agency staff should develop collaborative relationships with family members or legal guardians of a youth in an out-of-home placement. For strategies on getting parents involved, please see the *Family Involvement and Its Importance to Transition* section below, as well as the family involvement sections within each stage in this document.^j
- **Establish follow-up procedures.** The transition team should establish the process for collecting follow-up data once a youth leaves the system. Early planning of how to

^j Also see NDTAC's Family Involvement Library at <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/family.htm> for a variety of related resources.

collect follow-up data will help address later challenges. As in all other areas of the transition process, beginning with the end in mind—that is, the point when the youth reintegrates with his or her community and returns to the community school—will assist with a seamless transition when the youth leaves the system.

Strategy Four: Develop and Use an Electronic Data System

Electronic data systems can be extremely helpful in both transferring and maintaining records for youth in the juvenile justice system. Systems developed across the State allow schools and facilities to access records with minimal delay. Using Title I, Part D funds can be used to establish a data system for maintaining these records. According to the Title I, Part D Guidance, funds can be used to purchase new equipment or fund other needs with the purpose of easing youth transitions. This includes hiring data clerks and/or training existing personnel to manage records in compliance with State and Federal laws.

Several States and cities, such as California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Missouri, Oregon, and New York City, have electronic youth databases. For instance, in California, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), which is responsible for administering all juvenile court schools and alternative education programs in the county, designed a comprehensive electronic data system (Studata C) to track youth coming through the system and ensure that each youth has up-to-date academic records. Studata C is Internet accessible and eases the sharing of youth data between LACOE’s court and community schools and alternative education programs.^k

FAMILY¹ INVOLVEMENT AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO TRANSITION

Family involvement can have a significant impact on outcomes for a child in the juvenile justice system. According to the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice, “Families have the potential to be the greatest source of positive change and support for youth in the juvenile justice system.”⁸ Studies have concluded that maintaining or revitalizing family involvement while a youth is incarcerated or adjudicated is correlated with a successful transition back into the community and, ultimately, with reduced recidivism.⁹ Additionally, youth who anticipate returning home or to live with other relatives upon release, as opposed to a less stable post-detention placement, have a significantly lower recidivism rate.¹⁰

This section presents an overview of practices related to family involvement. Key elements of these strategies also appear in sections III through VI of this document, which address innovative practices for each stage of transition in greater detail. Here, three overarching strategies are presented.

^k For more information on Studata C, please view the July 2005 NDTAC Webinar presented by the creator of Studata C, Frank Plaistowe, at http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/events/webinars.asp#data_systems.

¹ For the purposes of this Toolkit, “family” and “parent” are interchangeable with guardian(s) or adult advocate(s) tending to the care of the youth.

Strategy One: Help Parents Overcome Barriers, and Make the Environment Welcoming to Families

Family members may fear that they are being judged by the school, court, and community because of their youth's criminal behavior. This fear may lead to hesitation about or resistance to involvement.¹¹ Along with other agency personnel, administrators and teachers from a child's new institutional school can reassure parents that their child's behavior is not a direct reflection on them. Schools can make this explicit, but parents may also benefit from a staff member expressing empathy about the parents' situation or directing the parents to a support group where they can get to know other parents in a similar situation. School staff should also explain to parents the differences in education practices between the community school and the juvenile justice facility. Below are some specific strategies to help parents overcome barriers and make the environment more welcoming to families.

- **Explain and/or provide literature** to family members and their youth about the incarceration process and system, their rights and their youth's rights, the goals of incarceration, and so on.
- **Reassure parents** that their child's behavior does not reflect on them as parents.
- **Help family members overcome any initial hesitation** about involvement.
- **Communicate to family members that school is a place for education**, whereas the institution/facility is where the child is held accountable.

After helping family members overcome any initial hesitation about involvement, it is important to make all subsequent encounters comfortable for the family. Below are some suggestions for how to do this:

- **Employ effective strategies to engage families.** These strategies include establishing trust and mutual respect by taking time to explain technical information, orienting family members to facility and school staff, and sharing decision making.
- **Provide an array of opportunities for family involvement.** Families may respond better to some opportunities than others. Even if a family does not respond to one opportunity (e.g., participating in a parent conference), continue to invite them to all pertinent opportunities.
- **Assess each family's level of involvement and act accordingly.** Inquire about the underlying causes of increased or decreased involvement. Build on strengths and brainstorm ways to overcome barriers.

Strategy Two: Communicate With Families in a Way That is Comfortable and Accessible

Suggestions for communicating with parents follow:

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- **Be respectful and culturally competent** in interactions. This may include using a language that the family members understand and being sensitive to traditions and beliefs.
 - **Continue to reach out to the family**, even if initial attempts at engagement are unsuccessful. School staff should analyze and change communication strategies as necessary.
 - **Use multiple modes of communication.** The more modes of communication the school uses (e.g., in person, phone, email), the more likely it is that the recipient will receive the message. Once school staff know the mode or modes the family prefers, they can tailor their communications.
 - **Don't use technical jargon.** Using specialized terms, idioms, expressions, acronyms, and abbreviations that are understood by only a select group of people prevents others from fully engaging in communication.
 - **Realize that communication is a two-way street.** The school should strive not only to get its message across but also listen to the family's concerns and requests.

Strategy Three: If Family Members Are Unable or Unwilling to Be Involved, Engage Others

Walker and Friedman argue that if family members are unable or unwilling to be involved, surrogate family members, extended family members, adult advocates or mentors should be assigned.¹² Some researchers have documented the effectiveness of such programs in reducing recidivism.¹³ Even if individuals do not have a close relationship or a long history with the youth, they can still have a strong, positive impact.

NEXT STEPS

The following four sections of this document dig deeper into each stage of the transition process (i.e., system entry, residence, system exit, and aftercare) and discuss strategies that may be useful to each: general transition strategies, strategies specific to records transfer, and strategies specific to family involvement. Additionally, Appendix A is a self-study tool to help you determine your status in implementing key strategies and plan next steps in program improvement efforts.