

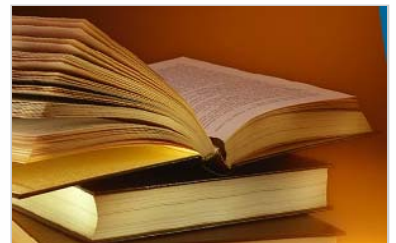


Evaluation of the Department of Youth Services Education Initiative

Executive Summary

Implementation, impacts, and strategic considerations for the Department of Youth Services Education Initiative

February 2008



Executive Summary

Beginning in 2003, the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS) undertook an unprecedented reform of DHS Education programs. This reform process, commonly referred to as the Education Initiative, was a direct response to deficiencies identified in a study report submitted by DHS to the Massachusetts State Legislature in February 2001.¹ That study was undertaken due to concerns that high teacher turnover rates were substantially eroding the quality of educational services provided to youth in DHS care. Beyond this specific concern, the report identified “a resource and systems crisis” with regard to educational services, and articulated widespread inconsistencies and deficiencies in several major areas. The report concluded that these deficiencies combined “to make DHS’s educational efforts ineffective and inefficient, thereby impacting the rehabilitative objective set forth in its own mission.”

The Department quickly moved to address deficiencies identified in that report by setting the Education Initiative in motion, with the Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp) and the Hampshire Educational Collaborative (HEC), under sub-contract to CommCorp, as key reform partners.

Evaluation of the DHS Education Initiative

In spring 2006, DHS engaged the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute to conduct an extensive third-party evaluation of the Education Initiative. This evaluation reflects DHS’s interest in formative feedback to guide planning and decision-making related to the Education Initiative, and to identify possible steps toward the next phase of the reform process.

Overall, the findings show remarkable progress in the development and implementation of key interventions and positive initial impacts. Following three years of active reform within DHS Education, tangible evidence indicates important systemic changes to educational service delivery, support of student transitions, and overall system management. Important new programs, policies, and infrastructure are now in place, which have facilitated improvements in the stability and quality of the DHS teacher workforce, in the instructional resources and methods used in DHS classrooms, and in the operative culture in which teachers and students function each day. Positive impacts are evident, and continued progress is likely, assuming DHS can sustain its vigorous investment of time, resources, and attention. At the same time, the findings underscore not only the need to continue and expand improvement efforts in the coming years, but also the challenges associated with delivering educational services to adjudicated youth.

Implementation of Reforms: Accomplishments and Opportunities

The evaluation first focused on assessing the extent to which DHS has successfully implemented education reform strategies and the factors that have influenced these improvements. These include changes in DHS’s educational services, transition services, and system management capacities.

¹ Future Management Systems, Inc., *Establishing Partnerships for Educational Success: A Report on Education Services in the Department of Youth Services*. February 2001.

A. Educational Service Delivery

Key Finding

DYS has dramatically improved the competitiveness of education staff salaries in order to attract and retain well-qualified teachers.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- A 2001 DYS Legislative Report identified “concern about the extraordinarily high turnover rate amongst DYS teachers and its effect on the quality of educational services.”² It concluded that high turnover and problems with recruiting qualified staff were primarily attributable to salary inequities between DYS and public school districts.

In response:

- DYS implemented a more competitive salary scale that increased the minimum salary for bachelor’s-level teachers, bringing starting salaries in line with state averages. The new salary structure also offers compelling incentives for teachers to pursue full professional licensure.

Looking ahead:

- As DYS continues to consider important reforms to its salary structure, it may need to offer higher salaries in key sub-regions where public school salaries are highest. Further, DYS may need to equalize teacher benefits and working conditions across program vendors.

Key Finding

DYS has made substantial progress in the development and implementation of a system-wide curriculum approach supported with instructional guides, templates, and material resources.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- There was “little evidence of consistency across programs for curriculum content, teaching methodology, or student learning expectations.”

In response:

- DYS and its partners have been building a curriculum approach tied to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, and inclusive of content goals, instructional methods, templates to aid in lesson planning and unit design, and self-evaluation and reflection. This approach is responsive to the unique challenges that a juvenile justice setting presents to students and teachers.
- DYS has made substantial investments in new curriculum materials and technology to support student learning, dramatically increasing the availability of teaching resources, Internet access, and student computers.

Looking ahead:

- DYS should consider replacing the existing lesson planning template with a more streamlined one, which may be easier to implement and thus encourage more consistent compliance.
- Systems to support the purchase of and feedback to new curriculum materials are ready to move to the next level. A materials inventory and accounting system should be created, and systematic feedback should be collected regarding the suitability of materials for DYS students in varying contexts.

² All citations in the “Prior to the Educational Initiative” sections of the Executive Summary come from Future Management Systems, Inc., *Establishing Partnerships for Educational Success: A Report on Education Services in the Department of Youth Services*. February 2001.

Key Finding

DYS and its partners have implemented an extensive professional development system and instructional coaching model.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- There was “no comprehensive Department-wide professional development (PD) plan for educators.” Further, “professional development needs of teachers [were] identified and met sporadically.”

In response:

- DYS and its partners have established a robust series of PD offerings consisting of several components, including statewide events, regional trainings, summer academies, and teaching coordinator trainings.
- Full-day statewide PD, focused on both curriculum content and pedagogy, has been provided five times per year since 2004-05. DYS has successfully eliminated key barriers to participation in statewide PD events, resulting in improved attendance. Teacher ratings of the relevance and value of statewide PD have gradually increased over time.
- DYS has established on-site instructional coaching in support of classroom teachers’ implementation of the DYS curriculum approach and the use of instructional techniques presented in PD.

Looking ahead:

- Feedback from DYS teachers indicates a strong interest in the use of more trainers with experience in the DYS classroom or a similar environment, more strategies for working with high-mobility students, and more training in “extreme” differentiation of instruction, which continues to challenge many educators.
- It may be important to offer two PD tracks, one targeted to veteran staff who have effectively integrated past PD into practice, and another for new teachers or those struggling to apply concepts in the classroom.
- The non-supervisory nature of the instructional coaches’ role and the confidentiality of coach-to-teacher contact are critical components of their work and should be protected. Further, as the role of the DYS instructional coach continues to evolve, the existing job description may need updating.

B. Transition Services

Key Finding

DYS has identified a need for more robust employment pathways for appropriate DYS youth and is actively piloting and assessing new programs, and taking other steps, to support this need.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- A 2001 study observed that “a growing number of youth in DYS... would benefit from participation in vocational training, work skill development, and job preparation training,” and described vocational and job training opportunities within DYS as “sporadic.”

In response:

- DYS has actively supported new partnership-based models to enhance the career-readiness and employability of DYS youth, highlighted by the Bridging the Opportunity Gap Initiative, which funded 14 pilot programs in FY 2007.
- The Department is taking proactive steps to support GED and employability programming directly within its educational programs. Such steps include revising policies vis-à-vis GED services (currently under review), integrating career decision-making tools into the student assessment regimen, and plans for developing an instructional guide for career readiness and employability (due in June 2008).

Looking ahead:

- Partnership-based program models are highly practical and offer economies of cost and expertise. They are also complex to develop and manage, and the long-term sustainability of programs that rely on grant funding remains uncertain.
- A focus on GED attainment and employability skills for appropriate youth in DYS residential programs may offer great benefits to students who would be receiving services in a closely-monitored and accountable environment.

Key Finding

DYS has improved the infrastructure to support student transitions within DYS and into academic settings in the community. New models to facilitate transition are being pursued.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- Support for student transitions within DYS and to community-based academic settings was often inadequate. It was observed that “DYS does not have standard protocols in place nor the resources to execute them...” Further, Education Liaison positions showed high vacancy rates.

In response:

- DYS has engaged in several partnerships with urban school districts and communities to facilitate student transitions into academic settings.
- The Universal Student Transcript is among the most tangible evidence of the development and implementation of more effective transition protocols. Public school officials indicate an improved ability to assess DYS students’ academic experience, resulting in improved credit recovery and timelier student placement.
- The stability of DYS’s Education Liaison positions was benefited by the introduction of the same wage scale that applies to DYS teachers. All ten positions were filled at the time of this study.

Looking ahead:

- DYS managers and staff agree that student transition remains an area in need of continued reform and investment by DYS. Ultimately, attention to this component of the continuum of care will be essential to realizing and measuring the long-term outcomes of the Education Initiative.
- Further study is required to understand the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of partnerships with urban school districts and community organizations; little information is currently available or reported to DYS.
- Anecdotal reports of non-compliance with Universal Student Transcript protocols at some programs, related to turnaround time in particular, suggest that ongoing training, as well as enforcement of compliance, may be advisable.

C. Education System Management

Key Finding

DYS has expanded its management capacity and educational expertise through use of external vendors – most notably CommCorp and HEC.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- DYS did “not have a management infrastructure capable of supporting its education, job training, and employment programs. Prior to the budget cuts of 1990, the Department had an education and job training staff of ten. Through attrition and early retirement, this number was reduced to two central office education staff, and no central office job training staff” as of 2001.

In response:

- DYS has taken steps to address deficits in its management capacity and educational expertise utilizing a partnership approach with external vendors.
- DYS has approved funding for new management positions which constitute a promising step forward in support of a more unified approach to critical program areas including transition services, career readiness programs, and education data management.

Looking ahead:

- The use of contractual arrangements with external vendors has enabled much of the Education Initiative's progress to this point, but may not meet DYS's interest in developing internal management capacity.
- Increasing DYS management capacity through additional state positions would enhance the Department's ability to effectively manage its education system and public investment in its improvement.

Key Finding

DYS has improved its education system coordination and has taken important steps toward establishing more effective system-level accountability.

Prior to the Education Initiative:

- Studies concluded that DYS lacked the internal administrative capacity to coordinate and sustain an education system of this magnitude. Further, these studies reflected the absence of clear expectations relative to the standards for education within DYS.

In response:

- DYS increased program-level accountability through the development and implementation of Minimum Education Standards that set clear expectations and are applicable to all programs.
- DYS implemented a Field Assessment process to collect information on programs' compliance with the Minimum Education Standards. This process established a foundation upon which more rigorous progress-monitoring and continuous improvement systems may be built.
- DYS has made substantial progress with MCAS coordination and administration, and the attendant training and information provided to support MCAS activities are well regarded in the system.
- DYS Education has improved system coordination in many regards. For example, DYS now routinely convenes functional workgroups and system-wide meetings of key staff to support communication and decision making related to education services.

Looking ahead:

- As an increasing number of programs are meeting the Minimum Education Standards, DYS is now in a position to "raise the bar" for performance.
- As DYS will not conduct the Field Assessment process in FY 2008, ideally this will provide a pause to consider options for a more robust, program-level data-collection and feedback system to serve the future needs of DYS Education.
- DYS data-collection protocols and information-sharing mechanisms may be among the areas most in need of further intervention at this time. In the aggregate, protocols and systems to support the collection and movement of data within the organization are under-developed and often inefficient. This is unlikely to be resolved in the absence of a comprehensive information management system.

Short- and Mid-Term Impacts of the Education Initiative

A. Short-Term Impacts of the Education Initiative

At this point in the reform process the outcomes of the Education Initiative remain preliminary; however, it appears to have resulted in several positive short-term impacts within DYS Education. These manifest as changes in capacity and practice, which may be expected to support increased student learning and other outcomes upon which the success of the Initiative will ultimately be judged.

Perceptions of Education Quality

- Following three years of active reform, DYS teachers' perceptions of the quality of education provided to DYS youth have markedly improved, and future expectations are for continued improvements in quality.

Workforce Stability and Qualifications

- Data show positive impacts on the stability and qualifications of the DYS teacher workforce over the past three years, including a decrease in teacher turnover and in August vacancy rates. In addition, a far greater percentage of DYS teachers held a teaching license in FY 2007 compared to the previous year.

Changes in Instructional Practices

- According to teachers, new curriculum tools and templates have made a positive impact on instructional practice, and instructional coaches' reports indicate that teachers are now implementing recommended practices with increasing frequency and quality.
- Teachers report that statewide PD has had a moderate to high impact on their instructional practice and student learning in the past three years. Data also suggest that instructional coaching helps many teachers reflect on their teaching style and encourages them to adopt new teaching strategies.

Impact on Educational Culture

- Data suggest that a positive cultural shift has resulted from the adoption of education reform within DYS, and that a stronger professional culture has emerged within DYS Education. These trends are strongest among treatment programs, but are evident system-wide.

B. Mid-Term Impacts of the Education Initiative

The mid-term impacts of the DYS Education Initiative, conceptualized to include improvements in student literacy and numeracy, standardized test scores, and transition outcomes, cannot yet be assessed with great confidence, but data are encouraging.

High School Diplomas Earned

- Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) Benchmarks data, collected and reported by DYS, show that the number of committed youth receiving diplomas has generally increased over the past four years. While this is a positive trend, the finding is limited by the fact that it does not present the data as a percentage of all DYS students who were eligible to earn a diploma, though DYS intends to do so in the coming year.

GED Attainment

- Benchmarks data show that the number of DYS-committed youth earning GEDs is rising steadily. These data undercount GED attainment by excluding youth who have been discharged to the community. DYS intends to make data more robust by expanding community-level data collection and by calculating pass rates for committed youth.

MCAS Achievement

- MCAS pass rates among DYS youth reveal positive trends. Grade 10 English language arts (ELA) pass rates surged from 51% in 2005 to a historical high of 71% in 2006. MCAS math pass rates also improved steadily, from 17% in 2002 to 42% in 2006. In the future, DYS can strengthen attribution of these results to the Education Initiative by connecting them to data related to student characteristics and services received. Pre/post testing of student literacy and fluency gains while in DYS Education programs may further clarify the role of these programs in student MCAS achievement.

Strategic Considerations Moving Forward

DYS can be proud of its many achievements, while at the same time much work remains. At its core, the system has created a stronger and more stable foundation for success. Having established this foundation, a set of strategic considerations related to DYS's educational services, transition services, and system management capacities are provided in the full report. These strategic considerations are intended to provoke discussion and inform debate among DYS and its partners as they move into the next phase of education reform.

The full report also contains a separate section which features six case studies that focus on new programs, tools, and processes developed through the Education Initiative. Each case study introduces the featured practice's purpose and importance to DYS, describes its implementation, articulates its benefits to the DYS system and to DYS youth, and outlines opportunities for enhancement of the practice. Additional evaluation reports available include two literature review reports, and results from the DYS teacher survey administered in January 2007.