

Improving the Odds

For Incarcerated Youths

Recently, the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice received a letter that pointed out the many new developments in the area of education at the Augusta Georgia Youth Development Campus. After reading the letter, it became apparent what people may see as they visit other similar sites throughout Georgia:

- Students actively engaging in course work correlated to the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum;
- Students being prepared to pass state tests to meet high school graduation requirements;
- State-certified teachers preparing individualized lesson plans for each student in the classroom;
- A new textbook, recently adopted by DJJ teachers, to best meet students' unique learning needs;
- Students actively engaging in quality vocational courses taught by certified Department of Technical and Adult Education teachers;
- Instructors teaching work skills in high employability occupations;
- More than 40 percent of students in smaller classes because they have been identified as having special needs — students in these classes are receiving special education services by certified teachers to address their identified needs;
- Students reading below a sixth-grade level enrolled in an individualized reading program designed to remediate reading deficiencies;
- Students using the newly developed curriculum activity packets to prepare them for the GED;
- A distance-learning Spanish class preparing students to meet the academic requirements for their high school diploma;
- Library facilities containing a wealth of educational resources and high-interest reading materials available to students;
- Computers on teachers' desks connected to the DJJ intranet for use with educational management and student tracking; and
- School counselors working with students on conflict resolution or reviewing their transcripts and student portfolios to help them smoothly transition back into the community.

It is certain that visitors to these campuses would be impressed by the comprehensive plan in place to meet the needs of the youths committed to this educational program. Georgia's DJJ program is focused on youths and it is seamless, comprehensive and consistent statewide.

By Tom O'Rourke

The Framework for Georgia's DJJ Educational Reform

Has it always been this way? A letter to then-Gov. Zell Miller on Feb. 13, 1998, from the U.S. Department of Justice best answers this question. It was in this letter that DOJ issued findings that concluded that certain conditions in the state's juvenile justice facilities violated particular constitutional and federal statutory rights of juveniles. Shortly thereafter, the state of Georgia and the federal government, through good faith negotiations, reached a Memorandum of Agreement of provisions to ensure compliance with federal law and constitutional standards.

DJJ Commissioner Orlando Martinez laid out plans for making changes to the current juvenile justice system. Central to this plan was his support of education. He stated, "If there is a silver bullet for dealing with delinquency, it's education. ... Mental health services, counseling services and security ought to support the basic foundation ... education." This article focuses on the educational portion of his plan, Educational Services for Incarcerated Youth.

DJJ students, who may be in the system for as little as one day or longer than five years, provide many unique educational challenges not usually faced in the normal school setting. These students often come from dysfunctional homes; have poor academic records; experience learning, emotional and behavioral problems; dislike school; and have low self-esteem.

It was not long ago that teachers were asking: With the wide variety of students and transient population, how do we provide a quality program that meets each individual's needs? How do we know in which course to place students until their records arrive from their local schools? How do we track their progress and assign meaningful grades for them to take back to their local schools? How can we conduct a classroom of students who are in different courses on different levels? How do we get our students to graduate?

These teachers believed that the youths placed in their custody should receive an educational program that fits their individual needs. They believed that these young people should have the opportunity to develop to their highest potential. There was a consensus that in order to meet these expectations and comply with state law and the mandates of the Memorandum of Agreement, educational reform was necessary.

Strategic Planning for Improvement

Strategic planning for school improvement was the process used for educational reform. This process was characterized by five phases in an ongoing, cyclical process of planning, implementation and evaluation:

- Planning to Plan — Creating an understanding and commitment to the process;
- Data Compilation — Collecting school data relevant to the development of an action plan;
- Strategic Planning — Identifying and prioritizing key issues and developing an action plan;
- Implementation — Applying and carrying out the action plan; and

- Evaluation — Measuring the success of the action plan to determine future planning.

Phase 1: Planning to Plan

The first step in the development of the School Improvement Plan was to appoint a steering committee to oversee the process. This committee, which was comprised of school leaders, teachers in each academic area, site leaders, community representatives and other stakeholders close to the school setting, served as the driving force for the development of the action plan. Its function was to plan, coordinate, manage and act as a conduit for the change process.

Phase 2: Data Compilation

The steering committee, through its subcommittees, used the concerns identified by the federal investigation and the needs assessment gathered from site interviews and surveys to formulate baseline data for planning.

Phase 3: Strategic Planning

The steering committee used the data from these assessments to identify key issues that needed to be addressed to make positive changes to the DJJ educational system. They included program direction, educational management, educational resources, special education, behavior management, space, staffing, staff development and program evaluation.

Program Direction. The committee developed a mission, vision and beliefs to define the purpose, function and values of the DJJ educational system. It also formulated policies and procedures that would ensure a consistent, statewide educational system.

Educational Management. Teacher representatives from each academic area, school leaders, consultants and central office staff served on this action team to develop the educational management system. This management system includes curriculum frameworks, textbooks, teacher resources, 10-day academic modules, resource guides, curriculum activity packets, course codes, tracking sheets, withdrawal forms and transcripts. The system, which meets state and federal standards, provides validity, integrity and uniformity to the DJJ educational programs.

The curriculum frameworks, written for grades five through 12 in the areas of social studies, science, mathematics, language arts, and health and physical education, are aligned and correlated to the objectives of Georgia's statewide Quality Core Curriculum. They include course descriptions and objectives, course content, cognitive level of the content based on Bloom's Taxonomy, the approximate number of hours needed to teach objectives and resources provided to teach course content. The frameworks are provided to all teachers statewide through hard copy and the DJJ intranet.

As an outgrowth of the frameworks, curriculum activity packets (CAPS) were developed to provide teachers with individualized lesson plans and student activity sheets for every course in the curriculum. Students who complete their CAPS receive grades and course credits that meet

state graduation requirements and are transferable upon return to their home school. This system of mastery learning allows students the opportunity to move along at their own pace and accumulate credits toward meeting their high school graduation requirements. It also enables teachers to become facilitators, tutors and managers of the educational process.

With the rapid turnover of students in the detention centers, teachers often asked how they could get students involved in meaningful educational programming as quickly as possible. The 10-day academic modules were developed to meet this need. These modules, which are correlated to the state's Quality Core Curriculum, provide assignments in booklets for youths during the first 10 days of their confinement or until the center receives the students' academic records from their home schools. The modules were developed on three learning levels:

- Module A — for learning levels grades nine to 12;
- Module B — for learning levels grades five to eight; and
- Module C — for learning levels grades one to four.

In addition to instructional plans and resources in the core academic areas, the modules offer lesson plans for teachers and student activity sheets in character education, drug education, self-esteem, study skills, employability skills and conflict resolution. Placement in an appropriate module is based on initial academic screening through teacher observation and the Test of Adult Basic Education Survey, which assesses reading and math levels. Teachers score completed student work in the modules and assign appropriate grades. These grades are assigned a course code and are transferable when these youths return to their home schools or move through the DJJ system to other facilities.

Students who complete CAPS receive credits that are subsequently recorded on the academic tracking sheets, which are used statewide in all DJJ educational programs. They serve as permanent records to track students' progress toward mastery of the Quality Core Curriculum's objectives. The sheets list each activity packet by number, related textbook lessons, state objectives to be mastered, correlation to the statewide end-of-course and graduation tests, completion date of objectives at a predetermined level of mastery, and teachers' signatures with each students' grade. The tracking sheets, available on the DJJ intranet, follow the students' progress and provide a permanent record that can be transmitted by withdrawal sheet or transcript to the home schools once the youths are dismissed from the DJJ system.

Baseline data revealed the need to restructure the vocational program. An advisory committee of leaders from the business community, representatives from secondary and post-secondary education, consultants and other stakeholders was formed to discuss meaningful timelines, goals and objectives to improve the existing vocational program. Meetings were held with Georgia's Department of Technical and Adult Education to discuss working agreements with postsecondary technical colleges, which would play a significant role in the future of the DJJ vocational program offerings. A partnership agreement was signed whereby DJJ agreed to provide laboratory space, equipment, instruction-

al materials and supplies, and the Department of Adult Education agreed to provide the instructors and curricula that would enable students to receive dual high school and post-secondary school credit. Together, they conducted an employability study to select the most appropriate courses to offer to the DJJ student population. Students are not only provided with the knowledge and abilities necessary for successful transition from secondary education to post secondary education and beyond, but also with the skills necessary to compete in the job market.

Educational Resources. Most sites had outdated textbooks, supplies, materials and other resources necessary to adequately support an educational program. The curriculum frameworks subcommittee, made up of regular and special education teachers in each academic area, adopted new state-approved textbooks and purchased supplies and materials best suited to support the newly adopted curricula.

Space. There was a critical need for classrooms, particularly in all of the regional youth detention centers. Recommendations were made to install double-wide mobile units at each of these centers to provide adequate teaching space. Mobile units were purchased and put in place to meet this need.

Special Education. Federal and state investigations indicated that special education was probably the weakest link in the DJJ educational system. The special education action team, which included teachers, technical assistants, central office staff and other stakeholders, completely restructured the special education program. The first step in this restructuring process was the development of a state-approved special education manual and a 504 manual, which is based on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, detailing all of the policies and procedures to be followed. These manuals, now available on the intranet at each site, served as the foundation for the entire special education program. Through increased staffing and the identification of eligible students, the provision of related services, staff development, training, hard work, technical assistance, and constant monitoring and planning, the most recent federal and state audits indicate that all state and federal guidelines are being met.

Behavior Management. Surveys and observations indicated inconsistency in the handling of school-related behavior problems. Students at many sites were being isolated and not receiving adequate educational services. There was an urgent need for a consistent behavior management program for students who exhibited behavioral problems in the classroom. This issue was addressed in a twofold approach. First, there was a strong belief that effective educational programming would reduce student discipline problems. Youths who are enrolled in programming designed to meet their identified academic, mental health and social needs are less inclined to present behavior problems in the classroom. Second, an alternative education placement model was developed as a structured approach to managing students who exhibit behaviors that are disruptive to the regular classroom setting.

The model requires that there be physical space set aside to isolate disruptive students within the institutional setting. Students assigned to it are closely supervised by a trained member of the security staff who monitors the academic work and behavior of the isolated youths. Students

placed in the model are informed of why they have been assigned, given the appropriate CAPS and are told the steps they must take to earn their way back to the regular classroom setting. This model plays an integral part in the management of classroom behavior at each facility statewide.

Staffing Plan. Adequate and consistent educational staffing was a problem at all facilities. A staffing formula was developed to ensure that a sufficient number of administrators and certified regular and special education teachers were provided at each site. The staffing formula used objective criteria to equitably allocate teachers and support staff to meet all state and federal guidelines. This allocation also allowed sufficient time for each teacher to plan lessons, grade assignments and participate in educational meetings.

Staff Development. An action team of administrators, teachers, consultants and other stakeholders was appointed to create a model that could be used statewide to train educational staff to carry out this comprehensive plan for educational improvement. This model included statewide, regional, pilot site and site-based meetings. Training consultants helped educational staff train in these broad areas: program direction, curriculum, special education policies and procedures, records management and student behavior management.

Phase 4: Implementation

Strategic plans often fail at the point of implementation. Translating innovative ideas into action is a very difficult undertaking. There is often a resistance to change, operational distractions and confusion regarding who is going to be accountable for what. Two conditions are crucial to the successful implementation of the plan. First, the individuals responsible must relentlessly support it. Second, the action plan must become a normal part of staff workload and people must clearly understand their roles in the plan's successful implementation.

To gain the support of the teachers and site administrators, selected youth development campuses and regional youth detention centers were used to pilot the educational management system. Teachers were trained at each pilot site and their input was used to refine and improve the system. After six months of piloting the changes, a "train the trainers" model was implemented statewide. Teachers and administrators at the pilot sites were used to train all the other teachers statewide in program implementation. It has taken about one year to fully implement this reform.

Phase 5: Evaluation

Most important to the continued maintenance of the School Improvement Plan process is evaluation. It is during this phase that the organization defines the degree to which it has been successful in accomplishing its designated goals and objectives. To determine progress toward the goals and to ensure compliance with state and federal standards, evaluation instruments were developed in three areas: program, teacher and student.

The program evaluation instrument was developed to enable the educational program to comply with standards of the American Correctional Association, Correctional Educa-

tion Association, Georgia DJJ Quality Assurance, Georgia School Board of Education, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act special education guidelines. The instrument contains performance ratings for standards in 30 broad areas. These standards are rated as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, with specific comments and ratings in each standard area. Programs are evaluated from three perspectives:

- Facility Self-Evaluation — Principals at each site review records; observe programs and classroom activities; and interview staff, students, teachers and administrators to determine standards compliance. They submit written reports to the DJJ Office of Education with corrective actions indicated.
- DJJ Office of Education Evaluation — A team of administrators, Office of Education personnel and other staff review these self-evaluation reports. This team then visits the site and conducts an audit. It reviews records; observes programs and classroom activities; and interviews staff, students, teachers and administrators to determine standards compliance. The team evaluates the steps that have been taken to correct noted deficiencies and prepares a written compliance report.
- DJJ Office of Quality Assurance Evaluation — The DJJ Office of Quality Assurance conducts an annual formal audit of the educational program. This department reviews documentation; observes programs and classroom activities; and interviews staff, students, teachers and administrators to determine standards compliance and program quality. Written reports are submitted to the commissioner and the associate superintendent of education.

Teacher evaluations are conducted by using the State of Georgia Performance Management Instrument and the DJJ Curriculum Assessment Instrument. Principals and site directors who document employee performance conduct these evaluations. The Curriculum Assessment Instrument is used to provide input for the Georgia Performance Management Form. This form incorporates job and individual responsibilities, terms and conditions of employment, salary recommendations, employment status and an employee development plan into the overall rating of the employee's job performance. Each employee is given a copy of the report's overall ratings and an employee development plan.

Students are evaluated by using the Georgia Standardized Testing Program. This program involves criterion-referenced testing as well as the state graduation test to determine whether the students are improving academically. Students are also tested and graded on work completed in CAPS. Grades are recorded on the tracking sheets and provided on the student withdrawal forms or student transcripts with appropriate course titles and course codes.

Summary

Significant changes have been made in the DJJ educational system. Have they been successful? These indicators suggest that the Georgia DJJ is headed in the right direction. More than 900 students have been identified and are receiv-

ing special education services — this represents a 300 percent increase over the number identified two years ago. The Georgia Department of Education recently determined that DJJ was in compliance with all federal and state regulations regarding special education at every youth development center and regional youth detention center school site. It stated, “The special education program in DJJ is exemplary; great strides have been made to identify and provide services to identified youths.”

Four hundred thirty-seven students completed one full year or more of a vocational program and received certificates from postsecondary technical colleges. Three students successfully passed the first of two Computing Technology Industry Association A+ exams. These exams will confer internationally recognized certification as computer repair technicians. One student received certification as a welder from Central Georgia Technical College and earned more than \$3,000 while working as an apprentice off-campus. Another student earned \$3,600 while working in heating and air conditioning with his certification from the technical college. A recent audit report from the State of Georgia Vocational Department stated, “The vocational program in DJJ has made remarkable strides. Students are actively engaged in quality vocational programming.”

Teachers indicate that they are much better-prepared and are experiencing fewer discipline problems as a result of the new curricula. They now have lesson plans and student activity sheets for students in each academic area. DJJ students have significantly improved in all areas of the Georgia statewide testing program during the past two years. Of

the 308 students who took the GED in 2001, 196 passed and received certificates. This 64 percent pass rate exceeded the state average of 58 percent. All schools in Georgia readily accept DJJ withdrawal forms and transcripts. Students are now earning high school diplomas based on academic credits earned in youth development campus programs. Students have been heard to say, “This is school, and it really counts.”

Recently, a student at the Dalton Regional Youth Detention Center asked if he could remain a few more days so that he could get caught up with his work before he returned to his home school. Dustin at the Eastman Youth Development Campus wrote, “Sir, I just wanted you to know that I appreciate all of the help you have given me in the body shop. Not only have I learned about fixing cars [but] I have learned where I am in life. I just know that things are going to work out for me. I pray that all of the people who have helped me through this time will continue to help others and make a difference in their lives too. Thanks.”

Has the Georgia DJJ arrived at the mythical “there” yet? No, not really. DJJ educators believe, however, that they are on the right track. These educational initiatives are providing youths with meaningful skills and the knowledge necessary to stay in school and to be successful in the workplace. Teachers are convinced that they have improved the odds for incarcerated youths to become productive members of society.

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