

Think Exit at Entry
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“Think Exit at Entry” has become the guiding principle for the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. The Georgia DJJ believes that the transition process begins the day the youth enters the system and continues well after release from the institution. Literature points to the need for transition planning as one of the most important keys to the successful re-entry of youth back into the community. It’s unrealistic to expect youth who are released from juvenile justice commitment to successfully find their way into the community without support. These youth often have chronic problems that require coordinated and comprehensive solutions. The Georgia DJJ Student Transition Model, developed and described in this article, is designed to coordinate services to assist the youth with academic achievement, vocational training, behavior management, peer and family relations, and life skills necessary for successful reintegration back into the public schools, the home and the community.

In May 2003, the Georgia DJJ was awarded a United States Department of Labor Academic/Workforce Preparation Grant to be implemented at its Eastman YDC facility, the largest male juvenile institution in the system. This grant expanded the existing transition program and built on partnerships with the Georgia Department of Labor, the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education and other state agencies.

Providing comprehensive academic, special education, and vocational education programs has been central to the mission of the DJJ Office of Education, which is to “provide a comprehensive educational program that will facilitate the successful integration of each student into the community and workplace”. The success of the department’s educational programs was indicated by the United States Department of Justice when it released the DJJ education programs from intensive monitoring, stating, “The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice has created an exceptional education system for detained juveniles.” More recently, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools awarded accreditation to the DJJ school sites.

The Department of Juvenile Justice is very proud of its quality educational program, developed to meet the unique needs of its students. Noteworthy accomplishments include development of a comprehensive curriculum, increased identification and services for special education students, an on-line statewide Juvenile Tracking System, and an extensive vocational program provided by the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education. A visit to any DJJ classroom will find state certified teachers, teaching academic courses correlated to the state performance standards.

Students are being prepared to pass academic courses and mandated state tests leading to a high school diploma or to take the GED exam. Nearly 40% of the students are in smaller specialized classes because they have been identified as special needs students. Individualized reading classes for students with diagnosed reading deficiencies and computer labs are available at each school site. Students in long-term programs are engaged in vocational courses in high employability occupations to provide them with the vocational competencies and work skills necessary to become employable in the community.

Based on the strengths of its academic, special education and vocational programs, the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice was well prepared to implement the United States Department of Labor Academic/Workforce Preparation Grant at its Eastman Youth Development Campus. The DJJ Office of Education used the grant funds to fully implement “The Student Transition Program Model” (see attachment). This model describes the continuum of services, with timelines and staff responsibilities, to be provided as the youth progresses through the long term YDC facility and on into aftercare status upon release.

The goals of the Student Transition Program/Model are:

- To provide a Student Plan to serve as an educational guide for the student while they are in the institution.**
- To identify and place students in appropriate academic and vocational courses of study.**
- To provide ongoing review of student progress.**
- To provide an educational program that will enable students to gain the knowledge, attitudes, vocational and social skills necessary to become a contributing member of society.**
- To provide a system where there is collaboration with DJJ program personnel, schools, state and community agencies to support youth as they reenter the community.**
- To assist in job placement, work search, school enrollment, and other post release options as needed.**

Juvenile offenders require guidance and support as they try to enroll in school or seek employment in jobs for which they have been trained. The Eastman YDC school counselor and the juvenile probation/parole specialists in the community have large caseloads and often lack the time and specialized knowledge to adequately address school and job placement issues. The DOL grant resources were used to expand on-site services at the Youth Development Campus and to provide follow-up support for the youth upon release.

Grant funds are used to fund a variety of positions to assist existing DJJ staff in the student transition process. A part-time program manager directs

the project and is responsible to review student plans and coordinate after care services. This manager provides oversight for guidance and assessment, portfolio development, job placement, and other services to assist the youth. A career education teacher teaches a course that helps students in resume building, portfolio development, and interview skills, in addition to emphasizing the social skills and work habits needed to obtain and retain a job. Two developmental instructors work with vocational teachers to provide individualized instruction to youth with deficiencies in academic and vocational skills. A statewide network of part-time career facilitators provides employment/school placement assistance to youth upon release from the facility.

The DJJ Student Transition Program Model has four major stages: intake review, ongoing assessment, pre-release review, and exit interview.

First Stage: Intake Review

Within the first week, the school counselor, principal and other staff assess the youth's school records and conduct tests for academic and vocational aptitude and interests. Mental health and medical records are reviewed. A Student Plan to direct the youth's program of studies is created within the first 30 days. The counselor and the program manager begin development of a Student Portfolio. The portfolio includes student records, vocational competencies, work samples, transcripts, certificates of skills mastered and work habits, resume, letters of reference, and other student data to be used in the transition process. The portfolio is also used to track and record student progress.

Second Stage: Ongoing Activities

Within 90 days, a review panel comprised of a school counselor, school administrator, cottage life supervisor, and the youth's juvenile probation/parole specialist meet with the youth to assess progress. The panel reviews the student portfolio and discusses student performance, behavior and interests. The Student Plan is revised based on this assessment.

Third Stage: Release Review

Within 60 days prior to release, the review panel, which now includes a career facilitator and the parent/guardian, meets to assess student progress recorded in the student portfolio. Plans are made for the student's transition and re-entry into the community. Information discussed at this meeting may include housing, food, clothing, sexual and /or alcohol abuse treatment, transportation, educational and vocational training needs of the youth.

Fourth Stage: Exit

Within 10 days prior to release, the panel conducts an exit interview. At this meeting, the panel ensures that all documentation is included in the student portfolio. The portfolio is provided to the parent, juvenile probation/parole specialist and career facilitator to assist in a successful student transition.

Has the Eastman YDC transition program been successful? Early results lead us to believe that we are headed in the right direction. Ronnie Woodard, Director of the Eastman YDC, is very encouraged with this program and he stated that he has seen a difference in the behavior of the youth on campus. "They seem to understand how this program can benefit them upon release." The principal, Dr. Marilyn Dryden, who has been at Eastman YDC since May 2004, stated: "In the short time I have been at Eastman, I have witnessed the positive effects of our transition program. We have seen a surge of much interest in student transition. More students are working and achieving in the GED programs, the high school track and in the vocational areas. We have many students who are now approaching us to learn more about the transition program and what it can do for them. I cannot stress enough the importance of keeping this program alive." Teachers have said that students seem to be more involved in their class work. Clifford, a former YDC student, says the support he received while at Eastman turned his life around. He is currently employed at UPS and attends a local community college.

Georgia DJJ has contracted with Georgia State University to conduct an internal and external evaluation of the program. The evaluation will review the treatment, education, and transition systems in place, making recommendations based on the results of outcome data. There are many indicators of success for youth who have gone through the Eastman YDC program:

- 90 youth (48 part time; 42 full time) are now gainfully employed in sites throughout the state**
- 22 youth are currently enrolled in a state approved GED program**
- 13 youth are currently enrolled in a technical college**
- 2 youth have earned their high school diploma while attending school at Eastman**
- 54 youth earned a GED while enrolled in the Eastman school program**
- 122 youth have re-enrolled at their local high schools**

Posters stating "Think Exit at Entry" are displayed in every DJJ classroom and administrative office in the state. These posters serve as an ongoing reminder to staff and students of the importance of transition planning in the educational process.