

4-1-2006

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## Recommended Citation

Borawski, Tara, "Educating Juvenile Detainees: The Goals of a Connecticut Facility". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2006.

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# Educating Juvenile Detainees: The Goals of a Connecticut Facility

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ED 400 Senior Research Project

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December 16, 2005

## Introduction

Over this past summer I had gotten an unpaid internship with the Department of Children and families. Here I did many aspects of social work; from going to house visits and seeing how the children and the parents are doing to doing research for the deputy commissioner about literacy rates and young adults to helping collect the educational resources at the Primer Facility. Working with this population of at risk children, I really started to see that they don't have much going for them, in terms of parenting and support. Many children who are with DCF are in foster care and jump from house to house and to different schools, making it hard for them to succeed academically and behaviorally.

Working with the social workers, they have stressed the need to educate these at risk children, and so I became very interested and involved on this approach. While I was working, I realized they only have one correctional facility for teenage boys in Connecticut, the Primer Facility. I started coming up with many questions on how they educate these boys if they are coming from all over Connecticut, with not the same educational backgrounds. From all of these questions, I have come up with this for the start of my project: What are the goals at the Primer Facility for these juveniles and how are these goals reflected in the curriculum and the classroom?

While researching this topic, I have found that the number of juvenile detainees is increasing exponentially, not only in Connecticut but in the whole country. If more and more youth are being sentenced to these facilities, then the states should make sure they

are creating a strong learning environment not only for the youth to succeed academically, but to prosper as an individual to make better choices. However, there isn't much information on the different programs used in facilities for youth because the "education programs in many juvenile correctional facilities are inadequate" (EDJJ). Many don't cater to the needs of the children in the facilities.

Giulioti did a study on Project READ, which was the "latest assessment of reading levels of incarcerated youth", which was conducted all the way back in 1978. From the results that Project READ gave us, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention looked for different methods or models to help improve literacy in correctional facilities. Some methods that they used were; "direct instruction methods...and teacher-directed classrooms use sequenced structured materials appropriate for the student's ability" (Giulioti). After testing these methods and other phonics' instruction, the students had a significant increase in their reading abilities. If this program works then we need to implement more programs like this across America. While researching at the Primer Facility, I have examined the different programs this facility utilizes. If this facility has positive outcomes then it should be a model for further correctional facilities for youth.

With the research that I have come up with, it is mainly negative on how these boys and juvenile delinquents are underachievers and illiterate. These schools are where the juveniles regain their confidence, both with their lives but also regain confidence in their academic abilities. Researchers should focus on what works for this population, not how they are underachievers. It has been noted that many youth who are detained in juvenile correction facilities are below a fourth grade reading level, which makes them

functionally illiterate (Giulioti). Many agree that the underlying problem of poor academic achievement is due to the fact that youth have difficulty in reading, which then leads to delinquent behaviors. When young boys are not doing well in school, they look for other ways to stand out; they resort to destructive behavior and truant behavior as well. They start not to care about school and doing well academically, so they start to cut classes and eventually the whole day.

With the juveniles coming from all over Connecticut, they have “a broad range of intense educational, mental health, medical, and social needs” (National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice), making it difficult to provide a regular curriculum. Therefore, many feel that incarcerated youth are provided with minimum services and there is a “lack of attention to [their] educational rights” (EDJJ). This is highly unfair, just because these children do not have the right guidance, doesn’t mean they should be punished for it by not educating them. These facilities should have the same resources available to them as regular public education does. According to Partee, “many of these youth have the ability to succeed but they are so far outside the educational mainstream and have been for so long that flexible approaches must be applied to their education and development” (Partee).

One of the goals of many correctional facilities is to help reduce the numbers of recidivism. Education is one of the most important skills one can acquire to prevent delinquent behavior and the reduction of recidivism (EDJJ). When released into the communities, CJTS wants their students to be successful and have a gradual transition (Eggleston). Eggleston debated whether “recidivism data be used as a measure of correctional education program success.” In the mission statement, CJTS states that their

goals are “to prepare boys committed to DCF and placed in a secure facility for successful community re-entry through innovative educational, treatment and rehabilitative services.” So upon seeing the recidivism rates, schools can see if they are actually reaching their goals to decrease the rates of reentry.

This Connecticut facility aims for the children to be educated and have a smooth transition not only into their community, but their school systems as well. This is implemented throughout the classrooms, the environments that the teachers provide for these boys and the literacy program the school utilizes

## Methodology

I have taken the qualitative methods approach to examine my research question. I have interviewed 4 different people; the deputy commissioner of Department of Children and families, the principal, and two teachers. I had interviewed the deputy commissioner, Ms. Miller, because she is one of the top people in DCF, which is a state run organization that runs this school along with a few others. Ms. Millar deals with all of the policies, curriculum, and staffing at the Primer Facility. She has worked very close with the school, teachers and even the children, so she is very knowledgeable on how this facility operates. It was very necessary to complete an interview with the principal, Ms. Ward because she has been at this school for years and was just appointed the full time principal of this school in August of 2005. I have met with Ms. Ward on different occasions through my internship in the summer, and she has always been a very cheery

and approachable woman, which showed how she feels about this facility, the faculty and the children. The other two interviews I chose to do were on Mr. Smith, who is a math teacher, and Mrs. Chantel, who teaches English. I had observed both of these teachers' classrooms. Mr. Smith has also created the math curriculum at this school and Mrs. Chantel was very interesting and had worked in criminal justice before she taught this population. By interviewing these people I wanted to explore the curriculum of this facility, what its goals were and if they thought this curriculum works best for this population.

To find out how these goals are implemented in the curriculum, I did various class observations. I spent a total of 5-6 hours in four different classrooms; math, English, world cultures, and a Computer Education class. By observing these classes, it contextualized and made me get a feel of how a normal day would run for these boys. It showed me how teachers reached these goals through their teaching styles.

### Description of the Setting

The Ward facility is home to 112 boys who range in age from 12-18 and are in grades 6-12. This all boy facility is made up of mostly minorities. This facility is set up like a high security prison; having a very high chain link fence, with barbed wire wrapped around the top, inclosing all of the property is lays on. The main building of this facility houses the security cameras as well as huge steel doors with windows, which are always locked. When I walk in, I get my bags checked and I have to walk through a metal detector. The security at the front desk makes sure that I don't have any keys or cell

phones on me, before I am allowed through the doors; someone has to come down and walk me to the building where the classes are held. There are two ways in which I can walk to the courtyard of the facility, the one on the left is for visitors and the one on the right is for faculty and staff; the faculty have to go through the same security check as I do. Finally someone arrives to walk me to my destination, buzzing in to the security stand for them to unlock the doors as we reach them. We go through a total of three doors before reaching the courtyard.

The interior of this facility looks like a wheel, with a spoke at the center. There are six buildings in total, each with its separate pathway, connecting to the spoke. Towards the right of the main building, is the school, the green house and different playing fields; to the left there is the cafeteria, and the living corridors in the other buildings. Once I walk into the school, I walk down a very bare hallway, no posters on the wall, just one lone metal detector. The school is set up with the faculty lounge in the center of the building, and the hallways circling around it and the classrooms on the perimeter. In this building is an auditorium and a gym as well as different vocational classrooms.

Along the hallways are many chairs lined up, outside each classroom for the YSO's to sit outside and break up any tension, if there shall be any. The majority of the faculty is white; however the YSO's are mostly black or Hispanic. Upon talking to some, they feel like they can relate to the kids better because they act like them and the teachers don't. There are a few boys who are roaming the hallways, dressed up in their white Velcro shoes, and their khaki pants with the elastic waists, blue collared shirts, sweatshirts, and/or jackets. All of these have a "ghetto" flair to them, with many of the

boys wearing their pants baggy and low, and their tops oversized. Inside each classroom is the teacher's desk, with their computer. Every classroom has a TV and VCR along with computers, mostly for the teachers, but some rooms will have two, so the boys can use it as well. The classrooms are very bare, just like the hallways; the posters have nothing too pleasing on it. Most of them are study skills, how read a dictionary, parts of a flower, presidents and so forth. These classrooms look like they house different subjects due to the types of posters that line the walls.

## Data and Analysis

In my interview with the Principal of the school, Patty Ward , she articulated two main goals for the children. One which she mentioned was through the school, which was to “remediate areas that are deficient, to provide structure in a strong educational environment, and give them opportunities for credits that will transfer to use towards graduation.” The other goal that CJTS holds is through the facility, which deals with the whole child, to help them become “productive citizens”. Ms. Millar has even stated that this facility wants to rehabilitate these kids with a developmental focus, in hopes of developing different skills and values so they don't come back, to lower recidivism rates.

The curriculum of this facility tries to take the curriculum of other mainstream schools in Connecticut and tailor those to this facility. This is because the boys are from all over Connecticut and it would be easier for them to ease back into their previous educational system. They try and use some of the same text books that neighboring schools have and offer the same regular classes such as English, Math, Science, and

Social Studies. The one difference between this school and regular mainstream schools is that it doesn't offer any foreign languages. The facility is places the students into classes based on their grade level and their credits they need for their mainstream school. Mrs. Ward had stressed that they aim for credit retrieval, so the kids can use this towards their graduation. The boys are in classes from 8:15 to 2:30 and have 7 different periods, the last of them is a vocational class.

Upon intake, the boys are evaluated and assessed on many different levels from cognitive levels, behavioral, emotional and drug issues. They go through different therapy, rehab and treatments as needed. Although this facility has two goals, my real interest was on how these boys were educated.

During my observations, it was very obvious that Mrs. Ward wasn't the only one who wanted to help educate these boys. In Mrs. Conway's World Cultures class, she kept stressing that she wants them to learn, not just go through the motions of school. In the class that I had observed of hers, the five boys in this class watched the movie *Dances With Wolves* which ties into their Native American theme right now. Many people believe that watching movies is a way of not teaching the students, but Mrs. Conway was using this movie as a supplement to her class lectures. It was also around Thanksgiving time, and because these children didn't get any vacation off from school, she thought it would be a good way to keep the boys minds working, but still giving them a break from regular lectures and classes.

At first, the boys started to complain about watching this movie, saying they don't like this type of movie, because it was older and nothing they have heard. Mrs. Conway, without raising her voice, replied light-hearted, that they don't like the movie "because

[they] don't want to learn, but I will make you learn". By saying this, the teacher was showing that even though they are watching a movie, she wants the boys to still be engaged and have their mind thinking about the ways this related to their previous classes and what they have learned thus far on their Native American Unit. After that comment, the boys all paid attention to the movie and start making comments and asking questions to Mrs. Conway, who was ready to respond.

Mrs. Conway is a very approachable middle aged woman. She seems to have such a strong presence with the children. They always listen to her and joke around with her. She never once raised her voice to the boys, even when one was sleeping during the movie, but instead gave him an ultimatum and joked around with him, which he responded to and started to pay attention. She never put down any students comments and always responded to everyone who talked. She really cares about these children. For example, one of the boys asked if he could get some water, Deb responded that he had to watch some more of the movie before he got water, so he started to pay attention to the movie even more now. While he was engaged in the movie, Mrs. Conway went to her desk, took her own water and poured it in a cup for this boy. She did this because she cared and didn't want the boy to miss any of the movie. She doesn't treat these children like criminals, but like students, which seems like a theme for other teachers. I had the pleasure of sitting in on Mrs. Chantel's English class and seeing that she has the same view of the children as Mrs. Conway.

Mrs. Chantel worked in criminal justice before she came to this school. She felt like she could help the youth in other ways, so she decided that teaching this population was the right idea. The kids have great respect for her; they always pay attention in her

class and know her boundaries that she is there to teach them, not to be friends and hang out with them. One of the boys had gotten in a fight earlier that day, and didn't want Mrs. Chantel to know, because he knew she would be disappointed in her.

I had asked Mrs. Chantel if she knows what each boy did to get in this school and she said that she doesn't want to know. She explained that each teacher can see each student's background, but she feels like she might judge the students based on the severity of the crime, and she wants to treat each boy the same and give them all equal opportunities. Ms. Chantel believes that these boys deserve a second chance and wants to help them and make good decisions in the future. She told me that a goal of her own that she tried to implement in her classroom, is to help the boys improve academically and make good choices. She believes that these boys aren't bad, but because of their environment that they were brought up in, they were not given much hope.

When I has observed Ms. Chantel, she was teaching an 11th grade English class. She explained that some of the boys are up to that level, but some are on a 4th grade reading level. To give them equal opportunities, she grades the boys individually and on their improvement and effort that they put forth. To help cater to the boys who struggle in this class they read the books (they were reading *Scarlet Letter*) together with a tape playing, so the students can follow along. She stops the tape periodically to see if the boys had any questions and then she asks some of her own comprehension questions. One of the students, who is not on grade level, was constantly answering the questions and putting forth a lot of effort.

Mr. Smith constantly encourages his students to participate all of the time in his class. He is always motivating his students by asking them many questions, such as;

“What would you do next?” and “why”. Mr. Smith believes that the kids can do the work either in their head or on a calculator, but he emphasizes that he wants to see it on paper, to show that they know how they got the answers. Mr. Smith relates to the kids and has a good relationship with them. He relates math problems to real life situations using sports statistics and prices of different products such as stereos. This came in handy, because they were learning about means and averages in the class I saw. In the class that I had observed, Mr. Smith had one of his students play “teacher” and explain a problem. This student enjoyed doing this very much; he really believed he was the teacher, calling on each student, helping explain the problem to the class.

Mr. Smith believes that this curriculum, especially the math curriculum works best for this population. He created the math curriculum for the school, when he started teaching here three years ago. He feels that the math curriculum and the curriculum for the whole school tailors to the students individual needs. It tries to bring up the students test scores in the fastest possible time. This curriculum gives hope to the students, showing them they do have chances to succeed in academics and in life in general.

PLATO is used as a supplement 2 times a week in addition to other English classes. This is the main part of the literacy program. PLATO has been utilized since Oct. 27, 2004, which means that every student at this school has been assessed with this program upon intake. The program is to help promote literacy in reading, language arts and math. It is a great program, because it addresses all different skill levels, it ranges from 2-14 different grades. PLATO places learners in the appropriate activities depending on their academic level. This computer based program teaches each child something and then assess them by doing different activities and tests. If the student

doesn't pass a test, then it goes back to reviewing that specific task, until they can pass the test. PLATO Learning's Middle School Solutions are individualized to help identify and develop needed skills while also providing appropriate challenges for students who are faster learners. It helps to find the learning gaps and tries to decrease them. The students have said that this program has given them more confidence in school because their progress, it shows them they can do something and be successful at it. Some kids now read for pleasure. The majority of the students have increased their grade level by at least a grade in a couple month span, one boy even went from a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade reading level to an 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. Some of the teachers have expressed that it would be really beneficial to the school and these boys, if there was a way to continue PLATO in the mainstream schools. The school is trying to get a license, so the kids can log onto PLATO at their public libraries and school libraries in their communities when they are let out of this facility. This program is working so well for these kids, because it is the individualized and lets the students' progress at their own pace; because of this Mr. Smith has been trying to implement a math literacy program, very similar to this.

## Conclusions

This facility has many strong and positive aspects to it. For example, this facility has some of the best resources in all of Connecticut. Ms. Miller has stated that the "resources are very rich" because when the facility asks for something, the state jumps through hoops and gets it done for them. This facility has cost 50 million dollars to build, and they still don't utilize everything that they have gotten, I know because I was doing

educational inventory for them over the summer. Along with the resources, the curriculum has a lot of promise in the vocational programs. It is one of their strongest aspects of their curriculum. These vocational classrooms include; arts, building trades (electrical, masonry, plumbing and carpentry), media production classes (equipment operation, public speaking), computer technology (basic computer literacy, computer repair, advanced applications), career/work center (career exploration/counseling, interviewing skills, resume preparation), family and consumer science (prep. For independent living, cooking), greenhouse/gardens (includes landscape), business marketing (typewriting, accounting, tax prep, business communication) and even classes on commercial cleaning and bicycle repair.

One main aspect of this school, which makes it stand out beyond other schools, is that student to teacher ratio. The class sizes range from 4-8 kids, which is very small, so the kids get more one-on-one individualized time. The faculty has also expressed their enjoyment working in this facility. They have explained to me that it feels rewarding knowing you can actually make an impact on these children. The goals of the teachers is to get them to learn, work hard and succeed not only as students but as citizens. Even the educational assistants, in passing, have stated they like to help the kids out with the different behavioral/mental issues because it is more challenging and rewarding- these kids are the ones many have given up on, but the kids just need the opportunity to grow and prosper, and they haven't gotten this chance yet.

“These kids are the biggest examples of social problems in Connecticut- they have been at risk all their lives- many of their own family members have been incarcerated, the odds are just against them”

“Most [of the students], I would say, are well behind academically but have the ability to succeed if given the opportunity and the motivation to do so.”

These quotes signify the main perceptions people have on this population of children. The community's they grow up in basically give up hope on them. From examining this topic, I am very curious on how these boys were treated in their normal schools. The Primer facility doesn't give much background on the students, like the family history. It mainly shows why the boys have been sentenced to this facility, any previous delinquent behaviors, how their grades were in their previous school system, and their general information on height, weight, looks, any distinctive features.

Another problem of this facility is that does not follow up on these children. Once their sentence is up, the facility doesn't see them unless they repeat their delinquent acts and come back. However, many of the children who leave this school are around the age of 18, so the next time they commit a crime, they get sentenced to adult and more serious prison. I would like to see if their improvement from this school continues in their old school systems, or if they just relapse into old behaviors.

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