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Education in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice 2009

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The purpose of this report is to provide information to legislative leaders and the general public on the state of education in the secure facilities operated by the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. The Department provides these services through School District 428, a special school district created by the Illinois legislature solely for this purpose. This report should be seen as a follow up to a prior report issued by the John Howard Association of Illinois in October of 2007: "Teachers in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice."

This report is based on the observations of teams of trained citizen volunteers who have visited each of the eight secure facilities operated by the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice since its inception in July 2006 and who observed conditions and interviewed administration, staff and youth. Each facility has been visited a minimum of three times over this period.

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Education in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice

Classroom education is perhaps the most important and effective agent for change in the lives of the young men and women committed to the care of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. Most youth enrolled in school spend more time in classes than in any other activity offered by the facility. For many of these youth it may be their last opportunity to obtain a high school diploma or GED, and perhaps, to even learn to read and write. Many of the youth who enter DJJ have been thrown out or pushed out of local schools, or have simply absented themselves because of a lack of motivation to attend or an inability to keep up with their peers.

DJJ provides an opportunity for these young people to be placed in small classes (there are no more than 12 youth in any one class and many are as small as 8 students), with teachers who are used to providing individualized instruction that challenges youth while providing them with opportunities to succeed. All youth are initially assessed for math and reading levels and school transcripts are obtained to gauge scholastic achievement. Youth are placed in classes with others who are working on the same subjects at similar levels. Individual education plans are made to prepare youth for 8th grade or high school graduation, or to take the GED test.

Our classroom visitors consistently remark that students appear to be engaged with teachers and that teachers seem to provide individualized opportunities for each youth to succeed. Classrooms abound with examples of student papers and projects and the youth are anxious to demonstrate what they are working on. Given this positive attitude it is not surprising that students often make remarkable gains in educational skills in short periods of time, and that the facilities have high passage rates on the high school equivalency test.

Department Achievements

New Superintendent

In spring of 2008 DJJ finally hired its first School Superintendent, Dr. Lanee Walls. Dr. Walls, a former educator and administrator with the Chicago Heights Public Schools, quickly acquainted herself with the District's problems and has taken steps to raise morale of teachers, obtain additional resources for the schools and attempt to solve some chronic problems in the schools.

Her first job has been to attempt to fill existing teacher and principal vacancies and to fully staff needed special education teaching slots and vocational instructor openings. By the end of 2008 each of DJJ's eight facilities had a principal in place. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the open teacher and instructor positions. The challenges these tasks present are outlined in the following section.

Dr. Walls moved quickly to impose a uniform calendar on the school district. She instituted district-wide teacher conference days, and started the practice of having parent-teacher conferences twice each year. The institution of a uniform calendar and the designation of teacher conference days provide an opportunity for the administration to share its vision for an improved school district and to impart needed skills.

Parent Teacher Conferences

The creation of parent-teacher conferences was the first attempt of the school district to reach out to parents to involve them in the education of their children. It offers parents, who too often feel they get little information about what is happening to their child while in DJJ, a chance to meet their child's teachers, see their child's work and participate in creating an educational plan for their youth once he or she leaves DJJ.

Parents who participated in these conferences had uniformly positive responses. Unfortunately, given the location of DJJ facilities (often in remote areas or far from public transportation), a relatively small number of parents were actually able to participate in the initial conferences in September 2008. For the second set of conferences in the March 2009 some facilities also invited parents to participate by scheduling telephone conferences. This increased the number of contacts, but was only possible at a few facilities.

New School Board

Over the summer of 2008 the Governor finally appointed a school board for District 428. This body met for the first time in September and now meets very other month. The Board has offered the Department and its new Superintendent valuable assistance in attempting to re-establish post secondary educational opportunities and in updating and streamlining its efforts to obtain local school records of youth committed to its care.

Additional Advances

In December 2008 District 428 hired a Director of Special Education, Azalea McEwen, who is revising special education policies and procedures. Since only three of eight facilities have diagnosticians, she is searching for screening tests which can be used by teachers.

Individual schools appear to be making more efforts to involve their residents in the type of academic activities in which youth in local schools participate. IYC Joliet had a science fair. Participating youth were assisted by teachers in choosing a project. A given area of science was explored in depth, culminating in an experiment or demonstration. The projects were then set up in the multipurpose room and all in the facility were invited to view them while the participants explained what they had done. Prizes were awarded and the participants celebrated their achievements at a luncheon.

Department Challenges

Hiring

The John Howard Association has consistently criticized DJJ and its predecessor, the Youth Division of the Illinois Department of Corrections, for its lack of teaching staff. Teacher shortages have been so extreme at some facilities that youth do not receive the statutorily mandated number of hours of education per week. Although the situation improved somewhat during calendar year 2008, because of the proposed Pontiac closing and the hiring freeze it mandated, teacher vacancies began to rise again in early 2009.

To fully understand the difficulties the Department faces in trying to keep its teaching positions filled, one must look at the state's hiring process. When the Department learns it has an opening (and the process cannot begin until the position has actually been vacated), it notifies the state's office of Central Management Services (CMS) and asks permission to post the position. CMS may get back to the Department quickly, or it may take months. (When the state's budget is tight CMS typically takes longer to respond and is more likely to say no, even if there are unexpended funds in the Department's budget.) Once the position is posted, a month must elapse. Then individuals who have applied will be screened and "qualified" individuals (without identifying information) will be forwarded to the Department. A handful of Department employees who have received special interviewing training may then interview the applicants and make a selection. The selected individual must then go through background checks and pre-employment screening. The process of bringing on a new employee, from the CMS approval to an actual hiring, takes at least 3 months, and often far longer. If a second or third position falls vacant during the process one cannot simply look at the individuals who have already been found "qualified," but rather the process must start over again.

This protracted and convoluted hiring process is particularly ineffective in producing good, energetic teachers for DJJ. Most teachers are really "on the market" for a few months in the spring through early summer. By then they have found a position for the next year and are no longer looking. And because DJJ can only post positions once they are actually vacated (rather than when they are notified that the position will become vacant) such postings occur at odd times during the year when the market of teachers looking for positions is diminished. In addition, most teachers want to meet and interview with their potential principal or department chair. This is not possible since few principals have been trained in the required state interviewing protocols.

Finally, contractual mandates also complicate the process as it did with the proposed closing of Pontiac. Although there were no teachers at Pontiac, the possibility that someone from that bargaining unit might have qualified for a position within one of the DJJ facilities acted as a bar to the posting of any DJJ positions, including teachers. (The problem may become even more difficult if IYC Pere Marquette is slated for closing.) A second contractual issue that can complicate the adequate staffing of DJJ

schools is that there is one salary scale for all teachers. Those living and working in Harrisburg are on the same pay scale as those in St. Charles and while the differential between the state scale and the local school may be slight in Harrisburg it is probably large in affluent collar counties.

Understanding the problems that the Department faces in filling its teaching positions does not excuse the results. At present one facility, IYC Kewanee, has so few teachers that youth attend school, at most, half day. Since its opening in 2001 Kewanee has never had sufficient teachers to provide its residents the 300 minutes of schooling per week which is mandated by state statute.

The Department has had a particularly difficult time attracting and keeping the required number of special education teachers at all of its facilities. At one time the Department of Corrections had a contract with the Macon County Special Education District to recruit and hire these individuals. That contract has not been renewed and the responsibility falls to DJJ. It remains to be seen how successful Ms. McEwen will be in keeping the numbers of qualified special education teachers.

Curriculum

Dr. Walls reported at the February 2009 School Board meeting the Department's current curriculum is outdated. Our visitors noted the presence of many old textbooks in classrooms they visited.

Vocational Instruction

Vocational instruction in most correctional systems can be an important adjunct to the traditional educational curriculum. Many youth who find themselves committed to a correctional agency have had limited academic success and a good vocational experience can spur them to additional academic effort or provide an alternative career path. DJJ has in some limited ways provided youth some good experiences. Youth at IYC Harrisburg, Murphysboro and St. Charles have participated in carpentry programs producing goods for Habitat for Humanity. There are horticulture programs at IYC Harrisburg, Murphysboro, and Pere Marquette. But most of the facilities do not have an adequate number or variety of vocational instructors, or adequate equipment to prepare youth for jobs which exist in the community. Although the facilities exist at IYC Pere Marquette for the creation of a nail technician program, an instructor was never hired. IYC Joliet had a small engine repair and a print shop program but they appear to have been abandoned. A number of facilities have computers in various states of disrepair but no computer repair program was ever created. DJJ must carefully examine its vocational offerings, survey the current job market, and craft programs which prepare youth for real jobs. The current boom in green construction, renovation, demolition and energy must surely present some interesting opportunities. Once these steps have been taken we will strongly urge the filling of vocational instructor positions.

College Program

At one time, long before the creation of DJJ, the Youth Division of the Department of Corrections had a vibrant program that allowed its residents to begin to earn college credits while still incarcerated. The remnants of that program still exist at IYC Harrisburg which has a small college program through which residents can earn credits from Southeastern Illinois College.

Approximately 15% of youth currently in DJJ have high school diplomas or GEDS. At most facilities they engage in no further education, but rather work or hang out in the day rooms. Many of these youth are candidates for further education after they leave DJJ. In this day of distance learning it would seem that the recreation of such a program is attainable.

Conclusion

The Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice faces many challenges in providing high quality education to the residents of its eight secure facilities. Some of these may require additional funds, like implementing revised and updated curricula, and creating meaningful vocational programs and quality college offerings. Others, such as seeing that an adequate number of teachers are hired, may require enhanced cooperation with other parts of state government and a partnership with the unions. The schools need to reach beyond the walls of their institution to involve the community. Some already make good use of individual volunteers for tutoring, but most local schools do far more to bring members of the community into schools. Community volunteers, for example, could be recruited to establish drama, arts, music, sports, or culinary arts programs. A structured interaction with a group of residents can often lead to a host of additional benefits for the facility as a whole.

All of these tasks will only be accomplished with strong leadership from the Director of the Department, his new Superintendent and the School District 428 Board of Education. We urge you to support the Department and demand the best for its charges.