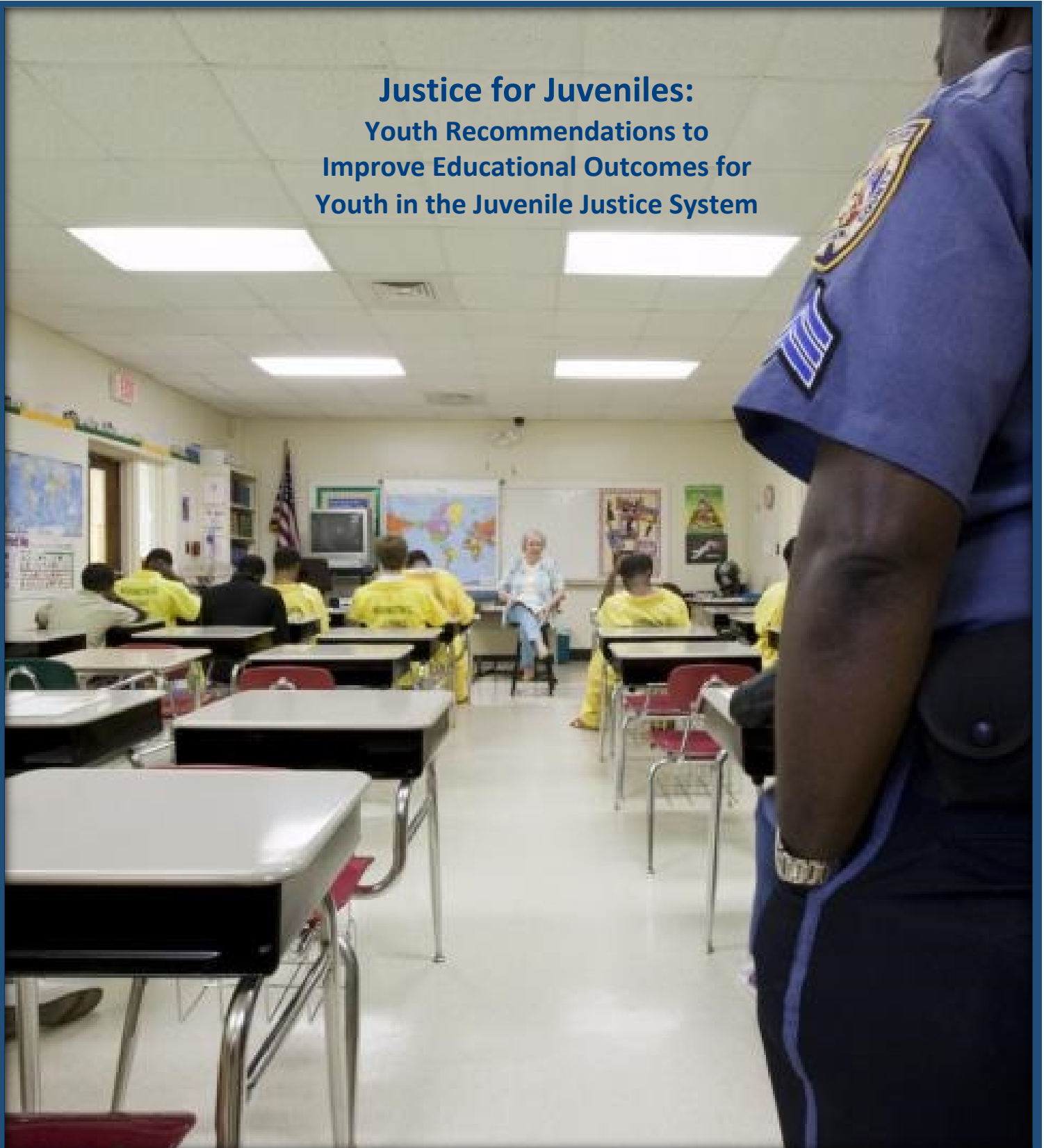


**Justice for Juveniles:  
Youth Recommendations to  
Improve Educational Outcomes for  
Youth in the Juvenile Justice System**



**Juveniles  
for Justice**  
a project of Juvenile Law Center



Juveniles for Justice is a youth engagement program of Juvenile Law Center. The program includes youth who are or have been in the juvenile justice system. Juveniles for Justice offers the youth an opportunity to assess the juvenile justice system's strengths and weaknesses, and then develop and implement advocacy projects to improve the system based on the youth's research and personal experiences.

*Members of 2014-2015 Juveniles for Justice:*

Brenden H.  
Bruce M.  
Jaleel M.  
Jamar B.  
Marcus J.  
Quadera P.  
Sasha G.  
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Tone E.

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April 2015

## Introduction

All youth deserve a high quality education, whether they attend a public school in the community, an alternative school, or a juvenile justice facility school. Too often in the juvenile justice system and alternative schools, youth receive a poor education and inadequate supports to transition back to their communities. These experiences have long-term consequences.

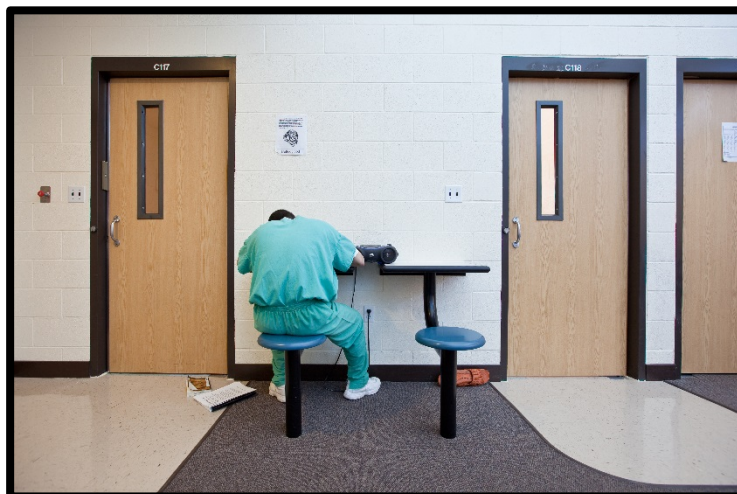
We are youth who have experience in the juvenile justice system and alternative schools. While we had some positive educational experiences in these systems, overall we felt like our education was negatively affected by these systems. Many of us were in facilities where all youth – no matter what age or grade level – were in the same classroom and doing the same work. We had teachers who did not seem qualified to teach us, and we did not have enough textbooks, workbooks or other resources that challenged and engaged us. When we returned home, we struggled to get back into school. Schools would not accept all the credits we earned in the juvenile justice system. We were behind the other students. Some of us were forced into poor quality alternative schools where we didn't learn and feared for our safety.

***If they don't care  
about my education,  
why should I?***

**- Quadera**

We know that alternative schools and schools in the juvenile justice system may not have enough funding or support. But we know that resources exist to help these schools improve. For example, the Department of Education and Department of Justice's memos, "Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings" and "Guiding Principles on Improving School Climates and Discipline," provide guidance to help put some of these recommendations into action.

Our recommendations are based on our research and experiences. If policymakers, facility staff, educators, and advocates want us to succeed when we leave the juvenile justice system or an alternative school, they should make sure we get a strong education and supports while we are in those systems, as well as the supports we need to make a smooth transition from the facility or alternative school to educational opportunities in the community.



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## Problem: Lack of Appropriate Work in Juvenile Justice Facilities

While we were in juvenile justice facilities, the work we were given was often not appropriate for our age, grade, or developmental abilities. In many of the schools in juvenile justice facilities, we were provided only worksheets and online computer activities. We did not receive work that engaged and challenged us. Some facilities only offered alternative curricular choices like GED programs. When youth like us don't have access to challenging, grade-appropriate work, they have fewer opportunities when they leave the juvenile justice system.



### **Bruce's Story**

*Beginning at age of 15, I lived in four different juvenile justice placements over 16 months. At each placement, I attended classes with students of different ages and educational levels. We all did the same work, and I felt like it was never challenging enough to help me advance educationally. The work is not stimulating, and it's at a lower level. It was nothing that I didn't know already. I wish there had been more work, harder work, and something*

*that would have me asking questions and thinking. I did not feel like the teachers cared if you were learning. Instead, school in a juvenile justice placement felt like vacation from real school.*

**School in a juvenile justice placement felt like a vacation from real school.**

**- Bruce**



### **Jaleel's Story**

*I was a 10<sup>th</sup> grader when I was in a juvenile justice facility. We all did the same grade level of work and I attended classes with youth of all different ages. We had to watch videos and complete short worksheets in all of my classes except English. Fridays were considered "movie day," which just made it feel like the teachers were just there to babysit and watch us all day. Now, because I never received some of the work and classes my peers had in their regular schools, I am severely*

*struggling to transition back into my regular school. I am struggling to transition my credits to my current school and to catch up on the subjects that other youth my age are learning. I think that placement schools should have assessments for youth when they first enter, to see where we are academically and place us in the right classes, with other youth on the same grade level.*

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Require Student Assessments:** All students' educational abilities and needs should be assessed when they enter and leave a facility. Students should be assessed for potential special education needs. Youth should also be assessed to measure their progress at the facility, which will provide feedback for teachers and staff as well as helpful documentation for students when they transition to their next school.

- **Provide Grade/Age/Developmentally Appropriate Work:** Students should be taught at the level that is appropriate to their grade, age, and developmental needs, and they should receive work that advances their educational goals. Youth should be in a classroom of peers instead of with youth of varying ages and grade levels. Youth with special education needs should have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are followed and updated regularly.
- **Ensure Varied Classroom Experiences:** Youth should be exposed to a variety of learning opportunities in the classroom that include technology, group work, individual work, book work, hands-on activities, and lectures.
- **Align Curriculum with State Standards:** Curricula in juvenile justice facility schools should meet state curriculum standards. This would help make sure youth receive a high quality education while they are in the facility and that credits can transfer from the juvenile justice facility school to the youth's community school when they return home.
- **Provide Diverse Educational Options:** Students should have the opportunity to participate in vocational/trade programs, GED programs, college prep, and post-secondary courses while in placement. Academic and career/technical training should be aligned with state standards and jobs available in the youth's communities. Career and technical training should meet industry standards so that youth are trained and prepared for available employment opportunities.
- **Provide Access to Higher Education Credits:** All students in juvenile justice high schools should have opportunities to take courses that will prepare them to earn college-level credits, or to take post-secondary courses if they already have a diploma or GED.

*It felt like the teachers were just there to babysit us all day.*  
- Jaleel



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## Problem: Lack of Educational Resources in Juvenile Justice Facilities

The classrooms in a lot of juvenile justice facilities do not have the same resources as normal middle school or high school classrooms. When we were in these facilities, we did not have access to the same textbooks or technology that we would have had in our community schools. Facilities need to do a better job of making sure that classrooms have the resources that youth need to prepare us to succeed when we return home.



### *Jamar's Story*

I was sent to a juvenile justice facility when I was 15. There, I did all of my work on the computer, but the internet always went out so I could not submit or save my work. The teachers would tell us that we could finish the next day after the technician came out, but often the problem would not get fixed and would persist. This was frustrating and I felt like I was falling behind because of all the work I had to re-do and make up.

Then, when I was sent to another placement, there were not enough books for everyone in the class. We ended up having to pair up and share books, which meant I would have to slow down or increase my pace depending on who I was working with. Placements that allow the use technology should have working equipment and classrooms with updated books and class materials for all youth in placement.

*When I was sent to [one] placement, there were not enough books for everyone in the class. We had to pair up and share books, which meant I would have to slow down or increase my pace depending on who I was working with.*

- Jamar

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Provide Adequate Classroom Resources:** Resources in juvenile justice facility classrooms should have the same resources that would be available in a community school (e.g. libraries, up-to-date workbooks, textbooks, and technology) for youth of all grade levels.
- **Provide Working Technology:** Classrooms should be equipped with technology that is up-to-date. This includes making sure that vocational and or trade classes have the materials necessary so students can learn things they can apply later. Youth should also have safe access to computers with working internet and the software so that, when youth return home, they know how to use current technology that they will need for their education and employment.

## Problem: Lack of High Quality Teachers and Staff in Juvenile Justice Facilities

In juvenile justice facilities, it is important to have teachers with teaching degrees who are trained to work with students who have special academic, emotional, and behavioral needs. Often, when we come into the juvenile justice system, we are behind grade level and have experienced a lot of violence and trauma in our homes or communities. It is important that the teachers and staff who interact with us have the training and skills to help us and keep us from falling further behind.



### *Brenden's Story*

When I was in a juvenile justice facility, I felt completely abandoned in my education. Often, teachers would eat or sleep in class, and they would only pay attention to us when their bosses walked by. We were often directed to get into groups and teach ourselves. Some of my teachers even admitted that they were not sure what they were doing. Youth should be exposed to certified teachers who are trained in the subject they are teaching and how to work with youth on my level who need behavioral support. This means giving behavior prompts, feedback outside of the classroom instead of in front of the class, and calling home when a youth is doing well. Highly qualified and trained teachers would have motivated me to learn. Instead, our teachers only motivated us to get through the day.

***Highly qualified and trained teachers would have motivated me to learn. Instead, our teachers only motivated us to get through the day.***

**- Brenden**

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Recruit Highly Qualified Teachers:** Juvenile justice facilities should employ certified teachers, equipped with the knowledge and skills to teach academic and career/technical subjects and course work. They should also be trained to support youth's emotional needs, and respond appropriately to youth's behaviors.
- **Support Teachers with Professional Development and Planning Time:** Teachers should have training and support to develop their specialization in teaching youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Teachers should also have enough time in their day to plan lessons so they can be effective in the classroom.
- **Increase Oversight of Teachers and Staff:** School administrators should provide more oversight of and mentorship opportunities for teachers and staff. Administrators should offer financial incentives to juvenile facilities when they can increase positive behaviors and improve student performance. Positive behaviors and performance should be measured through more than test scores and should include frequent classroom observations and student-driven evaluations. Also, local school districts, states, and the federal Department of Education should oversee juvenile justice facility schools.

## Problem: Excessive Use of Inappropriate Discipline in Juvenile Justice Facilities

When the classroom work in juvenile justice facilities is not engaging or challenging, youth in these facilities may get distracted and act out. Too often, the response to this behavior is excessive, inappropriate, and harmful to our mental health, including physical force and verbal threats. This sort of discipline makes us, as youth, feel unsafe and disengaged from school and other activities at the facilities.



### *Sasha's Story*

Since I was 14 years old, I have been in and out of the juvenile justice system. I don't feel like I learned anything in placement schools and felt like the discipline in my classrooms was inappropriate. The teachers did not have any control over the kids. When I did not want to complete my assignments, they sent me to the "discipline room." I never had a chance to explain my side of the story. The discipline room had only padded brick walls and no windows and no furniture. There were sometimes two to four kids in the room, with staff monitoring us. We just stood in the room with no school work and nothing to do. I learned nothing from being sent to that room.

The discipline in that facility made me lose respect for older people. You know how they say "respect your elders"? Well, I lost respect for them.



### *Bruce's Story*

When I was at one juvenile justice facility, if we misbehaved we would be taken from regular school grounds and sent to the "sanction unit" in a different building. Our time on the sanction unit could vary from five to thirty days. We also had to attend a school at the sanction unit, but I did not consider this school because there was no separation of classes by grade levels. It almost felt as if we were being quarantined when they took us there. I don't feel it was necessary for us to have so much time away from our regular placement school because of misbehaving.

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Establish Clear Rules and Appropriate Responses to Classroom Misbehavior:** Teachers and staff should provide consistent rules and protocols for behavior in classrooms. These protocols should include warnings that are clear and non-threatening. Youth should always have an opportunity to explain their side of the story.
- **Promote Timely and Restorative Practices:** Students should be given punishments that allow them to learn from their mistakes. Issues in the classroom should be addressed

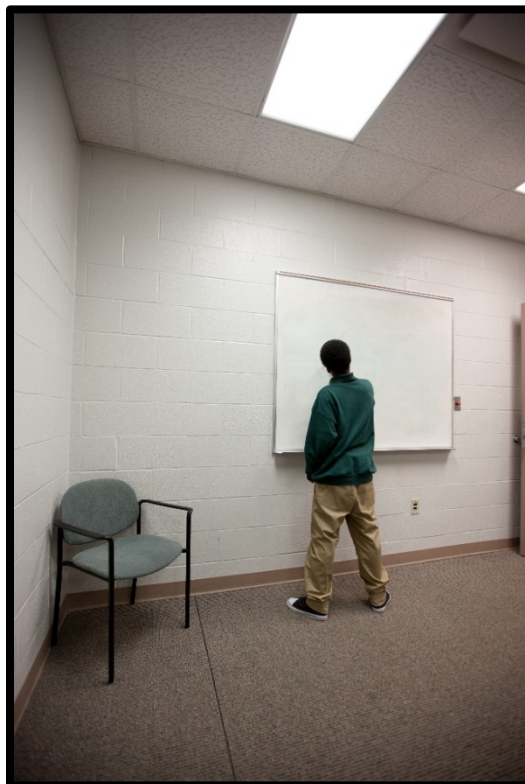


immediately and should not result in being excluded from the classroom for long periods of time.

- **Increase Oversight of Teachers and Staff:** School administrators should hold teachers and staff accountable for students' academic and social progress. This oversight should include more frequent teacher and staff observations by federal, state, and district-level administrators. They should also conduct student evaluations and assessments to determine if students are making academic progress.
- **Require Additional Training for Teachers and Staff:** Teachers and staff should be trained on topics such as diversity, mental health, and trauma. They should also be skilled in both mediation and de-escalation. For example, teachers should know how to redirect and prompt us in a way that is proportionate to our misbehavior and respectful to our pride.
- **Increase Data Collection on Discipline in Facilities:** The Department of Education should collect data on the use of discipline in placement and detention both inside and outside of the classroom.
- **Denial of Education Should Not Be Used as a Punishment:** Students in juvenile justice facilities should never be denied school time as punishment for misbehavior inside or outside of the classroom.

*If we . . . did not want to complete our work, we would be sent to the "discipline room." The discipline room had only padded brick walls and no windows. I learned nothing from being in that room.*

- Sasha



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## Problem: Difficulty Transitioning Back to Home School

We need to make sure that, when youth like us leave a juvenile justice facility, we can re-enroll in our community school and get credit for the work we did in placement. While we are in juvenile justice placements, we are completing classes and credits, but when we leave the facilities our community schools are not informed of the progress we have made. Too many of us do not get credit for the work we completed in placement, and we are far behind our classmates when we return to our communities.

Nationally, as many as two-thirds of youth dropped out of school after they are released from the juvenile justice system.<sup>1</sup> A 2005 study of youth in Philadelphia found that 90% of students who had an out-of-home placement in the juvenile justice system did not graduate.<sup>2</sup> More needs to be done to make sure that youth in the juvenile justice system can transition back into their community schools and graduate.



### *Shyara's Story*

When I left a juvenile justice facility and returned home, I was only one credit away from graduating, so I took my transcripts back to my public school to enroll. Unfortunately, my public school was in a different county from my placement school, and my public school said that they would not accept my credits and that I would have to go back to 9th grade or take GED classes. I decided to go the GED route and finished in two months. But I wish I would have had better educational options. Although I was able to move forward and accomplish my education goal, I wish that my credits would have been accepted so that getting my GED wouldn't have been my only option.



### *Quadera's Story*

I was in the juvenile justice system for about a year, and I had setbacks when transitioning from a juvenile justice placement to my home school. I was placed in the juvenile justice system at age 15. After I left my placement, I tried to re-enroll in my community school, but was told that I would be denied entry because I had been "truant." I found out that my home school was not notified that I was in placement, so they declared me truant. I had to go to court to fight the truancy charge, but as a result, I missed more days of school. Before I was in the juvenile justice system, I had perfect attendance, then they called me "truant" because I missed school while I was locked up. I was discouraged and remember thinking to myself, "If they don't care about my education, why should I?" It was hard coming back to my community school because I had to start a class all over again. It was also hard for my classmates to get along with me because they thought I was a bad person because I had been in the juvenile justice system. It made me feel depressed, like no one was there to help me.

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Require Transition Meetings:** Juvenile justice facilities should organize mandatory meetings between transition specialists, students, their parents or other educational decision makers, and the youth's attorney(s) to help students transition out of placement and back into their home schools. The transition team should make sure that youth leave the facility with an appropriate educational placement, living arrangement, career/technical training/extracurricular activities, and other supports. If youth are struggling to re-enter school, the placement or detention facility school should help coordinate access to any tutoring, remedial services, or credit recovery programs that the student needs to continue his or her education. The team should also make sure youth are aware of their education rights, including any special education rights.
- **Hire Qualified Support Staff and Transition Specialists:** Youth should have access to counselors, mentors, tutors and social workers while in placement. These staff members should work together with teachers to ensure that the youth's case plan meets their educational needs and corresponds to the youth's educational and employment plans and goals when they leave placement. All placements and detention facilities should have caseworkers that specialize in transition and re-entry. There should be enough transition social workers so that each student has the opportunity to develop an appropriate transition plan.
- **Align Credits with State Standards:** Credits earned in juvenile justice facilities should be transferable to any public school. Academic credits should be aligned within state standards to ensure that all youth in placement have the ability to transfer their credits across multiple districts within their own states, without delaying their academic progress and ability to graduate from high school.
- **Ensure Prompt Reenrollment:** Schools should enroll students leaving juvenile facilities immediately once they receive proof of age and residency (or other documentation required by state law).
- **Monitor, Collect, and Disseminate Student Progress and Records:** Schools in juvenile justice facilities should collect transcripts and classroom progress for youth. Staff at the facilities should make sure that when students leave placement, they and their families have access to their academic transcripts and other academic records from placement or detention. Placement and detention facilities should transfer all documents that demonstrate academic progress to the school where the student will return within 5 business days of the student leaving the facility.

*Despite all of my struggles, I got good grades in placement. But when I came home, I was not able to transfer my credits from placement so I had to enroll in GED classes.*

- Jamar

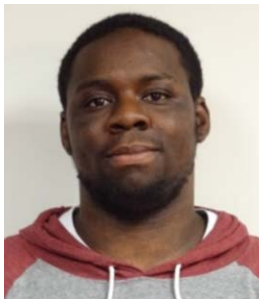
## Problem: Students Are Often Forced into Inferior Alternative Schools

Youth should be able to attend high quality schools in their communities. Many of us, however, were forced into inferior “alternative schools” when we left juvenile justice facilities. Others of us were sent to these alternative schools after we had problems in our public schools. When we are sent to alternative schools that are not doing a good job educating us, we often drop out of school, return to our regular schools unprepared, get stuck in these inferior schools, or end up in the justice system.



### *Marcus' Story*

When I was 15 years old, I was expelled from high school for getting into a fight after school. Because I was also on academic probation at the time of the fight, I was sent to an alternative school for youth with behavior and discipline problems. At the alternative school, I didn't have appropriate classroom work, and I felt like my life was in jeopardy. I decided to drop out after someone in my class got shot right after school. It could have been any of us. At that school, you could get punched in the face for telling the wrong joke. I felt like I was better off being on the streets than in a place where I felt like my life was in jeopardy, where I was going to have to fight for my life at any given time. Then I turned to crime to support myself. I was ultimately arrested and earned my GED at 16 years old in an adult facility. I felt like a GED was just as good as a diploma from the alternative school. The alternative school's diploma wouldn't have been worth anything because they weren't teaching you anything. Putting all the kids with bad grades and bad behavior together does not make them better. Kids need to be around more positive people with smaller classroom sizes and support so we can feel safe and learn to be less negative. I feel like if I was able to go to a normal school with adequate classroom work, that time in the adult criminal system could have been avoided.



### *Brenden's Story*

I spent time in an alternative school for youth with behavior problems. While I was living at a group home, I got into some fights and was automatically enrolled in an alternative school. I had no opportunity to tell my side of the story or negotiate where I wanted to go to school. No one asked me what I wanted or advocated for me. The alternative school was like academic punishment. There was no structure to our day or classroom lessons. The alternative school was my first year of high school, and I didn't learn what I needed to. Instead, my hope was just getting through the day. I feel like it was unfair for me to be punished academically for behavior issues outside of school. I would have had a better education experience if I could have gone to regular school while I was at the group home. I wish that I would have had an advocate who could have helped me go to regular school. I don't deserve to be wrongly placed.

## Recommendations for Change:

- **Eliminate Zero Tolerance Policies:** Remove policies in public schools that require students who misbehave to be suspended, expelled, sent to alternative schools, and/or referred to law enforcement. Allow youth second chances before they are disciplined. Offer opportunities for youth to receive behavioral and emotional supports so that youth feel safer and more engaged in the school community.
- **Require Formal Hearings before Placement in Alternative Schools:** Students should never be automatically placed in inferior alternative education program when they are released from a juvenile facility or while on electronic monitoring. Youth are best served by – and therefore should be allowed to attend – their community schools. When youth are released from juvenile facilities, attending the community school should be the default. Before sending youth to an alternative school, school districts should try different methods to keep youth in their community school, including counseling and restorative justice interventions. If these alternate services and programs do not work, students should have the option of a formal hearing before being placed in an alternative school. Their parent/caretaker or adult who helps them make education decisions should be there to advocate for them.
- **Establish Academic and Career/Technical Standards for Alternative Schools:** Require all alternative schools in states to be licensed by the state. Alternative schools should have curriculum and teacher requirements that meet state standards. They should also have to meet state reporting requirements on expulsion, suspension, and special education.
- **Provide Meaningful Opportunities to Transition out of Alternative Schools:** Youth should have meaningful opportunities to work their way out of alternative schools and back to community schools. This means that the youth’s progress should be measured regularly. Progress should include a number of factors and not just whether a student has avoided getting into trouble. The standard for assessing progress should be careful not to penalize students for the bad behavior of others.
- **Support to Implement Student’s Transition Plan:** A plan should be in place to help students transition out of alternative schools and back into their home schools. A student’s transition plan should also provide options for youth to return to their district schools if they complete community service, attend mentorship programs, or receive therapeutic services. Alternative schools should be required to meet with youth and the youth’s parents or other education decision-makers monthly to see whether the alternative school continues to be appropriate.

*I decided to drop out [of the alternative school] after someone in my class got shot. I felt like I was better off being on the streets than in a place where I felt like my life was in jeopardy.*

- Marcus

## Conclusion

Everyone constantly tells us that education is power and education is the key to success. In our experience in the juvenile justice system, education was instead a frustration and disappointment. We hope these recommendations will help policymakers, educators, administrators, and advocates to make changes that will make sure that other youth don't suffer the same educational setbacks we did. By implementing these recommendations to improve the quality of education in the juvenile justice system and alternative schools, you give youth the opportunity to be successful, empowered, and hopeful citizens.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Southern Education Foundation, *Just Learning: The Imperative to Transform Juvenile Justice Systems into Effective Educational Systems—A Study of Juvenile Justice Schools in the South and the Nation*, 18 (2014), available at <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/cf39e156-5992-4050-bd03-fb34cc5bf7e3/Just-Learning.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Curran Neild & Robert Balfanz, *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis 2000-2005*, 5 (2006), available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538341.pdf>.



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