

The New York Times

Editorial – April 20, 2014

The Next Juvenile Justice Reform

Research has long shown that locking up young people puts them at greater risk of dropping out of school, joining the unemployment line and becoming permanently entangled in the criminal justice system. States and municipalities have thus been sending fewer young offenders to juvenile institutions and more of them to community-based programs that keep them connected to their families and reduce the risk that they will engage in further crime. The number of children held in custody plummeted from about 107,000 in 1995 to less than 71,000 in 2010 and is still falling.

This is all to the good. But the authorities could bring even more juveniles into the mainstream if they did a significantly better job of educating them. That means paying more attention to the learning disabilities, emotional problems and substance abuse issues with which these youngsters are disproportionately afflicted and which often helped land them in trouble in the first place.

It is a mistake to assume that all children held in juvenile facilities represent “hard cases” beyond redemption. Indeed, a new study, by the Southern Education Foundation, a nonprofit group based in Atlanta, shows that nearly two-thirds of the young people who were confined in 2010 were confined for nonviolent offenses.

Moreover, disproportionate numbers of these young people have special needs. Federal data from 2010 show that 30 percent had learning disabilities, 45 percent had problems paying attention and 30 percent had experienced physical or sexual abuse. It should come as no surprise that most of the young people entering juvenile residential institutions are behind in reading and math.

These children do not get the attention in school that they need to succeed and get even less of it in juvenile justice facilities. A federal study showed that in 2009, fewer than half of students in state juvenile justice programs earned even one course credit and that fewer than one in 10 earned a high school diploma or a G.E.D. This makes it unlikely that most of them will succeed at school once they are released and more likely that they will get in trouble again.

The good news is that it is possible to create strong schools inside juvenile facilities that actually help the most troubled children. This can be done by improving coordination between the public schools and the juvenile justice system. States can also seek to emulate models like the one used at the Maya Angelou Academy in a juvenile facility in the District of Columbia, which hires talented teachers with high expectations, uses individualized instruction to meet particular student needs and weaves special education services throughout its lessons.

Most important, however, the states need to redefine the mission of their juvenile justice systems. That means refocusing from warehousing and punishing juveniles to a much more positive mission: educating troubled youths who typically suffer from an array of psychological and educational challenges.