

# NDTAC | Tip Sheet

## *Creating and Maintaining Good Relationships Between Juvenile Justice and Education Agencies*

The development of this tip sheet stems from NDTAC's 2013–14 Topical Workgroup for State Title I, Part D coordinators and their peers focused on this topic. The goal of the tip sheet is to assist State and local justice and education agency administrators, including State Part D coordinators who work between agencies and the practitioners with whom they work, create strong working relationships that make high-quality education programs within juvenile justice settings possible. The tips in this sheet were informed by the input of more than 20 members of the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA) who, between them, have many years of experience operating State correctional agencies. CJCA is a national nonprofit organization, formed in 1994, to improve local juvenile correctional services, programs, and practices so that youth in the justice system succeed when they return to the community, and to provide national leadership and leadership development for the individuals responsible for the systems. CJCA members represent all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and major metropolitan counties. NDTAC is grateful for their contributions.

### **The Importance of Working Together**

Many of the education programs supported by Title I, Part D operate within juvenile or adult justice detention centers, group homes, and correctional facilities. These settings are typically run or overseen by a State or local justice agency, which may or may not also run the education program. Regardless of who is responsible for education, the justice agency typically works with an external education agency (e.g., the State department of education or a local school district) in some way to ensure that youth in the facility receive educational programming. These agencies often have different missions and responsibilities and may go about meeting those responsibilities in differing ways. For education programs to run smoothly and foster good outcomes among students, however, justice and education agencies must work together. This tip sheet provides some suggestions aimed at making this process easier, more positive for both agencies, and more beneficial for the students served.

### **The Biggest Challenges to Good Relationships**

Interagency cooperation is not without its challenges. Philosophical, structural, language and communication, and staff and stakeholder barriers can all make it more difficult for education and justice agencies to work together to make education successful.<sup>1</sup> Education agencies are often “guests” within the confines of justice-run facilities and may feel as if their top priority of preparing youth for further schooling and/or careers is superseded by justice’s missions of security, safety, youth responsibility, and rehabilitation. Moreover, detention and correctional schools operate on the grounds of secure care facilities, which are operated 24/7, year-round, in locked settings where the conditions for learning and school climate are often quite different from those in community schools. Recruiting and retaining qualified, effective teachers in such environments can be difficult, and having enough high-quality teachers across a State’s geographically dispersed, often rural facilities can be logistically challenging. In addition, the use of some instructional techniques (e.g., online learning) and some educational experiences can be limited by a facility’s age, construction materials, safety, and security concerns.

Not unlike community schools, education staff in justice facilities work alongside security, treatment, and other staff. Despite the proximity, because staff are usually employed by different agencies, structured and open communication and planned opportunities for cooperation may not always be present. Teaching staff may not be aware of student dynamics in the living and other units of the facility, and security and treatment staff may not be informed of students’ goals and performance in the classroom. Therefore, staff may work toward shared goals such as student behavior management, but in different and sometimes conflicting ways. All of these challenges show why it is critical for education and justice agencies to communicate regularly and work collaboratively toward meeting common responsibilities and achieving shared goals.

### **Working Toward a Meaningful and Sustainable Partnership**

Following are 10 tips for education and justice agencies to consider when forming and sustaining strong working relationships that can improve individual student, facility, agency, and State outcomes:

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<sup>1</sup> Skowrya, K. (2010). *Serving youth involved with the juvenile justice system through a system of care: Key issues, collaboration strategies and sustainability planning*. Presented at the Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health Juvenile Justice Symposium, March 24, Washington, DC. Retrieved from [http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/presentations/jjSymposium\\_skowrya.pdf](http://www.tapartnership.org/docs/presentations/jjSymposium_skowrya.pdf)

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- 1. Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Regular communication, formalized as part of the standard operating procedures of a facility via a memorandum of understanding or agreement, is essential as the basis of true collaboration and coordination between justice and education agencies. Communication should occur at each level and across all staff: between the facility director and school principal as well as among all teaching and security, treatment, and support staff; facility staff; community school staff; and with agency administrators and State leadership. Effective communication across departments might take the form of joint reentry planning and action steps, individual behavior plan construction and implementation, and overall case planning and Individual Education Program (IEP) plan development and implementation.
  - 2. Increase and ensure understanding across staff.** Beyond simply talking with each other, justice and education staff—from State and local administrators through facility staff—need to *understand* each other. This means, at a minimum, reducing the use of agency-specific jargon and creating a shared language, but also understanding where each agency is coming from and agreeing on respective and shared roles. Each agency must share priorities and challenges openly. Further, it means that each party recognize how these shared roles can contribute to a facility and school focused on positive youth development.
  - 3. Take a whole-child approach.** Justice agency objectives can and should be reinforced in facility classrooms, and education should be seen and managed as a critical part of the overall mission of justice facilities. Youth in juvenile justice settings benefit from security and safety as well as education and treatment. Viewing each agency's and department's role as vital pieces of a whole helps produce the best *overall* outcomes for the youth and for the State or locality.
  - 4. View each other as partners and build trust.** Because each agency's role is one piece of an important whole, it is logical that each agency regard the other as a partner. Partnerships take time to develop and rely on trust to succeed. But by operating as partners and trusting each other to take the actions necessary to meet both unique and shared responsibilities, justice and education can be seen as one entity, from the State level to inside facilities. This means that education agencies realize and support the fact that safety and security are top justice priorities and that education staff are flexible when issues arise. Likewise, it means that for a facility to operate successfully, justice must acknowledge the necessity of a high-functioning education program. This includes not only facilitating educational schedules and needs by providing adequate space, resources, and support, but being available to support education staff in addressing issues as they arise.
  - 5. Find common ground and develop shared goals and objectives.** The partnership between education and justice can solidify and grow stronger if there is a deliberate effort, at all levels, to determine where agencies and departments share similar responsibilities and they can work together to accomplish common goals and objectives in complementary, if not cooperative, ways. It may not always be possible to do everything together, but agencies should ensure they are not working toward conflicting ends or in contradictory ways. One way to formalize common ground and shared goals and objectives is to develop rehabilitation, learning, treatment, and transition plans that are logical, supportive, and sequential and that align with one another.
  - 6. Recognize individual strengths and expertise and avoid duplication.** Although common ground is important for cooperation, so too is knowing each agency's and department's strengths and limitations and not trying to force collaboration when it doesn't make sense. There will always be things justice agencies and staff are better suited to do in facilities, and likewise for education. Knowing what is possible and what is not will go a long way toward sustaining effective and efficient partnerships. Further, agencies and departments should acknowledge up front the unique roles that will contribute to the collaborative process overall.
  - 7. Co- and cross-train staff.** One way to ensure that all staff members understand each partner's role, and to determine where coordination and collaboration make the most sense and enable them, is to provide agency- and department-specific training and professional development for *all* staff. This might mean that teachers are familiarized with facility safety and security procedures and security staff are trained in a school's educational and classroom management practices. Similarly, co-training could include all staff across a facility receiving training on universal precautions or educational disabilities, and all staff's roles in particular areas.
  - 8. Share staff across agencies and departments and/or create teams.** Although having staff in facilities take on roles across agencies or departments may not be possible in all situations, it could enhance the relationship between education and justice agencies *and* maximize sometimes-scarce resources in a facility. Similarly, forming teams between education and justice staff reinforces the partnership and could improve efficiency and effectiveness. This does not mean that security guards who are not certified educators should

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be teaching classes or that teachers should be monitoring living units, but it could mean that teachers participate in afterschool activities alongside security staff or help supervise family visitation time. Either way, sharing staff and/or creating teams maximizes staff flexibility in the facility environment and during everyday tasks.

9. **Incentivize cooperation.** In situations where Federal, State, and local funds may be limited or strained, maximizing resources through cooperation can foster both effectiveness and efficiency. In recent years, the Federal Government has incentivized cooperation between justice and education agencies through grants. State and local governments can do the same when allocating funds by encouraging or requiring justice and education agencies to submit joint applications or obtain formal letters of commitment from each other. Similarly, justice agency budgets for facilities should adequately support educational programming and not reduce funds from programming alone when resources are scarce, and education agency budgets should complement justice agency priorities through allocations for academic and related programming.
10. **Celebrate shared accomplishments.** Above all else, the successes of the youth within justice facilities, whether academic, rehabilitative, or otherwise, should be seen as priority one and their achievement and accomplishments should be shared by all agencies and departments operating within a facility. All staff should celebrate these achievements and accomplishments and see them as examples of what strong relationships and cooperation can produce.

For more helpful tips and information on developing and maintaining strong working relationships between education and justice agencies across all levels and staff, be sure to check out:

- [NDTAC Practice Guide: Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems Through Interagency Communication and Collaboration](http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/sites/default/files/docs/NDTAC_PracticeGuide_InteragencyCommunication_2011.pdf) ([http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/sites/default/files/docs/NDTAC\\_PracticeGuide\\_InteragencyCommunication\\_2011.pdf](http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/sites/default/files/docs/NDTAC_PracticeGuide_InteragencyCommunication_2011.pdf))
- [NDTAC Webinar: Improving Practices Within Neglect and Delinquent Systems Through Effective Communication and Collaboration](http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/events/improving-practices-within-neglect-and-delinquent-systems-through-effective-communication-and) (<http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/events/improving-practices-within-neglect-and-delinquent-systems-through-effective-communication-and>)
- [ND Communities Topical Workgroup: Relationships between Education and Justice](http://www.ndcommunities.org/events/topical-calls) (<http://www.ndcommunities.org/events/topical-calls>)
- [Joint Letter on Correctional Education and School Discipline—U.S. Departments of Education and Justice](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/140609.html) (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/140609.html>)

### **About the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk**

This document was developed by the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk (NDTAC), which is funded by a contract awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in Washington, D.C. The mission of NDTAC is to improve educational programming for youth who are neglected, delinquent or at risk of academic failure. NDTAC's mandates are to provide information, resources, and direct technical assistance to States and those who support or provide education to youth who are neglected or delinquent, develop a model and tools to assist States and providers with reporting data and evaluating their services, and serve as a facilitator to increase information-sharing and peer-to-peer learning at State and local levels. [For additional information on NDTAC, visit the Center's Web site at http://www.neglected-delinquent.org.](http://www.neglected-delinquent.org)

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