Program Highlights

Transition and Prevention Programs
Washoe County, Nevada

Introduction

Transitioning between the juvenile justice system and the general education setting can be difficult for youth due to a variety of personal and institutional challenges, including poor academic grades, credit deficits, poor conditions for learning, and the absence of effective communication and information exchange between sending and receiving schools. These barriers, along with many other challenges, make it difficult for youth to integrate and thrive in general education and facility-based settings and develop the skills necessary for postsecondary and workforce success.

Proper transitional interventions and services may increase the likelihood of a youth succeeding in school and decrease the possibility of the youth reoffending.

Youth exiting the juvenile justice system in Washoe County, Nevada encountered similar difficulties, including receiving nontransferable and misallocated credits for courses. Youth also exhibited warning signs of disengagement from school. To address these transition issues, the Washoe County School District (WCSD) implemented the Title I, Part D (Part D)-funded Transition Specialist Program (TSP) in 2007. TSP’s ultimate objective is to reduce the number of youth who recidivate and increase the number of youth who are successfully engaged in school, work, and their communities.

The Transition Specialist Program

The challenges associated with reintegrating youth from juvenile justice placement into a community school, and providing appropriate educational services upon placement, often stem from the lack of systematic processes for transferring educational information between facility schools and community schools. Washoe County’s TSP is designed to help assure the seamless transfer of youth and their records between public schools, detention centers, and community and employment agencies. The TSP program allocates Part D funds to provide Transition Specialists, whose responsibility is to facilitate communication between juvenile justice facilities and community schools, in order to provide a coordinated and strategic effort to ensure continued academic progress for youth.

Once a youth enters placement, a Transition Specialist evaluates the youth’s academic and behavioral records and researches their social-emotional needs. The Transition Specialist collects academic transcripts and pertinent information regarding special education services. The specialist then works with the facility teachers to provide youth with appropriate academic assignments. Upon entry to the facility school, students receive a pretest and posttest using the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) assessment, which focuses on reading and mathematics functioning. CASAS is a tool used by some correctional settings to measure academic progress made while youth are in placement. An additional assessment, called Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), is also conducted. This assessment is the standard metric used by Nevada school districts to assess proficiency in subject areas and measure achievement. Both assessments are used to place students in the appropriate curriculum. This step in the transition process is particularly important for Transition Specialists, because they are responsible for ensuring youth are enrolled in the required courses for high school graduation, as well as identifying supports, services, and accommodations found in newly developed and existing individualized education programs (IEPs) and individual learning plans (ILPs) for disabled and nondisabled students.

Providing appropriate credit transfer when a youth leaves the juvenile justice system and transitions into a community school has been a long-term problem for many programs across the country. A lack of coordination among multiple systems often creates barriers that prevent youth from seamlessly progressing through their education. Washoe County juvenile justice facilities had a history of awarding quarter credits for the work youth completed during their confinement, yet Washoe County schools did not accept these credits because their policies permitted them to only accept half or full credits. To resolve these credit issues, juvenile justice placement sites adopted the “A Plus” curriculum to align their courses’ content with the content being implemented in all county schools. The A Plus curriculum is a competency-based program that provides planned lessons and tutoring based on a student’s competency level in a given subject. Standard education programs place youth in classes by grade level, while A Plus assesses competency in subject matter without consideration of grade level. If a youth is assessed as knowing half the expected curriculum of a ninth-grade English course, he or she may be awarded half credit for the course. This is particularly beneficial for youth who
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are juvenile justice system–involved, as staff has noticed higher disengagement among youth when the curriculum is not relevant.

As Transition Specialists determine the youth’s social-emotional needs through their record review process and communication with the facility staff, potential social-emotional learning opportunities are shared with the receiving community school, in order to promote positive outcomes for the youth. The schools are encouraged to provide the youth with social-emotional learning opportunities in a sequential and developmentally appropriate manner, given the youth’s individual needs. The following is an example of social-emotional learning opportunities suggested for many of the youth who are served by the Transition Specialists: recognizing and managing emotions; developing caring and concern for others; establishing positive relationships with adults and peers; making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. These opportunities promote skill development that enable youth to calm themselves when angry, make friends and sustain these relationships, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make safe choices.

Monitoring Transition

The transition between facility schools and community schools is not a singular event; it is a process through which youth must be supported to successfully integrate into their new setting. Washoe County’s Transition Specialists are responsible for monitoring youth as they transition into community schools during a 90-day period following release. This is done through coordinated efforts with the schools, the youth, and their families. Standard monitoring calls and visits occur at the 10-, 20-, 60-, and 90-day benchmarks. Transition Specialists often visit youth at the school site to discuss their progress and meet with teachers and administrators. Transition Specialists access youth grades, attendance, and school work through the school’s parent portal. The parent portal is a web-based program designed to give parents and caregivers up-to-date and easy access to information on the student’s academic progress. Transition Specialists draw on this information, as well as meetings with youth, parents, and school staff, to monitor progress towards course completion and rectify any issues related to credit recovery and deficiencies.

During the 2011–12 school year, the TSP served approximately 300 youth (255 males and 46 females), who averaged 33 days in facilities. See Figure 1 for a breakdown by race/ethnicity of youth receiving TSP services. Of these youth, two-thirds saw an increase of at least one-half of a grade level in reading, and 50 percent of the youth gained at least one-half of a grade level in mathematics.

Figure 1. Student Demographics: Race/Ethnicity

Prevention Efforts: YES

WCSD determined that it was also necessary to provide prevention supports to reduce the number of youth entering the justice system. The Youth Empowered to Succeed (YES) program addresses the social-emotional and interpersonal issues that youth at risk of dropping out commonly experience, and thereby reduces the number of youth who come in contact with the justice system. The YES Program is a 1-year program offered at five schools (middle and high schools) in the WCSD. Initially funded by Part D dollars as a pilot study in three schools, the program showed success and was expanded and funded by local school district dollars. Youth recruited to this program exhibit at least three risk factors, which may include failing grades in two or more classes, high absenteeism, high rates of in-school detentions and suspensions, and a history of retention. YES offers youth various skill development opportunities such as leadership training courses, which emphasize the importance of education and foster self-awareness, student engagement, and continuous academic success. Students set individualized and student-driven goals that promote their overall success, and are matched with instructors who support and assist them in developing a formal plan to reach their goals. Evaluation of this program shows it has encouraged youth to improve their self-esteem, complete high school, and continue their education through vocational training, the military, or community college.

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