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High School Assignment Completion: A Case Study of a Collaborative Intervention in Detention

Sarup R. Mathur, Ph.D., BCBA-D
Professor, Division of Educational Leadership
Arizona State University

Teasie Colla, B.A., Psychology, B.A. Child Development
Program Manager
Juvenile Justice Services Division
Arizona Supreme Court

Suman Pangasa, M.A., M. Phil Sociology, MEd, Special Education
Education Program Manager
Yuma County Juvenile Justice Center

Gina M. Thompson, MEd Educational Leadership
Superintendent
Yuma Union High School District 70

Rebecca I. Hartzell, Ph.D.
University of Arizona

A collaborative intervention, the assignment completion program, was developed by a county detention facility and a school district to support the academic success of high school students who were detained in the facility. Communication protocols were developed for each student who entered this detention facility to enhance academic success. Results from the interviews of two education leaders about the intervention are shared in this case study. The findings indicate that inter-agency collaboration contributed to youth academic success. The drop-out rates for the participating school and recidivism rates for detainees went down. Implications include (a) developing strong collaboration between public schools and detention, (b) establishing protocols for targeted communication focused on student academic success, and (c) building a strong commitment to post-release success of detainees.

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Positive educational experiences are associated with appropriate social behavior, academic success, and productive engagement with community; therefore, effective delinquency prevention programs in detention facilities should strive to build additional opportunities to increase academic engagement (Scott & Cooper, 2013). School connectedness is related to positive school experiences (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), and functions as a buffer against aversive home environments (Maddox & Prinz, 2003) and emotional distress (Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011). Students with a strong sense of school connectedness are less likely to engage in risky and dangerous behaviors and more with desirable behaviors as compared to those who are disengaged or disconnected from school (Cumming, Marsh, & Higgins, 2017).

Positive approaches to discipline increase opportunities for learning, productive engagement, and positive life experiences (Archer, 2010). The use of zero tolerance discipline policies and practices for promoting discipline has been associated with a less healthy school climate resulting in poor conditions for learning (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013), lower academic achievement, higher levels of disruptive or antisocial behavior, and higher school dropout rates (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004; Skiba, & Rausch, 2006; Skiba & Losen, 2015). Students with disabilities in K-12 settings are 2.5 times more likely to receive exclusionary disciplinary practices such as restraint and seclusion than students without disabilities (U. S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). According to the Office of Civil Rights data (2014), students with disabilities represent 12% of all students, but 58% of them are subjected to seclusion and 75% are physically restrained. When students with behavioral issues are removed from instructional environments, they are likely to become disengaged and disconnected and drop-out of schools (Gunter, Coutinho, & Cade, 2002).

Researchers have studied the relationship between exclusionary practices, drop-outs, increased trends of arrests and incarceration and have referred to it as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010). Once the youth have commenced the trajectory of negative school experiences and behavior, they end up receiving instruction in alternative settings or more restrictive settings such as juvenile detention or long-term correctional facilities (Darensbourg et al., 2010). *Juvenile detention* provides a short-term, temporary custody of juveniles who are accused of delinquent conduct (National Juvenile Detention Association, 2018), whereas juvenile correctional facilities provide a long-term secure care to youth who have been adjudicated. Youth’s first exposure with the JJ system begins with detention, and the youth becomes a client or consumer of a variety of systems. While they are in detention, it is important to reconnect students to various educational and vocational opportunities, as well as resources that expose them to postsecondary career and education options that they would not have access to otherwise. By providing them continuity in their school work and keeping them engaged in their school learning during their time in detention, detention staff can continue to motivate them for school success after they are released. Many complexities surround the issue of the “school-to-prison pipeline” that are beyond the scope of this paper, but one way it can be disrupted is

through consistent collaboration between the local detention facility and the educational agency from where the student has received services.

Schools are an essential key to the reentry process and can serve as a hub of services for the students (Zubrzycki, 2012). Collaboration between detention and schools on a regular basis is one way to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline (Shippen, Patterson, Geen, & Smitherman 2012). Rather than quickly denying reentry to the home school or suggesting alternative placements to youth when they have completed their time in the detention facility, the detention facility must work collaboratively with the school system to transition the students back to their academic environment. Shared and coordinated responsibility across detention and schools can improve the educational success of troubled youth (Gonsoulin & Read, 2011).

Collaboration between agencies is difficult and substantial barriers exist that impact youth success (Gonsoulin & Read, 2011). These may include (a) philosophical barriers, such as different missions and goals; (b) structural barriers, such as policies and procedures for decision making; (c) communication barriers, which may include different uses of terminology and a lack of understanding or willingness to work collaboratively, and (d) motivational barriers, including staff resistance due to changes in job roles, responsibilities, and workload requirements (Gonsoulin & Read, 2011; Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone, 2012). The implementation of improved collaboration may present challenges, but strong communication, respectful interactions, and flexible structures can enhance the outcomes for each of the partnering agencies (Lane, 2017).

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), detention facilities receiving Title 1 Part D funding must coordinate educational services with local education agencies in order to minimize disruption to a youth's education upon reentry. The ESSA requires timely and appropriate re-enrollment in a secondary school or a re-entry program that best meets a student's needs (Farn & Adams 2016). In December 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice issued a School Discipline Guidance Package, which included a joint report that states that "[R]e-entry planning should begin immediately upon a student's arrival, outline how the student will continue with his or her academic career, and, as needed, address the student's transitions to career and postsecondary education" (DOE & DOJ, 2014, p.3).

Planning for school success must occur at the onset of the youth's stay in the detention facility, and supports should continue after they leave the facility to prevent post-release challenges (Goerge, Smithgall, Seshadri, & Ballard, 2010). Personnel in the detention facility must collaborate with local schools and other agencies to facilitate and create positive outcomes for youth in detention. Necessary supports for keeping youth connected with school success must be thought through with effective communication between the school and detention systems. Effective communication can reduce delays in the processes of admission to school and transfer of credits and records and can enhance successful reentry of the youth.

Professionals working in schools and detention have a unique opportunity to identify early indicators of youth's involvement in the juvenile justice as youth are generally involved in the education system prior to entering the juvenile justice system (Abbott & Barnett, 2016). By

working together, they can quickly start working with them as they enter detention and re-connect them in educational or vocational programs after their release, minimizing disruption to their academic engagement. By creating meaningful partnerships with schools, detention facilities can provide youth with comprehensive supports and accommodations (Mathur & Griller Clark, 2014) and reduce the barriers to their reentry success (O' Neill, Strnadova, & Cumming, 2017).

The purpose of this case study is to describe the assignment completion program implemented at a school district in conjunction with the detention facility to improve students' academic and reentry success following a period of time in the detention facility. This study will present views from the leadership at the detention facility and the school district in developing procedures that would assist in the seamless transfer of youth from high school to the detention facility back to the high school. This study describes interviews that were conducted during the implementation of assignment completion program with the dropout and graduation rates in the first five years of the collaboration between facilities. All procedures were approved through the University's Institutional Review Board and are in compliance with ethical protections for human subjects' research. Since this was a case study, only archival data collected by the two institutions participating in the study were used to evaluate the outcomes associated with implementation of the assignment completion program.

METHOD

Setting

The case study was conducted in a high school district and detention facility. Both the facilities were located in a rural county in the Southwestern United States. The unified high school district consisted of five comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school serving 10, 533 students of which 68% of students were eligible to receive free and reduced lunch. Nine percent of students received services under IEP and 504 plans. The detention facility provided educational and transitional services to the youth of two adjacent counties. At the time of the case study, 21.5 % of people in the area were living below the poverty line and the unemployment rate was 27.5 %. The county detention school operated on a year round schedule with 226 days of instruction and provided a minimum of five hours daily instruction. The facility educated 40 to 60 students daily, and the average length of stay for students in the detention facility was 11.5 days.

Participants

Participants of the case study were the associate superintendent from the school district, the education program manager from the detention facility who implemented the program and the advisory council that continually guided and supported the program. During the first five years of the homework completion program, 1062 students participated in the detention program. Of the 1062 that participated in the program, 224 of those students came to the facility with an IEP. All of the students were between 11-18 years.

The council consisted of 12 to 15 members representing various agencies invested in the progress of youth education. The advisory council met every two months during the academic

year. Representatives from counseling and treatment, juvenile court, detention (probation and education), and a judge were members of the advisory council. In addition, representatives from the high schools, such as dropout prevention specialists, campus administrators and the associate superintendent were in attendance.

Collaboration

The leadership team from the school district and the detention facility shared a need for (a) additional supports for youth who spend time in detention facility; (b) collaborative planning and involvement of both school and detention facilities staff; (c) professional learning to produce better outcomes for students who are at-risk for behavioral problems; and (d) technology to assist in tracking school success of those who are assigned to this completion program. The participating two leaders initiated a multifaceted approach to focus on working collaboratively with the providers of education services from the two systems (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). This coordinated, systematic approach was conducted as follows.

Building communication. Participating leaders along with the members of the advisory council came together and agreed that the two agencies needed to take collective responsibility for the education of the students served by each agency. The collaborative network of school and detention staff identified the strengths of each agency and how to address student issues that occur within the transition. The two participating administrators developed a memorandum of agreement and joint planning time to systematically engage all school and detention personnel to ensure continuity of educational services for high school students detained on a short-term basis.

To develop a method of requesting, gathering and delivering homework would require coordination of personnel at both locations. It was determined by the Advisory Council that once the detention notified the high school of a student being detained, a Dropout Prevention Specialist (DOPS) from high school would be contacted. The DOPS would look up the course schedule for the student and coordinate the academic work with the teachers at the school. If the DOPS did not receive the homework within a day, a personal phone call or visit to the classroom was extended. Homework was delivered to the detention facility by the DOPS, probation officer, or other staff members.

Assignment completion. After the first year of implementation, concerns were expressed that the homework was not always sent or received in a timely fashion. The high school district discovered that miscommunication between the two facilities made the transition difficult. At this time, electronic options for delivery were explored for students who were missing homework for absences, illness, and detention. The district purchased a learning management system, which allowed students to have individual access to courses within the high school district.

When youth in the detention facility encountered an assignment that was unable to be done in the facility (i.e. lab, physical education, group work), alternative assignments were coordinated between the two sites. Students within the detention facility were often students with a history of low-performance academically due to learning disabilities or undiagnosed reading difficulty. With the collaboration, the professionals from both agencies coordinated with the student to provide appropriate accommodations and modifications to the assignments. The sharing of

testing (i.e. formative, summative, and diagnostic) from the two locations assisted in providing the learning supports specific for the students.

The public school and detention education leadership teams recognized this program as a tool to assist in the academic success and reentry of youth serving time in detention. Upon their release, youth were more likely to successful return to the public school setting. Assignment completion was defined as completing tasks assigned at the school while the student was serving time in detention. The major goal was to provide the detained students a continuum of services to create a seamless transition back to the home school. The online learning management system provided individual access to courses within the district and allowed the students to electronically request work from the high school, complete the assignments in the facility, and return the assignments to the high school. Teachers from the high school were able to make comments on the assignment and return the assignments to the students. The assignment completion program reduced the time lag from the school to the facility and provided immediate access to the students during the process. The detention education staff was available to assist the students with assignment completion.

Professional development. The first two years with the online web-based system required significant teacher and staff training. Professional development meetings were provided to describe uploading courses, coursework, and troubleshooting problems. Monthly phone meetings with the advisory council were conducted to assess the efficacy of the collaborative efforts and to determine (a) participants were receiving support; (b) that the assignment completion was effectively implemented in detention classroom; (c) personnel were satisfied with time required to implement the program; and (d) that the intervention produced seamless assignment completion between the detention facility and the schools..

To ensure that the program was running smoothly, the staff at the high school and detention facility met on a monthly basis and discussed the progress. The detention education program manager provided any additional support needed for implementation of the program. The transition specialist in detention conducted the intake interview with youth admitted to the facility, reviewed transcripts from school, and contacted the school to create common academic and reentry goals for each student and include assignment completion in the transition plan.

Advisory council. The mission of the advisory council meetings was to provide input on student outcomes for those students who oscillated between attendance in detention facilities and public schools. The goal was to generate creative solutions, and to provide necessary supports to provide the students with fluidity in the process. An agenda was established before each meeting and sent by email. Each meeting addressed youth needs (academic, social, reentry), community resources, and rehabilitative ways to address youth criminal behaviors. Success stories were shared with the council to encourage continued participation of stakeholders in the council. Advisory council advised on how to improve communication between the high school and the detention facility when both agencies expressed that several students were oscillating between the two systems, and were not able to return easily to school because they were academically behind. To accomplish this, the staff of the two agencies worked together to develop protocols

for improved and expedited communication to assist the students in completing their assigned schoolwork while in detention.

Data Collection

The purpose of the assignment completion program was to improve the education and reentry of students at the detention facility returning to the public high school. Therefore, data were collected on the total enrollment in the detention facility, number of regular education and special education students in the detention facility, percentage of students receiving assignment completion support, number of recidivism cases per year, percentage of students enrolled 90 days post-release, and number of graduations to occur 90 days post release.

Semi structured phone interviews. Phone interviews were conducted by the first author due to her expertise and experience. The associate superintendent from the school district, the education program manager from the detention facility were contacted by the first author to identify their convenient time and date for interview. The following questions were asked: How do you define academic success for students who are detained? How does it contribute to reentry success of youth who have to serve time in detention? What have you done to promote their academic success? To what extent do you think the assignment completion program has assisted in promoting academic success of detained students and school success in general?

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the assignment completion program on the academic and reentry success of students in a detention facility. From 2011-2016 of the implementation of the assignment completion program, there were reductions in detention facility enrollment and number of recidivism cases per year. Detention facility enrollment ranged from 425 in 2011-2012 to 211 in 2015-2016. Occurrences of recidivism went from 4.5 in 2011-2012 to two in 2015-2016. There were increases in the percentage of students receiving the assignment completion program, the percentage of students enrolled in school 90 days post-release, and the number of students graduated 90 days post-release. Students receiving the assignment completion program were 53% in 2011-2012 to 86% in 2015-2016. The percentage of student enrolled in school 90 days post-release was 80% in 2011-2012 to 86% in 2015-2016. The students graduated from high school 90 days post-release were 10 in 2011-2012 to 21 in 2015-2016. The results are presented in Table 1 for each year of the program.

The participating district also showed increased graduation and reduced dropout rates in the past five years (see <https://azreportcards.com>). In 2011-2012 the graduation rate was 78% and it increased to over 90% in 2015-2016, whereas the state graduation rate for the same year was reported as 79%. The district rate for dropout reduced from 7.7 % in 2011-2012 to 2% in 2015-2016 which was lower than the reported state dropout rate of 3%.

Table 1

Five years detention data

<u>Measure</u>	<u>2011-2012</u>	<u>2012-2013</u>	<u>2013-2014</u>	<u>2014-2015</u>	<u>2015-2016</u>
Detention facility total enrollment	425	357	339	230	211
Regular education	357	301	307	199	174
Special education	68	56	32	31	37
No of high school students	368	344	313	182	189
Percent of high school students receiving assignment completion program in detention facility	53% (195/368)	56% (192/344)	79% 247/313	82% (149/182)	86% (162/189)
Frequency of recidivism cases per year	4.5	4	3	3	2
Percent enrolled in school 90 days post-release	80% 340	80% 286	82% 278	85% 196	90% 190
Total number graduated from high school 90 days post release	10	8	16	14	21

Each of the leaders provided a unique perspective on academic success of youth and similar themes were discussed throughout the phone interviews. Based on the analysis of the interviews, three main components were identified that contributed to the success of the assignment completion program: (a) effective professional development; (b) communication between the two systems; and (c) joint responsibility for solutions. The program manager explained the importance of the program for the detention facility and the school “one of our mutual goals was to have the student back to a more successful experience in school. The need for an electronic communication and homework system became critical”.

Professional Development. Both the detention program manager and the associate superintendent expressed a desire for the academic success of the students at both the school district and detention facility, but initially there were several challenges to address collaboratively. She explained “The initial two years with [the web-based tool] required a great deal of teacher and staff training, uploading courses and coursework and bug fixes for both organizations.” The detention education program manager explained the challenges of starting the process by saying, “Initially there was resistance in staff, it was not easy for them to go through the assignment which was not theirs.” Specifically, there was difficulty in the teachers at both sites to work together to complete assignment together. For example, the teachers had issues with correcting the assignment that were not assigned by them, “the teachers [at the detention facility] always complained by saying how can they monitor progress of an assignment given by an outside teacher.” The program manager added that improved professional development was needed to improve the perception that the program was not an added responsibility, but an improvement in the process of meeting the needs of students in the detention facility to return to school prepared with the necessary credits and grades to graduate. A professional development workshop on “success for all youth” was developed to improve the communication process between probation and education. The technology specialist of the participating district trained the staff at both locations to ensure that all of the personnel were on the same page. She further added “I had to work closely with the student and the staff initially to see how we could do this.” Her role changed from managing the detention processes to providing professional development opportunities for the staff at both locations. The associate superintendent of the unified school district found that “the lack of sharing information with both the organizations was another barrier,” so she considered it was important to invite detention staff and faculty to school events and share information with them to discuss the issues of community with each other. The associate superintendent of the district described the importance of staff development for both agencies together using workshops, seminars, and presentations, “it was helpful in sharing information on these events to better our collaboration as well as our individual organizations.”

On clarifying why both the leaders thought something needed to be changed to promote the overall academic success of students in the community, the associate superintendent and detention education program manager both discussed the importance of sharing a common purpose and having the opportunity to clarify challenges and suggest solutions. For the associate superintendent, a decrease in dropout rates and an increase in graduation rates was a priority. The associate superintendent found several opportunities for the staff of both facilities to come together and engage in professional development “I was so glad to find an incredible opportunity

for 60 professionals to attend a conference on differentiated instruction, which came as a direct result of this program and collaboration.

Communication/collaboration. The online system had a communication system where education specialists and high school teachers could electronically communicate. Through collaborations, they agreed on this web-based tool that helped keep track of homework assignments and follow-up. The associate superintendent also encouraged teachers to communicate with detention staff to clarify concerns about assignments that were given to detained students. She explained this, “One of our most productive initial conversations was about the need for communication with detention staff to see if the student could be given alternative work that could support future academic progress.” Both leaders discussed the enthusiasm of the students. Students liked the system and were excited to see that the assignments were meaningful and they did not feel their time within the facility was lost, but that they were able to continue with their school work within the facility.

The associate superintendent of the participating high school district indicated that since the implementation of the assignment completion program, the graduation rates have been on an upward trajectory and continue to improve. The dropout rates have decreased over time. The detention education manager believed the program had contributed to overall academic success of the facility. She said, “It looks like that the two themes are communication – both the difficulties with communication and the benefits. And, then professional development – because education and PD were necessary to facilitate the procedures.”

Joint responsibility for solutions. Throughout the implementation process, the benefits for both sites and the community became more evident to those on the advisory council and other. The program manager explained, “We’ve always been involved in leading but I think now the idea is shared with the whole staff and advisory council rather than just the senior leadership, and the benefits are shared by the whole community.” The associate superintendent responded similarly, “the whole community is benefiting from this. As you know, schools aren’t just about education but a partnership with the entire community.” The same sentiment was endorsed by the judge in one of the advisory council meetings. For example, he commented that he makes a sincere effort to come to the advisory council meetings and stated “we need to determine alternatives to secure detention when necessary and work with the community to develop more restorative and skill building programs and services for court ordered detainees.” The dropout prevention specialist from the district found the collaboration between the district and detention facility, “invaluable and beneficial not only for school but for the whole neighborhood.”

DISCUSSION

The case study describes the implementation process of the assignment completion program and presents the views of the two administrators who took the joint responsibility for academic success of youth in their community. Collaboration between the two leaders helped reduce long-standing barriers and created a more seamless system for youth in detention. When the two leaders saw what was not working and engaged in the process collaboration, they created a context within their agencies to support the needed change that resulted in benefits for youth,

sustainability in outcomes for both the agencies, and the whole community (Shufelt, Coccozza, & Skowrya, 2010).

The two leaders worked around the barriers and created a shared understanding and common goals with the assistance of the advisory council. They structured an effective information-sharing system to communicate the requirements for assignments in a timely manner. They provided cross training to their staff in technology so staff at both agencies could access the system and continued to share positive results and benefits (Osher, 2002).

The knowledge and insights derived from this case study lend themselves for several recommendations: Transition planning needs to start when the student enters the detention facility (Bullis, Yavanoff & Havel, 2004). It is important that detention centers focus on the education of juveniles in detention and assist students in getting back to their neighborhood schools (Gonsoulin & Read, 2011). More awareness needs to be created among educational leaders in public schools about transition/reentry processes and the impact they can have on staff at both the local high school and detention center levels. Advisory councils should include stakeholders from the community who have influence in transforming decision making that benefits the students and promotes their academic success. Students who are eligible to go back into their home schools should have that chance and staff and teachers from both facilities should work with them. Continuation of supports during their time in detention and after release is the best way to ensure reentry success. Juvenile justice agencies must continue to develop partnerships with local school districts (Lane, 2017) in order to coordinate services for and to share information about their respective students (Hirschfield, 2014).

Limitations

Some limitations in the case study affect the interpretation and generalization of the results. First, the study is exploratory and information was collected from one detention setting in one state, and is limited to specifics of the local demographics. Next, the nature of this descriptive study limits the information availed from two leaders from the two systems and is unique to their environmental and contextual conditions. It provides a snapshot of what was done in one facility and hopefully will guide other juvenile detention and correctional agencies to attempt similar programs. Future research could assess the academic results of students involved in a collaborative assignment program within the detention facility to the public school. Additionally, interviews with students and faculty members would assist in understanding the program from the viewpoint of other stakeholders. More information from youth who went through the program will strengthen our understanding of further reentry planning.

Implications

As mentioned earlier, this study only addressed collaboration with one school district, whereas, detention centers may have to consider a variety of options to meet the demands that may arise when working with multiple school districts. It may become necessary to provide more partnerships and more additional opportunities for professional development. Detention staff and school staff may require agreement on the indicators of quality of homework, so youth in detention can produce quality work during their stay in the facility.

This study just highlights how detention facilities can partner with the schools to assist students at risk for recidivism to streamline their return to the school setting. It also demonstrates how students need continuous supports to succeed academically and throughout the reentry transition. Youth who have been placed in detention settings due to delinquent behavior, can benefit from systems of supports just like students enrolled in public schools (Flower et al., 2011; Jolivette et al., 2012; Jolivette et al., 2014). Collaboration between the transition specialists, POs from JJ, school staff and teachers can further assist in developing an understanding about how to promote academic success of youth post-release. Person-centered academic supports that promote school connectedness and provide positive educational experience (Catalano et al., vi 2004) benefit youth in detention (Cumming et al., 2017), and increase academic performance of students in schools.

This study exemplifies collaboration between detention and school education systems. To facilitate staff collaboration across systems, the leadership at both the systems needs to focus on professional development for education personnel to build capacity to meet the needs of students who are detained. Professional development opportunities need to be provided at both sites to ensure that intervention agents are given crucial information to assist students in the detention facilities. By jointly understanding the issues of detained youth, the two sites are more likely to integrate educational services to further provide detained students with the tools and support they need. Preparing detained youth for return to their home schools and supporting their needs in a way that makes reentry to school easier has a great potential for keeping them engaged with continued education experience and reducing their risk of reoffending.

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