

What to do? Curriculum design for a highly transitory juvenile detention population

Mark Jones

District Director, Pima Accommodation District
Tucson, Arizona, USA

The Pima County Juvenile Court Center, located in Tucson, Arizona, detains over 1,400 juveniles on a yearly basis. This is a highly transitory population with average stays for detainees ranging from only fourteen days to thirty days. The Pima Accommodation District has the responsibility for providing educational services to these detainees, but what? And how? What type of curriculum best suits their needs? Working with outside sources, school and detention staff, the district developed over a two-year period a comprehensive life skills curriculum that is tailored to benefit this unique population.

Introduction

CAPE (Court Alternative Program of Education) is an educational school operated by the Pima Accommodation District housed in the Pima County Juvenile Court Center (PCJCC). The school's primary focus is to provide an individualized educational program to both regular and special education students, who have been temporarily incarcerated, to establish strong linkages with the local school systems to insure that students will experience a smooth educational transition upon their release from detention to a court-ordered education program, and to return students to the traditional high school setting or entrance into a community based educational program.

The challenge CAPE encountered was the constant influx and exiting of detainees on a daily basis from the detention facility. The average stay for any detainee is only fourteen days. Traditional core academic subjects were difficult to implement due to the constantly changing student populations. Teachers were assigned to a pod that housed twenty students. Everyday they would find two to three new students and two to three missing students that had exited the facility. Indeed, most of their students would be completely changed out within a two-week period. Delivery of traditional instructional practices was ineffective. Other than completing basic assessments, the teacher had very little time to assign appropriate work at each student's functioning level. To make matters worse, there are ten pods located in the detention facility. Detainees were assigned to a specific pod based on their age (ranging from eight to seventeen), sex, severity of offense, and/or security risk. This meant that the teacher would have multi-age, multi-functioning students in their classroom.

Something needed to be done to improve the instructional services for the youth. Both the court and the district wanted educational programming that met the students' needs and would be aligned with court goals to reduce recidivism. A task force consisting of probation and detention officers, school staff, and district administrators assembled. After reviewing existing practices, this advisory group determined that there were three issues facing them:

- **Meeting state standards** - There was little continuity in the existing educational program. Students entered and exited the school program quickly. There was little time to effect meaningful progress in basic core areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics due to student short-term stays. Yet, the Arizona Department of Education required the school meet all state standards for core subject areas and grade levels.
- **At-Risk Population** - Detainees were considered an at-risk group. They typically came from a lower social-economic population, and minority representation was high. The average age for a detainee was fifteen. The average functioning level was fourth grade/six month. Most all the detainees were functioning three to four years below their expected age and grade level.
- **Recidivism? What can the school do?** - The school should play a vital role in assisting the court in reducing recidivism. Could a school curriculum be developed that could impact the number of returning detainees?

The task force took on an ambitious project. The school curriculum would be revamped to meet the needs of the students. It would comply with all state standards, address the issue of the transitory population, and assist in reducing recidivism. This effort took more than two years to develop, and is constantly being modified and improved. The District and Court call it the detention Life Skills Curriculum. This curriculum has served as a model for other detention facilities in the state of Arizona. The Life Skills Curriculum has been recognized by the Arizona Supreme Court Youth Services as an outstanding model of educational services for transitional detention populations.

The life skills curriculum

What was discovered during the assessment of the school's programming is that it was deficient in meeting most of the students' life skill needs. Most of the detainees had limited social survival skills. They were inadequately prepared to deal with daily living challenges. Job skills were nonexistent and students constantly demonstrated the inability to make appropriate choices that could impact their lives positively. Detainees didn't know who they were or where they were going. Addressing these issues, making them better equipped to deal with life challenges could reduce recidivism.

The Life Skills Curriculum contains necessary elements to help students construct a better understanding of their world and acquire the necessary skills for gainful employment. In this manner, students would be able to deal with personal and social elements that confront them and in a positive way. The curriculum is a thematic program consisting of twelve units. Each unit deals with a particular life skills component. Each unit's duration is one week with pre and post testing to assess student progress and learning.

The curriculum is based on the Merging Two Worlds curriculum developed by the Arizona Department of Education for secure care facilities. The Life Skills Curriculum incorporates all state standards requirements for the core areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, but these requirements are incorporated into each daily lesson. The students acquire life skills and must utilize reading, writing, and math within the overall goals of each thematic unit. The curriculum major goals are developing the appropriate skills to make positive choices, cognitive restructuring, vocational and career exploration, and acquisition of skills that

enhance their ability to acquire work and be dependable. The curriculum is portfolio based. Once a student exits the facility, the portfolio goes with the student. It contains student work that consists of vocational and career assessments, completed work and examples, and a compilation of services and agencies that the student can seek out for support.

The life skills components

Each of the twelve units is self-contained and independent. The unit stands on its own. The curriculum is designed so that nearly all students can complete one unit during their short stay in detention and benefit from the lessons. If students return, they can pick up other units and continue their learning process. At the same time, the curriculum is presented in a sequential manner. The units are designed to build on one another. The longer a detainee remains in the facility, the better equipped he/she will be for facing daily life issues once departed from detention.

Week 1: Unit 1 - Who am I?

This unit contains lessons on exploring my interests, planning for the future, exploring my learning styles, forms of communication, exploring my skills, being independent, exploring my personality, right brain/left brain, putting the pieces together, and be motivated/be resilient.

Week 2: Unit 2 - Career pathways

This unit contains lessons on what's in it for me, career search, career pathways, planning for the future, how I see myself, jobs that fit me, gathering information, occupational outlook, and knowledge is power.

Week 3: Unit 3 - Where am I going?

This unit contains lessons on you bet your life, the power of goals, my life plan, dream a little, why not flip a coin, self talk, stumbling blocks, making lifestyle choices, what's my plan, and eye on the timeline.

Week 4: Unit 4 - Looking for work, applications and references

This unit contains lessons on finding your career, career checklist on how to find a job in the "ads", networking, internet job search, personal data sheet, applications of employment, references, social security application, avoid application errors, women and minorities, and 12 reasons why employers reject applicants.

Week 5: Unit 5 - Writing cover letters and resumes

This unit contains lessons on cover letters, 25 tips for writing letters, the resume, the right words to use, 25 tips for a better resume, references, part-time and summer jobs, and tips for preparing a scanable resume.

Week 6: Unit 6 - Interviewing and thank you letters

This unit contains lessons on doing well in a job interview, the interview, the interview survival guide, what body language do you speak, practice interviews, how to get a job if you're a teenager, questions often asked, thank you letters, tips for thank you letters, tough interview questions, and things during and after an interview.

Week 7: Unit 7 - Succeeding on the job

This unit contains lessons on important job factors, ways to work, choosing a job, why people work, job keeping skills, choices and consequences, who would let you go, judging your work ethic, employee benefits, top ten reasons young people are fired, work is a four-lettered word, evaluating job habits, and work values.

Week 8: Unit 8 - Being connected

This unit contains lessons on being assertive, sticks and stones, role playing, strategies for handling conflict, leadership, be emotional, attitudes and values, understanding feelings, the anger survey, relationships, family stress worksheet, and types of families.

Week 9: Unit 9 - Independent living skills

This unit contains lessons on independent living, living at home, finding a place to live, money management, wants and needs, payday, using a personal budget, purchases for independent living, a place to live, tenant and landlord responsibilities, choosing a residence, what will I do with my money, social security, and financial skills and abilities.

Week 10: Unit 10 - Transportation

This unit contains lessons on transportation types, driving laws and safety, MVD booklet, modes of transportation, riding the bus, public vs private transportation, purchasing a car, buying a used car, auto insurance, responsibility of having insurance, cost of transportation, miles per gallon, and maintenance costs.

Week 11: Unit 11 - Choosing a healthy lifestyle

This unit contains lessons on health and wellness, support systems, getting medical information, leisure time, good health habits, nutrition and digestion, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, dealing with stress, how to deal with stress, and be healthy and well.

Week 12: Unit 12 - Making educational choices

This unit contains lessons on if I need to know, where do I go, occupational outlook handbook, why education is important, financial aid, types of education, careers in the trades, time management, and where does all the time go.

Does it work? - evaluation

Obviously the most critical component of any program is the measurement of its effectiveness. Does it work? The Life Skills Curriculum was developed in the 2001-2002 school year with its initial implementation late in 2002. It began as an eight-unit concept. The curriculum was expanded to twelve units in the 2002-2003 school year. The curriculum is now entering its second full year of usage. There isn't sufficient data to quantify its effectiveness.

However, the court and district see it as very successful model. There is one trend that shows that recidivism has decreased slightly. Court data indicates that recidivism dropped by six percent in 2002 from the rate of 2001. Confidence is high that this trend will continue. The Detention Educational Advisory Committee for the Arizona Supreme Court has commended the district for the curriculum development and is considering implementing the concept in all of the fourteen detention facilities statewide.