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# Prisons Try To Span Learning Gap

*by Gail Braccidiferro MacDonald | Aug 4, 2011*

Christine Murphy recalls a young man who was barely able to read when he first was imprisoned at the Brooklyn Correctional Institution.

"Within six months he had made a three-year gain in reading," said Murphy, director of special education for the school district that operates 17 schools within the state's prisons. "On average, our students will gain two grade levels in a year."

Murphy and other educators working in the prisons, where programs serve adults and teenagers as young as 14 who were adjudicated as adults, say this man's severe educational deficiency is far from unique.

Despite having attended public schools for years, many prisoners read, write and perform math tasks at only the most basic of levels. Reading deficiencies are extremely common and many prisoners are virtual non-readers or read at a level more typical of a first- or second-grader. In the 2009-10 school year, there were 9,492 students in Unified School District 1 that operates in the state's prisons. Of those, about 20 percent have mental health issues and 1,700 received special education services. Most also lack basic social skills such as making eye contact during a conversation and not reacting to frustrations with violence.

In the 2008-09 year, Murphy said there were about 2,000 who needed special education services in the district. Some of these inmates are in prison for short periods and others for the entire year. Twenty-two percent of the district's staff provide either direct special education services or related services, which can range from counseling to speech therapy, as outlined in individual education plans. The district's contract to provide these related services has increased 13 percent over the past two years.

One 20-year-old inmate of the Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire, which houses younger inmates considered adults under the law, told a typical story: In the Ansonia public schools he was too frequently distracted by "girls, drama and partying." Once incarcerated, he had more direct attention from the prison teachers and little ability to skip classes and slack off. The inmate, not identified at the request of DOC, is now confident he'll soon earn his high school equivalency diploma and pursue a college degree once he is released.

Child advocates contend there is a direct cause-effect link to the fact that the vast majority of detained youth and adults in prison were once struggling public school students who did not get the educational support they needed to succeed. Many should have been, but never were, identified as needing special education services, say child advocates. Many others were identified as needing special education supports, but the Individual Education Plans mandated by special education law were not followed with fidelity.

Severe educational deficiencies also are common for detained juveniles in the state. An examination by the Yale University Child Study Center published in September 2010 found that most of the 270 youth detainees in the facilities overseen by the Department of Children and Families read at a fourth grade level despite being eighth graders or high school freshmen.

"It's a huge problem," Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford said. Securing appropriate special education for juvenile justice system youth is one of the agency's main educational projects.

The Yale study that looked at the educational services in DCF facilities reported a significant number of juvenile detainees "have special education needs that are often unidentified by home school districts."

**School-To-Prison Pipeline**

Connecticut is a microcosm of a nationwide problem, said Joseph B. Tulman, a law professor at the University of District of Columbia, Director of the Took Crowell Institute for At-Risk Youth and an expert on the so-called school-to-prison pipeline.

"Every kid I've represented has had an undiagnosed special education need," he said. "I practice only in the D.C. area, but I've traveled enough and talked to enough people to know that it's across the country."

Tulman estimates 90 percent of adult prisoners and youth detainees were never properly diagnosed as requiring special education services while they were in school, although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was signed into law in 1990 and its predecessor, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act has been in place since 1975. "If you neglect special education needs, kids will act out," Tulman said, noting that in recent years schools also are more likely to call police to handle students' behavioral problems. "Kids are now getting the worst of both worlds. They are not getting the services they need and they are getting kicked out and getting into the justice system more often."

In Connecticut, the high cost of special education may be one factor contributing to under-identification of special

education needs. In the 2007-08 fiscal year special education costs statewide were 20.5 percent or $1.5 billion of total education spending, the previous year it was $1.3 billion, according to Education Data And Research.

“I think the bottom line is money,” Stone said.

**Teaching At-Risk Students**

Garland Walton, chief of staff at Domus, a non-profit organization that operates two charter schools in Stamford and one in New Haven serving primarily students who are at risk of dropping out of school and who have not been successful in traditional public schools, agrees that tight budgets contribute to the problem. Many of the 20 percent of Domus students identified as needing special education services were never considered special education in regular public schools.

Domus oversees what is commonly referred to as wrap-around programming – a wide variety of intensive educational services, along with other types of supports that extend outside the classroom, such as family support services, mentoring and year-round programming.

“We have a constant stream of contact and support,” she said. The results: “65 percent of the kids in our high school have had contact with the justice system, but 85 percent of our kids go on to post-graduate study.”

The dollars and cents cost of this success is high, however. “It is labor intensive and it would be a burden for regular public schools,” Walton said. “We are small, but normal school district, say the Stamford district, could not cheaply or easily do what we do. Although it might be argued that in the long run it would be more cost effective because kids who end up in prison will be unable to get a job, ever. We are taking someone out of the prison pipeline and putting them into the working person pipeline.”

Education officials say while tight school district budgets may play a role in the under-identification of special education students, other factors also are at play. One is that special education by definition encompasses a wide range of physical, emotional and educational disabilities, some of which are more difficult to pinpoint than others. Another factor is that each school district in the state operates autonomously. Yet another factor is that some struggling students learn to compensate for their educational deficiencies, mask their deficiencies with behavioral outbursts or simply stop attending classes.

“Some disabilities are a lot easier to diagnose, a physical mobility issue for example,” said Kim Mearman, assistant director for program development and research/program evaluation at the State Education Resource Center in Middletown. “There are other disability categories that are more subjective. For example, if a student’s behind in reading, determining why can be more challenging.”

Michelle Lebrun-Griffin, educational consultant at SERC, said it is only recently that educators have become more adept at getting to the root of student reading problems. “Before it was just fluency and comprehension,” she said. “But those can be broken down. Teachers now are better at looking at patterns that are much more specific.”

Besides the somewhat subjective nature of appropriate identification of disabilities, the autonomy of the state’s school districts can be a hindrance to educational achievement because of the wide disparities of financial resources and levels of teacher professional development among districts, as well as because the students most at risk to end up in juvenile detention or adult prison tend to be highly transient. As students move from district to district, school records often do not follow in a timely manner.

Donna Macomber, an author of the Yale study, said the lack of communication and slow release of student records was also a hindrance to providing appropriate special education services to students who land in juvenile detention facilities. “There was very little sharing of records with the teachers in detention,” she said.

Kim Holley, director of academic programs for the state’s Unified School District 1, said it is common that prisoners did not receive appropriate special educational services while in public schools, simply because they stopped attending classes. Child advocates say this illustrates the clichéd chicken and egg scenario: Do students misbehave and stop attending class because they struggle or do they struggle because they misbehave and stop attending class?

Murphy and Holley both said from their students’ perspectives the bottom line reason for education failure was a feeling no one – not family, teachers, school counselors or any adult - really cared about them. It is a sentiment child advocates say they hear often.

“No one’s really interested in getting to the root of struggling students’ problems,” said Walton of Domus. “We try to figure it out.”

Says Stone: “There is not much public outrage for juvenile justice kids. People don’t speak out for them.”