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What It Takes to Transform a School inside a Juvenile Justice Facility

The Story of the Maya Angelou Academy

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"Do you want to apply to run the school inside Oak Hill?" The question came from Vincent Schiraldi, the new head of Washington, D.C.'s juvenile justice agency, in November 2006. He wasn't making any promises—there would be a formal Request for Proposals before any decisions were made—but he wanted to gauge our interest.

Schiraldi was not a typical juvenile justice administrator. He was a former social worker who had spent the bulk of his career as a critic of the way our nation treats incarcerated youth. Schiraldi understood education's transformative potential, and one of his first priorities was to improve the school at Oak Hill, the city's facility for juveniles who had been adjudicated delinquent.

Incarcerated teens suffer tremendous educational deficits: they disproportionately have attended failing schools, typically read and do math at the elementary school level, and often have dropped out or been kicked out of school before being arrested (Sedlak and McPherson 2010; Balfanz et al. 2003). In theory, commitment to a state facility offers them an opportunity to receive an education. In practice, however, most schools in correctional facilities are woefully inadequate (Dohrn 2002). In a typical facility, academic expectations are low, the curriculum is not rigorous, special education services are wanting, and the teaching staff is underskilled and demoralized. What Franklin Zimring said almost thirty years ago is still largely the case: "the training school neither trains much nor schools effectively" (Zimring 1982, 72).

Oak Hill was no exception. The all-male facility had long been a horror show—assaults were commonplace and drugs and weapons were easy to find. The *Washington Post* warned that it had become "little more than a warehouse that rehabilitates no one" ("DYRS" 2010). The school within Oak Hill—then called the Oak Hill Academy—was little better. Everything about the place told the young men incarcerated in Oak Hill that education was not a priority: guards sat in classrooms with walkie-talkies blaring, students came, went, or slept without interruption, and fights were routine.

Schiraldi was determined to change this. In an innovative move, he solicited proposals from successful educators to run the Oak Hill Academy, which until then had been part of the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). Schiraldi called us because since the late 1990s we had run two charter high schools that worked with some of the city's most underserved kids. Our schools—both named after the poet Maya Angelou—are open to any who apply, but we actively recruit teens who have dropped out or been expelled, have truancy issues, or have been arrested. We also serve a higher than average number of special education students.

Despite our background, we had serious doubts about taking on the challenge of running the school at Oak Hill. After all, we had never operated a school *inside* a prison. The list of possible pitfalls was long: Would qualified teachers apply to work in a juvenile facility? How would we manage discipline? Could we create a school that felt special and welcoming, or was it naïve to think we could establish such an atmosphere within the confines of a jail? Considering how far behind the students would be academically, could we help them make significant progress when we would only work with them for about nine months?

We eventually overcame these doubts, submitted a proposal, and were chosen to run the school, which we renamed the Maya Angelou Academy. We launched our program in the original Oak Hill compound, but after two years it was relocated to the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, a brand-new facility that replaced Oak Hill. Three years after it opened, the Maya Angelou Academy is far from perfect, but outside evaluators have been impressed with the speed and extent of the turnaround. In July 2010, the monitor overseeing the court-ordered reform of Washington, D.C.'s juvenile justice agency called the school an "extraordinary educational program" (Special Arbiter's Report 2010). The educational expert the monitor hired reached a similar conclusion:

> The Maya Angelou Academy at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center is one of the best education programs in a confinement facility I have had the opportunity to observe. Scholars in the model units are receiving an excellent education. The strength of the leadership and the

> staff, the people and material resources available to them, and the processes and program design all contribute to the overall effectiveness of the program. (Exhibit 6A 2010)

After decades of documenting the school's failures, the *Washington Post* finally had good news—citing the monitor's report, it noted that the school had been transformed "from one of the nation's worst programs to one of its finest" ("DYRS" 2010).

Drawing on the lessons of our collaboration with Schiraldi and D.C.'s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), we have written this chapter in the hope of fostering similar transformations elsewhere. We call on juvenile justice administrators, reform activists, and policy analysts to do whatever is in their power to bring high-quality schools to youth correctional facilities. Similarly, we call on education reformers to do more to create such schools in facilities across the country. Though our focus here is on education inside juvenile facilities, we also believe there has to be a larger commitment to educating these same young people before they enter and after they are released—themes to which we will return at the end of the chapter.

At first blush, such an appeal might seem unnecessary. After all, most people know that education is critical to a young person's future, and most people assume—even if they do not know for sure—that schools in juvenile facilities are not very good. Despite this, however, we have found that the education and juvenile justice communities largely inhabit parallel universes. The two groups rarely talk to each other—when we attend a conference of educators, members of the juvenile justice community are rarely present, and educators do not typically attend juvenile justice gatherings. (At the conference that led to this book, for example, there were only a handful of educators present, and no other charter school operators.)

There are many reasons why these two groups do not collaborate, most of them understandable. Apart from a few visionary leaders like Schiraldi, juvenile justice administrators have not thought to establish educational partnerships with high-quality charter school providers (or other unconventional school operators). Juvenile justice reformers, for their part, have been largely concerned with reducing the number of young people who are incarcerated (including reducing the number tried as adults), not with developing quality schools for those who remain behind bars. More radical reformers are reluctant to invest in improving schools inside juvenile prisons because they believe that doing so reinforces a system they would like to abolish. Finally, many juvenile justice advocates are lawyers (as are we), and law schools train students to think about pretrial rights (such as right to counsel and the right against illegal searches and seizures); by contrast, few criminal procedure classes or juvenile rights classes focus on what happens *after* a young offender is convicted and sent to a facility.

It is equally understandable that education reformers have not focused on juvenile facilities. Many wonder—as we did—whether the techniques they have developed running schools in the community will work in a correctional setting. Others are just starting their schools, or expanding, and do not have the capacity to take on an additional—and somewhat different—challenge. More than a few would prefer to work with the same group of kids for multiple years, rather than the nine months to a year that juvenile offenders typically spend in a facility. And some wonder if this is the best way to spend their own limited resources. Given that there are so many law-abiding young people who need better schools, these educators opt to work with them.

We do not seek to rebut these considerations here. Indeed, we would not want to—we endorse efforts by juvenile justice reformers to reduce the number of incarcerated youth, and we are thrilled that so many education reformers are creating high-quality schools outside of juvenile facilities. We view these efforts as of a piece with our own. On the other hand, we hope that our story can motivate some juvenile justice and education reformers to work together to improve other schools for incarcerated youth. By focusing on the nitty-gritty details of running such a school, we hope to suggest concrete practices that can strengthen their efforts.

We have divided our account of the Maya Angelou Academy's development into the following sections: "People," "Culture," "Curriculum," "Instruction," and "Transition." After describing the school, we discuss our results. We conclude by examining the policy implications of our experience and asking what the education and juvenile justice communities could do differently to achieve the central aim of this book—keeping kids out of the juvenile system.

People

It is now widely believed that improving teacher quality is the single most important thing a school can do to influence academic achievement (Gordon et al. 2006; Jordan et al. 1997). As Chris Barbic, founder of the high-performing YES Prep charter school network, is fond of saying, "We bet the farm on people."

Yet teacher quality in schools in juvenile facilities is notoriously low. This does not surprise many people. We wondered ourselves whether we would be able to recruit dedicated, high-performing teachers. But we saw one ray of hope. Even though many teachers would shudder at the thought of entering a juvenile facility every day, we also suspected that there was a subset of teachers who would be drawn to our social justice mission. Those behind bars have few allies, to be sure, but there are some in our nation—including some educators—who are appalled that we have the world's largest prison system and that we lock up so many juveniles in such terrible conditions. Those were the people we needed to find.

To get them, we had to send the message that the Maya Angelou Academy was going to be a high-quality school, even though it was in a juvenile facility. So every time we opened our mouths, wrote a flyer, or sent an e-mail, our message remained the same: We were going to create the best school in the country for kids who are locked up. We were not sure this would end up being true, but we figured if we did not believe it, nobody would.

Everything about our recruitment process emphasized our mission. Our outreach materials stressed the school's uniqueness. Our job postings declared that we would "provide these students with the best education they have ever had" and that we sought only those who had "an unyielding belief that with the appropriate supports, coupled with high expectations, all students can significantly improve their academic skills."

During interviews we probed candidates about high expectations in various ways. While some of our questions were tailored specifically to our school, we modeled much of our hiring process on what we have learned from organizations like New Leaders for New Schools, and from presentations by high-performing schools at conferences sponsored by the New Schools Venture Fund. We asked candidates to provide examples of how they created a classroom culture of high expectations even in the face of obstacles. We asked how they would approach working with teenagers who could barely read, students who had been labeled as needing special education throughout their school lives, students with little understanding of what it meant to be successful in school. We also asked each teacher candidate to respond to a writing prompt and to teach a sample lesson.

Our selection process served multiple ends. Most directly, it helped us identify talent. But it also served as a recruitment tool. We were trying to signal to candidates that this would be a rigorous school, with high standards for students and teachers alike. Having a rigorous selection process was essential to that message.

The process also gave us some insight into the quality of the teaching staff at the existing school. Our contract gave us complete hiring and firing authority. Existing teachers at the Oak Hill Academy—all of whom were DCPS employees—were not guaranteed jobs at the Maya Angelou Academy. They could apply to work for us, and we promised to interview all who applied. If they chose not to apply, or if they applied but were not hired, they would be reassigned within DCPS.

About ten of the existing teachers applied for jobs, and the interviews were dispiriting. One candidate proudly stated that "crossword puzzles and word-finds keep students motivated." Another told us that because most of the students could not read, he focused his efforts on the handful that could, and let the rest sleep.

We did not hire any of these ten teachers. Looking back, we realized that—although we had not set this as a goal—we had not ended up hiring any teachers with experience in a correctional setting. In hindsight, we think this was mostly a good thing, because no one came into the job dragged down by the low expectations of most correctional schools. (In saying this, we do not mean to suggest that there are not excellent, hard-working teachers in correctional schools; we mean only that the culture of those schools makes such teachers rare.)

Make no mistake: Finding the right teachers has not been easy. But through aggressive recruiting, we have found a number of highly experienced, talented teachers who, as we thought, wanted to make a difference by working with our students.

It is worth emphasizing the "reach" of our informal recruiting network. Many of the people we hired had heard of our program through friends and colleagues, not advertisements. Our inaugural faculty included a former Teach for America (TFA) corps member who had been teaching social studies at one of D.C.'s highest-performing public charter schools. She heard about us through the Children's Defense Fund. On our current math team, we have a teacher with many years of experience at a public school in the Bronx and a special education teacher who worked in alternative settings outside of Boston. Both were attracted to our mission, and after visiting the school, they felt that we had created a place where they could be successful. And our academic dean came to us with a stellar resume—she began her teaching career as a TFA corps member, then became a TFA trainer, was a teacher at one of our schools, and spent a year coaching teachers at DCPS under Chancellor Michelle Rhee. These were the kind of people we needed if we were to build the type of school culture we wanted.

Culture

High-achieving schools are places where a culture of trust dominates. They are safe and nonviolent. Students work hard and respect the building and learning environment. Unfortunately, schools in correctional settings typically have weak, or negative, cultures. Like the old Oak Hill Academy, they are often dominated by low expectations, a culture of violence, and negative behavior by students (and too often by staff).

Fixing this was our first priority. We started with the physical environment. When we walked through the Oak Hill Academy before taking over, we were greeted by drab walls, out-of-date posters, and classrooms cluttered with unused texts and papers from students who had long ago left the school. The divider in the auditorium was nailed shut, and an inside wall was blackened and dark from a recent fire. As a result, what could have been an ideal setting for school ceremonies and performances had become a fire hazard and a place for teachers to hide. Some of the physical obstacles seemed almost gratuitous. For example, although the school was located inside a large, prisonlike facility surrounded by thirty-foot-high razor wire, the school itself was surrounded by an additional ten-foot fence, as if to say to the students, "You are not welcome here" or "This school is a prison within a prison."

Soon after we took over the school, the hallways were decorated with student art and other work, awards and plaques hung on the walls, and classrooms were tidy. The small, never-used auditorium was open, painted, and ready for our first awards ceremony. And the fence that separated the school from the rest of the grounds was bulldozed over and thrown away.

Words—especially the ones you use to refer to people—matter, too. At Maya Angelou, we call the students "scholars." This practice began during our first summer, when we partnered with the Children's Defense Fund and established a CDF Freedom School (the first ever inside a youth correctional facility). In the Freedom School model, all participants are called scholars. We adopted the term that summer and decided to stick with it. We believe that it reminds everyone—teachers, visitors, and the scholars themselves—how we view the young men in our school.

We also believe in celebrating student success. We host an awards ceremony nine times a year, at the end of each curricular unit. Teachers give awards to outstanding scholars in each class, recognizing excellence in such categories as academic performance, leadership, creativity, advocacy, and greatest improvement. Students star in these ceremonies, serving as the emcees, reading poems or essays, and performing songs or dances.

Awards ceremonies are important at all schools, but they are especially important for our scholars. Most of them have failed repeatedly in school, have been suspended multiple times, and became known to school administrators and the larger school community only when they did something wrong. For such students, being rewarded and acknowledged for working hard helps them develop a sense that school can be a place where they can shine.

Awards ceremonies have other benefits as well. At our facility, as in most youth correctional settings, students are rarely allowed to mingle together freely. Instead, they spend most of the day interacting only with other members of their residential unit. A schoolwide ceremony helps to change the culture by establishing that students can come together in one place and behave appropriately.

In addition to celebrating their success, we help our students imagine a future for themselves. Good schools serving low-income populations work relentlessly to get their students to believe that their future includes college. Such schools hang college banners in hallways and classrooms, organize college trips, and invite guest speakers to campus. Schools in correctional settings must take similar steps. Accordingly, we sponsor college trips for students who are nearing their release date. We also host college fairs in the facility and have a "How to Apply to College" bulletin board prominently displayed in the school.

Even as we look to the long term, we know that building a strong school climate also requires attending to day-to-day behavioral norms. Accordingly, we teach and reward the behaviors and attitudes we want to see in the school through a range of incentive-based programs. These programs help students develop the social/behavioral habits that are expected in school or at work.

We use a modified version of the Positive Behavioral Incentive Program (PBIS) to encourage students to demonstrate our school values: Respect, Responsibility, Integrity, Safety, Self-determination, and Empathy (R^{2}IS^{2}E).[1] School and DYRS staff give out stars to students when they exhibit one of the values; the stars are displayed on the school walls and tallied daily in our student information system. The scholars who accumulate the most stars during each curricular unit are acknowledged at our awards ceremonies, earning a Nelson Mandela leadership certificate.

In addition, all teachers provide a daily score for students based on student *participation* and *respect* in each class (PR points). Students earn weekly stipends based on their PR points, which are totaled up along with their R^{2}IS^{2}E stars in an easy-to-read report. Each Friday, scholars meet with a small team of school staff to review their progress from the past week and set goals for the upcoming week.

In all these ways, we act on our belief that a good school inside a juvenile facility shares many characteristics with good schools on the outside. But we also recognize that a school inside a facility faces some distinct issues. While we believe these are matters of tactics, rather than philosophy, they are nonetheless important. In correctional settings, for example, staff includes both school staff and "correctional" or "secure" staff. These two groups—educators and security—often clash. The tension was magnified in our case because the school staff were our employees while the secure staff worked for DYRS. When we first came to Oak Hill, the chasm between school and DYRS front-line staff was wide. Many of the DYRS staff were wary and unsupportive of us. Some believed we were naïve, others doubted our sincerity, and plenty felt we would not last long.

Today, we have largely closed the gap between the two staffs. We were able to do this because (1) we had the support of DYRS leadership, (2) we were relentless, and (3) we were optimistic. The first point is simple but overwhelmingly important. Although many front-line DYRS staff had their doubts about our new school, Schiraldi and his entire leadership team believed passionately in our educational mission. The school would not have opened or survived without them. The lesson we draw for other educators is that this work can only be done with the support of the juvenile justice agency.

Second, we were relentless. We sat down with DYRS leadership and explained what we needed front-line staff to do in order for the school to succeed. The list was basic, but in this setting, our expectations represented a major culture shift: all kids come to school, on time; students receiving medication on a regular basis take it in the morning, before coming to school, instead of disrupting class later by making trips to the nurse; walkie-talkies are turned down in the classroom; DYRS staff and students are in classrooms during school hours, not chatting in the hallways. Making the list of priorities is only the first step; school leadership must enforce the new practices. We estimate that nearly 30 percent of the principal's time during the first two years was spent walking the hallways to make sure these changes were implemented consistently.

Third, we were optimistic. We believed that if we started to turn the tide and if the school started to function like a *school*, most front-line staff would adapt to and eventually prefer the new routine. We believed that most would eventually embrace the notion that from 8:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. all adults in the building have one primary objective—to help our students develop the skills they need to succeed when they leave. After all, most of the DYRS staff were good people who had spent years—sometimes decades—stuck in a dysfunctional system. A few were beyond reform (we were optimists, not fools), but the majority, we believed, would like their jobs better if they could spend the day supporting students who were engaged in the learning process, rather than punishing students who were bored, irritated, and restless. Our optimism (supported by DYRS leadership's willingness to hold staff accountable for their performance in the school) has paid dividends. Although disagreements remain between the school and secure staff, the two groups now generally work closely in support of students in the school.

We recognized from the outset that if we did not get school culture right, nothing else about the school would work. A strong culture does not guarantee success (we have seen schools with strong cultures but inconsistent instructional quality, for example). But a negative school culture guarantees failure. Accordingly, each of the practices we have described—adorning hallways and classrooms with student work and inspirational messages, holding awards ceremonies, offering incentives and rewards for positive behavior, exposing students to high-quality programs and colleges before they leave—were all focused on building up a culture where learning and academic achievement can flourish.

Curriculum

In designing the curriculum at the Maya Angelou Academy, we were guided by two well-established educational principles: rigor and relevance. First, a rigorous, challenging high school curriculum is a critical determinant of postsecondary success (Adelman 2006). Second, especially for students who have struggled in school, the curriculum must be relevant to their lives (National Research Council 2003). We also knew that core classes would have to be aligned with DCPS curriculum standards if our students were to earn credits that would count when they returned to school in the community. (In many states, schools in juvenile facilities do not use a curriculum aligned to the state standards—a source of great frustration for students who leave only to find that they have not made any progress toward graduation.)

Although we were committed to these general principles, we quickly realized that our status as a school in a juvenile facility would influence curricular decisions. Because our students come and go throughout the year, a curriculum composed of semester-long units would not work. If a student arrives in

November and the next semester starts in January, it is unreasonable to tell him to study for six weeks if he knows he will not earn credit for the effort.

For this reason, we structured our curriculum as a series of eight modular units, each of which takes just over a month to complete (this schedule is supplemented by an eight-week summer program). For the past two years, the unit themes have been Relationships, Systems, Change, Choice, Power, Justice, Ethics, and Dreams. Breaking up the school year into short, manageable units serves multiple goals. Even students who have been disengaged from school can quickly delve into the curriculum. And students who are with us for only a few weeks or months can complete whole units of study—and earn transferable credits—before leaving.

Here is an example of a unit in action. In the fall of 2008, the Systems unit focused on the presidential election. In social studies, students learned about the electoral process, the history of voting rights, and governmental systems. In math, they learned data analysis by studying the Electoral College system, conducting polls inside the school, and reviewing the correlation between demographic groups and voting trends. In English, students focused on messaging, marketing, and public speaking while reading Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*. The unit culminated with mock presidential and local elections, while the few students who were eighteen registered and voted in the actual election.

In addition to our core curriculum, we offer a GED program for selected students. GED programs have a bad name; they are often dumping grounds for kids whose schools have given up on them. And it is easy to offer poor GED instruction—we know, because our GED program floundered during our first year. But we have since developed a rigorous, engaging program that is on an upward trajectory. We think that getting it right requires remembering two key points.

First, a school must be thoughtful about the entry requirements for its GED program. The GED program should be reserved for those students who are unlikely to graduate from high school (because of their age and accumulated credits) and who have a real chance of passing the test. The test is not easy, and students who lack the basic skills necessary for a GED prep class probably need a more intensive focus on literacy and numeracy, and should not be fooled into thinking they are ready for the GED. Accordingly, we limit enrollment in our GED program to students who are at least seventeen years old, have less than a year of high school credits, have been at New Beginnings for a minimum of four months, have developed the behavioral skills necessary to function in a class comprised of students from multiple housing units, and who—based on their performance at the academy and on standardized tests—we believe can pass the GED with three to four months of intensive work.

Second, a GED program should not be linked, as it too often is, with vocational education, or "earning a trade." There is nothing wrong (and a lot that is right) with high-quality vocational education. Indeed, we have students who have earned their GED and gone on to construction-related job-training programs. But that should not be the only way a school talks to students about a GED. We talk about a GED as a gateway to college, and each of the last two years we have sent students who passed the GED while with us directly on to college. None of these young men had seen college as a remote possibility when they first came to New Beginnings.

To understand how we approach students who arrive performing at higher academic levels, consider Jeremy,[2] a seventeen-year-old who arrived at New Beginnings in August 2009. Jeremy performed at a higher level than our average student, having scored at the eighth grade level in math and the ninth grade level in English. He entered our GED program in December 2009 and passed the test in April 2010. At this point, however, Jeremy didn't stop working to improve his academic skills (as, admittedly, some of our students do). Instead, he studied for and took the SAT. He also took a mock Philosophy 101 class that we created for a classmate and him during their last month at New Beginnings. The class structure and expectations were modeled on those of an entry-level college class, and although he did not receive any credit, Jeremy worked hard. At this writing, Jeremy leaves for college in just a few weeks, interested in pursuing a degree in architecture (which he learned about in our carpentry class).

Although Jeremy is better prepared academically and socio-emotionally than many of our students, he faces a tough road. His SAT scores are lower than those of most of his college peers, and he has major gaps in his education. Nonetheless, we believe that Jeremy deserves the chance to pursue a college degree. And through our GED program, he obtained a credential that will give him that opportunity.

Instruction

Jeremy is not our typical student, of course. The average student enters the academy just under the age of seventeen, with less than a year's worth of high school credits, and functioning at between the fifth and sixth grade levels in reading and math.[3] Just under 50 percent are identified as special education students.[4] But these averages are just that—they hide great variation among our students, including the staggering fact that nearly 20 percent of our students test at or below the third grade level in reading at entry.

A further complication is that students attend school grouped by their residential units, not by their academic proficiency. As a result, classes are mixed in terms of age, skill level, and educational history. A single class may include both nineteen-year-olds and fourteen-year-olds; students who function at the high school level and students who struggle to read; students who had been attending school regularly prior to their involvement in the juvenile justice system and students who have not been to school in years.

One of our first challenges was to build and implement consistent classroom norms and systems. We use a variety of tactics, some of them versions of the practices Doug Lemov describes in *Teach like a Champion* (Lemov 2010). All classes start the same way (students enter, get their subject binders, and turn to the warm-up section), and all classes finish with an exit ticket (usually a short question or problem that helps to wrap up the class), after which students return their binders to the shelf.

In addition, students learn that at the academy we provide immense supports but don't allow distracting behaviors or interruptions to slow us down. Each class activity is timed: a typical class begins with five minutes for the warm-up, and a clock on the SMART board pops up and starts ticking. After five minutes, the clock goes off, the warm-up ends, and the class moves to the next part of the lesson. Then the clock is reset. Fifteen minutes later, the clock chimes, and the class moves to the next activity. When we opened our first school almost fifteen years ago, this process would have been anathema to us; we would have rejected it as too rigid and controlling. But we have changed our thinking. Now we believe that paying close attention to time in this way both maximizes learning time and reinforces the sense of urgency about the educational process that we want all students to feel.

Given our population, teachers must differentiate extensively within the classroom. For example, when teachers assign a newspaper or magazine article, they will typically create multiple versions, paraphrasing complex ideas or using substitute vocabulary where necessary. This enables all students to read and discuss the same article, while ensuring that the reading level is appropriate for each student. Teachers also differentiate final assessments—each version is aligned to the core content and skills taught during the unit, but the assessments vary in their level of complexity, the degree of guidance provided, and the expectations for the writing section. In addition, some students take the assessments one on one with special education staff and may receive additional time and support.

Differentiation is closely connected to individualization. In all classes, but particularly in English and math, we have systems in place to support the development of individual students' skills within the class structure. In math, all students take a diagnostic assessment when they arrive. Using this assessment, students and teachers prioritize basic skills that students need to work on. After the class warm-up, all students refer to their Skills Log, and for ten-fifteen minutes work on math fundamentals. Once a student believes he has mastered a skill, he takes a short assessment. Students only move to the next skill if they receive a grade of 80 percent or higher. Each day, once the "skills" part of the class is over, the full class moves together to the day's objective. Using this balanced approach, students have the time and support they need to tackle long-neglected math skills, while also gaining exposure to higher-level concepts in algebra and geometry—subjects rarely offered to students in correctional settings.

As this discussion indicates, many of our classes are structured in such a way that special education is woven into the fabric of the school. We do provide pull-out classes for some students, but the vast majority of our special education instruction takes place within our standard class rotations.

Keith's story provides a good example of how we work with students who are far behind academically. Keith was placed at New Beginnings in the middle of the 2009-2010 school year. He tested at the third grade level in reading, and a little higher in math. His background included middle school years at a special education school, and a failed ninth grade year at a large public high school.

After completing his intake assessments, Keith told our director of special education that he wanted to improve his reading more than anything. He pointed to the "2.8" next to his reading fluency score and told her he was going to make that number go up, because he didn't want to read like a second grader anymore.

When asked about his struggles with reading, Keith broke down and cried, admitting that he started having problems in second grade. His teachers knew it, he said, but they didn't help him—not in elementary school, not in the special education middle school, and not at the big high school where he got into trouble. He wasn't accusatory, just sad—and, it seemed, a little embarrassed.

For the next six months, Keith worked with one of our reading coaches each day instead of going to science class, using a variety of reading improvement strategies and programs, including the Wilson Reading System. In English, he set weekly goals for learning new vocabulary words, which he would take back to his unit in the evening. During the Structured Reading

Program (SRP)—a twenty- to thirty-minute session built into our English classes, inspired by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—he read and responded to books he had chosen from a list of titles at his reading level. Over the next six months, he read four books in the SRP and three others in English class, often taking his books back to the unit at night. He won recognition at our awards ceremonies as a member of our "Bookworm Club"—students who complete books or improve their reading levels during a curricular unit—and became a favorite with his English teachers.

Now, just six months later, as he prepares for his release, Keith's reading fluency score is just shy of the fifth grade level. Keith will be heading to the tenth grade in the fall. Age-wise, he'll only be one year behind his peers (he is still sixteen). Academically, he is much further behind but doing his best to catch up. We are working with him to find a school where he can keep getting the intensive reading support he needs. But his family just moved to Prince George's County, Maryland, and options beyond his large, low-performing neighborhood high school are limited.

Transition

Planning for a youth's transition back to the community must begin the moment he arrives at a correctional facility. This has become something of a cliché in the world of juvenile justice. But the principle is sound and a commitment to it is essential, even if it is hard to implement consistently.

Our transition specialists have the title "advocates," and their job begins with welcoming each student into the academy and helping him to adjust. They also serve as the school's primary liaison with the DYRS staff in charge of the student's living unit. Finally, they help plan and support the student's transition to school or job training in the community. By assuming all these roles, advocates develop a strong relationship with the student—a relationship of critical importance once he leaves us and reenters a world full of challenges and temptations.

In addition to building a relationship from the start, our advocates locate accurate and up-to-date school records (including special education records where appropriate). This can be difficult and is often done poorly in juvenile facilities (Balfanz et al. 2003). But such records are tremendously helpful for developing an academic plan. In addition, the very act of working tirelessly to obtain the records signals to students that—contrary to what previous bad experiences with juvenile officials might have taught them—we care about them and want to support them.

As students move to within a few months of release, the advocates work closely with them, their parents, after-care workers, and our director of special education, as appropriate, to support their transition. Advocates help students develop a portfolio of their work, awards they have received, progress reports, and a resume. With the support of DYRS, advocates set up and accompany students on interviews with prospective schools or training programs. Advocates ensure that all students have copies of the basic documents they need for work and school (Social Security card, non-driver ID, etc.).

In addition, all students participate in mock interviews as part of their transition process. Advocates help students prepare for these interviews, and friends of the school—from business, nonprofits, and government agencies—come out to New Beginnings to conduct them. The panels score each interview by using a rubric and talk with students afterwards about their performance.

Once students leave New Beginnings, advocates provide ongoing support for ninety days (this is not enough time, but it is all that our funding currently allows). Advocates often accompany students on their first day of school, and they visit students at school or in their homes or group homes once a week. Throughout this time, advocates stay in touch with DYRS after-care workers, school officials, and family members.

We believe that our advocates succeed because of their force of will and personalities, but also because our process allows them to bond with students and provide uninterrupted care. Students at the academy rightfully see the advocate as their closest ally and a source of consistent support—from day one to release and beyond.

Advocates must listen carefully to what a student wants, but they also must be honest with the student about creating a plan that is likely to succeed. For example, sometimes a student wants to go to his neighborhood school to be with friends, even though the friends are part of his problems. Others want to go to a school where they can compete for a football scholarship to college, even though they've never played football. Others want to enroll in a job-training program with academic entry requirements they cannot meet.

Trevon's story illustrates the role that advocates play in helping our students succeed in their transition. Trevon arrived at New Beginnings in the early fall of 2009. He had just turned seventeen, and had about a year's worth of high school credits. Trevon scored at the seventh grade level in reading and the fifth grade level in math. He was quiet, unassuming, and eager to learn.

Trevon did well at the academy. He played on our flag football team, then on our basketball team (where he earned all-league honors), and passed all his classes with a B+ average. Trevon especially liked his art and English classes. His scores went up at an annualized rate of more than three grade levels in reading and 1.3 grade levels in math.

As spring approached, Trevon's advocate started talking to him about his options once he was released. He didn't want to return to his neighborhood, where he said he knew he would get into trouble; he was open to going to a small school and said he didn't mind enrolling in eleventh grade, even though he would soon turn eighteen. These were all indications that Trevon was a good candidate for one of our Maya Angelou charter schools.

In Trevon's case, his advocate created a transition plan that appealed to his interests, reduced the risk of his getting into trouble over the summer before school started, and placed him in a school where we thought he could succeed. This plan included (a) getting Trevon signed up for D.C.'s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and arranging a week-long "tryout" at a summer basketball camp, the deal being that if he did well he could work at the camp for a month and get paid through SYEP; (b) researching our databank of precollege summer programs and encouraging him to apply to a three-week program at Pace University, where he would live on campus and take an arts-focused curriculum; and (c) working with one of our charter schools to get his application in for the fall.

Trevon "passed" his tryout week and spent a month working at one of the city's top basketball camps. He completed the program at Pace (not without some struggles), and he enrolled at the Maya Angelou Public Charter School as a junior. Ensuring that each piece of this plan came to fruition exemplifies the sort of hard, detailed work our advocates undertake. In Trevon's case, the Pace experience required convincing the director of the program to admit Trevon, taking him to the train station, buying a set of summer clothes, arranging a cell phone with restricted minutes, figuring out a ride from the train station in New York City to the Pace campus (the advocate's mother, who lives in New York, was called in to pick him up at the train station and get him to Pace on his first day), calling him daily, and having lots of "I know you can do it" conversations with him. This level of support, planning, and willingness to attend to the individual needs of students in transition is what sets our advocates apart.

Results

With all of these programs and strategies in place, what has the Maya Angelou Academy achieved? Our internal data indicate success in some important areas. First, consider credit accumulation. Students in juvenile facilities are often frustrated by their inability to earn credits towards graduation while they are locked up. If the school does not use a standards-based curriculum that allows credit accumulation, many students feel that their time is being wasted—and in an important respect, they are right. At the Maya Angelou Academy, however, students accumulate credits more than three times as quickly as they did before coming to us. Our average student earns just over six high school credits for every nine months of school with us. These same students averaged just over three credits during their prior *two years* of school, or about 1.5 credits a year.

In addition to accumulating credits at a faster rate, our students are improving their reading and math skills. During the 2009-2010 school year, students on average advanced 1.4 years in reading and 1.3 years in math.[5] These numbers are especially powerful given our students' previous rate of improvement. Remember that on average our students are reading and doing math at between the fifth and sixth grade level, although most of them are old enough to be in the eleventh grade. This means that before coming to the academy, our students on average advanced half a year in reading and math for every year they were in school. At the academy, these students have advanced at nearly three times that rate in both reading and math.

Most of our students have experienced significant school failure prior to coming to New Beginnings. They typically do not like school, do not think of themselves as successful students, and do not trust teachers and other educators. We think that changing these attitudes is as important as anything else we do.

We measure students' attitudes in several areas, both at enrollment and then again when they leave. At enrollment, more than 80 percent of our students tell us they did not like school and did not think they were successful students. At departure, however, more than 75 percent of our students say they enjoyed learning and felt successful at the Maya Angelou Academy. Our students are also much more trusting of teachers when they depart. When we ask them upon arrival if they trusted the staff at their prior school to work in their best interest, more than 70 percent say they did not. But upon departure, nearly 90 percent say they trust Maya Angelou Academy staff to work in their best interest.

We also track whether students remain in school after leaving us. This is a massively important measure, although it is one that we have less control over than some others. Our results here are improving rapidly, though they are not where we would like them to be. In the first nine months we were running the school, approximately 70 students completed our program. Of those, 35 percent were still attending school or job-training programs on a regular basis ninety days after release. The retention numbers have gone up since then. Of the last 70 students who completed the program (as of April 2010), 49 percent were still attending school or job-training programs on a regular basis ninety days after release.

Implications: Reforming Education outside of Juvenile Facilities

While we are gratified when students say, "This is the best school I've ever been to," we are often saddened as well. Shouldn't our kids have had many great schools before this? And shouldn't another great school await them when they leave?

Volumes have been written about improving our education system, and we do not propose to join that debate here. Our aim is narrower—we want to talk about education policy as it relates to the kids we see at the Maya Angelou Academy, those who have been the most profoundly underserved, who are the furthest behind, and who are at the greatest risk of ending up at the margins of our society unless we (and they) make different choices.

As we noted above, nearly 20 percent of our students enter the school functioning at or below the third grade level. Even if these students improve their reading two grade levels while they are with us, they nonetheless return to the community years behind academically, functioning well below the level necessary to succeed in a traditional high school, an adult education center, or a GED program. Yet there are almost no programs in the District of Columbia designed and resourced appropriately for them. So they quit.

Why don't these students have more, and better, options? We have already identified one reason—we do not think that either the juvenile justice or education community has paid enough attention to developing meaningful educational options for this group of young people. But that's only part of the story. In effect, national and local education policies conspire *against* these students.

When people ask us about the feasibility of starting a school like the Maya Angelou Public Charter Schools—community schools serving the kids who are most in need—we are encouraging, but also honest. We remind them that under the federal No Child Left Behind law (which we believe has done some good things), schools must test their students in reading and math and that the world will judge their school according to the percentage of students who meet the state's definition of proficiency. In some states (and in Washington, D.C.), the last tests are given in tenth grade. So although people may set out to provide a second-chance school for older students, they will face tremendous pressure to avoid accepting any students in the tenth grade (after all, if they do, they will only have a few months to prepare them for the tests). Similarly, it will be in their interest to avoid accepting too many ninth graders who are far behind. In order to have greater numbers of students who are proficient, they will do well to start with a younger group. If they truly want to serve the kids who are coming out of places like the Maya Angelou Academy, we tell them, they will be forced to explain their low test scores and face criticism from people who think they are just making excuses.

But state tests and No Child Left Behind are not the only problem they will face. There is also tremendous funding pressure. Students like those we serve at the Maya Angelou Academy cost more to educate properly than students who are on grade level. They even cost more to educate than the average low-income student. They have particular needs that a good school will try to meet. But where will the money come from?

Consider Anton, a fairly typical Maya Angelou Academy student. Anton was sixteen when he arrived. He tested just below the fourth grade level in reading and just above it in math. He had not earned any high school credits, and had not attended school with any consistency since he completed the eighth grade.

He had committed a crime, but like many of our students, he had also been a victim—he had been shot the year before. His father passed away earlier this year, while Anton was at New Beginnings. Anton does not have any diagnosed learning or emotional disabilities and is not a special education student.

He is doing quite well at the academy. Anton attends classes with ten other students, and in each class there are two members of our instructional staff and two DYRS staff. He receives counseling and behavioral health support on a regular basis, has adults who ensure that he gets up and comes to school each day, and often stays after school to receive additional tutoring. He attends a school with a total of sixty students.

Anton will return to the community with better academic skills, a transition plan, more resilience, and some strategies to cope with the trauma that he has experienced. But there is a good chance that whatever school accepts Anton will lack the resources to truly help him. Anton is involved in the juvenile justice system, will be returning from nearly a year of confinement, is five to six years behind in school, and has experienced major trauma. Once released, he needs a community school that will provide what proved successful at the academy, including tutoring, small classes, intensive support with his reading and writing, and consistent mental health counseling. If Anton were a special education student, he would have a chance of finding such a school. But for non-special education students who have his needs, the options are few. Schools that provide such services are almost nonexistent, because we as a society don't provide the funding to develop and operate them.

In most states there is one more obstacle to creating high-quality schools for students like those leaving the Maya Angelou Academy. In Washington, D.C., and the vast majority of states, the only way to earn a high school diploma is to accumulate the requisite number of Carnegie units. And the only way to earn a unit is to pass a class that meets the District's seat-time requirement (literally, this means that a student must spend a specified number of hours in class—i.e., in his or her "seat").

Thus, students who come to us at age seventeen with three high school credits, work hard, and leave us at age eighteen with nine to eleven credits will nonetheless return to their communities needing two more years of high school. For students like these, whose one real success in school was at the academy and who will probably be returning to a large, underperforming public high school, this is too long, and the diploma too far away.

There is a better way. A number of states—including California, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Oregon, and Rhode Island—offer more robust alternatives for earning a high school diploma; these include options for competency-based credit, workplace-based credit, and dual high school–community college enrollments. If our society is to provide a pathway for students such as those who leave the Maya Angelou Academy, then Washington, D.C., and other states must follow their lead.

Conclusion

This volume is dedicated to showing how we might keep our young people out of the juvenile justice system. This includes making sure that kids who enter the system do not return. In this chapter, we have argued that the juvenile justice community should do more to demand quality schools for youth in the system, and that education reformers should do more to create such schools. The story of the Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings is one example of how to build such a school inside a juvenile facility.

At the same time, what happens outside the walls matters just as much as what happens inside. Ensuring that young people do not return to the juvenile system will require that equally good schools are available to them when they reenter the community. This combination—of excellent education inside and outside—is what Jeremy, Keith, Trevon, Anton, and others like them need, and what we as a society have an obligation to provide.

NOTES

As used throughout this chapter, the pronoun "we" does not refer exclusively to the authors but often to the teachers and staff of the Maya Angelou Academy. Their passion and commitment are something to behold, and this chapter is dedicated to them. The authors also applaud the work of Vincent Schiraldi, Marc Schindler, David Brown, David Muhammad, and the entire DYRS team, including the front-line staff at New Beginnings Youth Center. We would like to thank Arthur Evenchik for his comments and editorial assistance, and Patrick Clark, Alana Intriere, and Michael Knobler for research assistance. Finally, we would like to thank the young men of the New Beginnings Youth Center. May you dream big, work hard, and never, ever return.

1. PBIS is a nationally recognized approach to supporting positive school culture, and it is used in many school districts. It was not specifically designed for use in juvenile facilities, although a number of such schools have adopted it.
2. We have changed all of the students' names for confidentiality purposes.
3. Here and elsewhere, our grade level equivalency estimates are based on students' scores on the Woodcock Johnson III Achievement series assessment.
4. Between September of 2009 and July of 2010 the percentage of special needs students at the academy averaged 48 percent, and varied from a high of 55 percent to a low of 39 percent.
5. Results are based on students during the 2009-2010 school year who took three sections of the Woodcock Johnson III Achievement series in both English and math at entry and prior to release. Growth rates are calculated by annualizing actual growth rates. On average, scholars were administered the test just over six months apart, and growth rates were then extrapolated to equivalent rates of growth over nine months.

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