

**Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice:**  
**IMPROVING THE ODDS FOR INCARCERATED YOUTH**  
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**Introduction**

Recently, a letter crossed my desk pointing out the many exciting developments in the area of education at the Augusta Georgia Youth Development Campus. It was gratifying to hear so many compliments about the educational program at this site. After reading the letter, I thought about what people might see as they visit other sites statewide:

*Students actively engaged in coursework correlated to the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum (QCC).	* Students reading below a 6 <sup>th</sup> -grade level enrolled in an individualized reading program designed to remediate identified reading deficiencies.
*Students being prepared to pass state tests to meet high school graduation requirements.	*Group of students using the newly developed GED Curriculum Activity Packets to prepare them to take the high school general equivalency diploma (GED) exam.
*State-certified teachers preparing individualized lesson plans for each student in the classroom.	*Distance learning Spanish class preparing students to meet the academic requirements for their high school diploma.
*A new textbook, recently adopted by Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) teachers, on students' desks to best meet their unique learning needs.	*Library facilities containing a wealth of educational resources and high-interest reading materials available for each student.
*Students actively engaged in quality vocational courses taught by certified Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education (DTAE) teachers.	*Computers on teachers' desks tied to the DJJ Intranet system for use with educational management and student tracking.
*Teachers teaching work skills in high employability occupations. A student in the computer repair class might show them his student portfolio with a record of the work skills and vocational competencies he can apply toward dual high school and postsecondary credit.	*School Counselor working with students on conflict resolution or reviewing the transcript and student portfolio to help them smoothly transition back into the school or community.
*More than 40% of students are in smaller classes because they have been identified as special needs students. Students in these classes are receiving special education services by certified teachers to address their identified needs.	

It is certain that the visitors to these campuses would be impressed by the comprehensive plan in place to meet the needs of the youth committed to the educational program. These words best

summarize Georgia's DJJ educational program: **It is focused on youth, and it is seamless, comprehensive, and consistent statewide.**

### **The Framework for Georgia's DJJ Educational Reform**

Has it always been this way? A letter to Governor Zell Miller on February 13, 1998, from the U.S. Department of Justice best answers that question. It was in this letter that the Department of Justice issued findings that concluded that certain conditions in juvenile justice facilities allegedly violated particular constitutional and federal statutory rights of juveniles. Shortly thereafter, the State of Georgia and the federal government, through good faith negotiations, reached a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) of provisions to ensure compliance with federal law and constitutional standards.

DJJ Commissioner Orlando Martinez laid out plans for making changes to the current juvenile justice system. Central to this plan was his support of education. He stated, "If there is a silver bullet for dealing with delinquency, it's education...mental health services, counseling services, and security ought to support the basic foundation...education." This article focuses on the educational section of his plan, *Educational Services for Incarcerated Youth*.

Georgia's DJJ has legislated responsibilities to educate the youth committed to its care. The 1992 Session of the General Assembly created a separate department to provide for the supervision, detention, education, and rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. This legislation also provided for a special school district with the same powers, privileges, authority, and standards as all other school districts in Georgia.

DJJ, which operates all detention centers in the state, has a variety of settings where educational services are provided. Long-term (average stay: 6 months-5 years) Youth Development Campuses (YDC's) provide academic and vocational educational programs for delinquent youth. Short-term (average stay: 90 days) YDC's provide primarily academic and vocational enrichment courses only. Regional Youth Detention Centers (RYDC's; average stay: 10-15 days) provide temporary secure care and supervision for youth who have been detained and charged with, or have been found guilty of, crimes and are awaiting disposition of their cases by the juvenile court or placement in another program. The school system also educates youth in wilderness programs, drug and alcohol treatment centers, community schools, and other alternative settings in the state.

DJJ students, who may be in the system for as little as a day or for more than 5 years, provide many unique educational challenges not usually faced in the normal school setting. These students often come from dysfunctional homes; have poor academic records; experience learning, emotional, and behavior problems; dislike school; and have low self-esteem.

Many questions about the DJJ educational program remained unanswered. It was not long ago that teachers were heard to ask: With the wide variety of students and transient population, how do we provide a program of quality that meets each individual's needs? How do we know which course to place students in until their records arrive from their local schools? How do we track their progress and assign meaningful grades for them to take back to their local schools? How can we conduct a class for students who are in different courses on different levels in the same classroom? How do we get our students to graduate with a diploma?

These teachers believed that the youth placed in their custody should receive an educational program to fit their identified needs. They believed that these young people should have the opportunity to develop to their highest potential. There was a consensus that in order to meet these expectations and comply with state law and the mandates of MOA, educational reform was necessary.

### **Strategic Planning for School Improvement**

Strategic planning for school improvement was the process used for educational reform. This process provided the necessary strategies and operations to improve DJJ educational programs. Strategic planning was characterized by five phases in an ongoing, cyclical process of planning, implementation, and evaluation:

- **Planning to Plan:** Creating an understanding and commitment to the process.
- **Data Compilation:** Collecting school data relevant to the development of an action plan.
- **Strategic Planning:** Identifying and prioritizing key issues and developing an action plan.
- **Implementation:** Applying and carrying out the action plan.
- **Evaluation:** Measuring the success of the action plan to determine future planning.

### ***Phase I: Planning to Plan***

The first step in the development of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) was to appoint a steering committee to oversee the process. This committee, made up of school leaders, teachers in each academic area, site leaders, community representatives, and other stakeholders close to the school setting, served as the driving force for the development of the action plan. Its function was to plan, coordinate, manage, and serve as the conduit for the change process.

### ***Phase II: Data Compilation***

The steering committee, through the use of subcommittees (i.e., action teams), used the concerns identified by the federal investigation and the needs assessment gathered from site interviews and surveys to formulate baseline data for planning.

### ***Phase III: Strategic Planning***

The steering committee used the data from these assessments to identify key issues that needed to be addressed to make positive changes to the DJJ educational system: program direction, educational management, educational resources, special education, space, staffing, staff development, behavior management, program, and teacher and student evaluation. Action teams were appointed to address each issue and to make recommendations to improve the educational system.

#### **Program Direction: Mission, Vision, Beliefs, Policies, and Procedures**

The action team developed a mission, vision, and beliefs to define the purpose, function, and values of the DJJ educational system. They also formulated policies and procedures that would ensure a consistent, statewide educational system.

#### **Educational Management**

Teacher representatives from each academic area, school leaders, consultants, and central office staff served on this action team to develop the educational management system, the foundation of the instructional programs. This management system includes curriculum frameworks, textbooks, teacher resources, 10-day academic modules, resource guides, curriculum activity packets, course codes, tracking sheets, withdrawal forms, and transcripts. The system, which meets state and federal standards, provides validity, integrity, and uniformity to the DJJ educational programs.

**Curriculum Frameworks: ( Academic)**

The curriculum frameworks, written for Grades 5 to 12 in the areas of social studies, science, mathematics, language arts, and health and physical education, are aligned and correlated to the objectives of Georgia's statewide QCC. They include course descriptions and objectives, strand and source of course content, cognitive level of the content based on Bloom's Taxonomy, approximate number of hours needed to teach objectives, and resources provided to teach course content. The frameworks are provided to all teachers statewide through hard copy and the DJJ Intranet system.

***Curriculum activity packets (CAPS).*** As an outgrowth of the frameworks, CAPS were developed to provide teachers with individualized lesson plans and student activity sheets for every course in the curriculum. Students who complete their CAPS receive grades and course credits that meet state graduation requirements and are transferable on their return to the home school. This system of mastery learning allows all students the opportunity to move along at their own pace and accumulate credits toward meeting their high school graduation requirements. It also enables teacher to become facilitators, tutors, and managers of the educational process.

***10-day academic modules.*** With the rapid turnover of students in the detention centers, teachers often asked how they could get students involved in meaningful educational programming as quickly as possible. The 10-day academic modules were developed to meet this need. These modules, which are correlated to Georgia's QCC, provide assignments in booklets for youth during the first 10 days of their confinement or until the center receives the students' academic records from their home schools. The modules were developed on three learning levels:

- Module A – for learning levels Grades 9 to 12
- Module B - for learning levels Grades 5 to 8
- Module C - for learning levels Grades 1 to 4

In addition to providing instructional plans and resources in the core academic areas, the modules offer lesson plans for teachers and student activity sheets in character education, drug education, self-esteem, study skills, employability skills, and conflict resolution. Placement in an appropriate module is based on initial academic screening through the TABE Survey (i.e., in reading and math) and teacher observation. Student performance dictates the movement of

students through each module. Teachers score completed student work in the modules and assign appropriate grades. These grades are assigned a course code and are transferable when these youth return to their home schools or move through the DJJ system to other facilities.

***Academic tracking sheets.*** Students who complete CAPS are able for credits, which are subsequently recorded on the academic tracking sheets. These sheets are used statewide in all of the DJJ educational programs. They serve as permanent records to track students' progress toward mastery of Georgia's QCC objectives. The sheets list each CAP by number, related textbook lessons, state objectives to be mastered, correlation to the statewide end-of-course and graduation test, completion date of objectives at a predetermined level of mastery, and teachers' signatures with each students' grades. The tracking sheets, available on the DJJ Intranet, follow the students' progress and provide a permanent record of their progress, which can be transmitted by withdrawal sheet or transcript to the home schools once these youth are dismissed from the DJJ system.

***Vocational education.*** Baseline data revealed the need to restructure the vocational program. An advisory committee of leaders from the business community, representatives from secondary and postsecondary education, consultants, and other stakeholders was formed to discuss meaningful time lines, goals, and objectives to improve the existing vocational program. Meetings were held with Georgia's DTAE to discuss working agreements with postsecondary technical colleges, which would play a significant role in the future of the DJJ vocational program offerings.

The Commissioner of DJJ, Orlando Martinez, and the Commissioner of Georgia's DTAE, Dr. Kenneth Breeden, signed a partnership agreement to explore the options in providing postsecondary education to incarcerated youth. This agreement essentially outlined mutual covenants. DJJ agreed to provide laboratory space, equipment, instructional materials, and supplies; DTAE agreed to provide the instructors and curricula that would enable students to receive high school and postsecondary school credit. Together, they conducted an employability study to select the most appropriate courses to offer to the DJJ student population. Youth enrolled in the program now have portfolios developed for their use as they transition back to their local schools and communities. DJJ and the Georgia Department of Labor are developing a transition plan to monitor these students and follow up on their progress at the time of their release. Our students are not only provided the knowledge and abilities necessary for successful

transition from secondary education to postsecondary education and beyond but they are also provided with the skills necessary to compete in the job market.

### **Educational Resources: (Textbooks, Supplies, and Equipment)**

Most sites had outdated textbooks, supplies, materials, and other resources to adequately support an educational program. The curriculum frameworks subcommittee, made up of regular and special education teachers in social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, health and physical education, and vocational education, reviewed and adopted new state approved textbooks best suited to support the newly adopted curricula. The books selected in each academic area were found to be the most appropriate for all levels of the student population under the jurisdiction of DJJ. These same teachers helped to select the appropriate academic and vocational supplies and materials needed to support the curricula. Their requests were reviewed and processed centrally to ensure consistent resources statewide.

### **Space**

There was a critical need for classrooms, particularly in all of the RYDC's. Recommendations were made by the Commissioner to install doublewide mobile units at each RYDC to provide immediate teaching space. Mobile units were purchased and put in place quickly to meet this need. Long-range planning is currently under way to create permanent space to meet the classroom needs of the DJJ educational system.

### **Special Education**

Federal and state investigations indicated that special education was probably the weakest link in the DJJ educational system. Therefore, it was critical to identify and serve students with special needs, including students receiving special education services from their home schools and students who were eligible to receive services but had not been identified in the past. A staffing shortage, along with a lack of qualified professionals, precluded their participation in determining student eligibility and implementing preexisting Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The audits cited the need to develop and implement policies and procedures consistent with federal regulations.

The special education action team, which included teachers, technical assistants, central office staff, and other stakeholders, totally restructured the special education program. The first step in this restructuring process was the development of a state-approved special education manual and a 504 manual detailing all of the policies and procedures to be followed. These

manuals, now available at each site, served as the foundation for the entire special education program. Through increased staffing and the identification of eligible students, the provision of related services, staff development, training, hard work, technical assistance, constant monitoring, planning, and prayer, the most recent federal and state audits indicate that all state and federal guidelines are now being met.

### **Alternative Education Placement Model (AEPM)**

Surveys and observations indicated an inconsistency in the handling of school-related behavior problems. Students at many sites were being isolated and were not receiving adequate educational services. There was an urgent need for the development of a consistent behavior management program for students who exhibited behavior problems in the classroom. This issue was addressed in a twofold approach: First, there was a strong belief that effective educational programming would reduce student discipline problems. Youth who are enrolled in programming designed to meet their identified academic, mental health, and social needs are less inclined to present behavior problems in the classroom. Second, an alternative education placement model (AEPM) was developed as a structured approach to managing students who exhibit behaviors that are disruptive to the regular classroom setting.

AEPM requires that there be physical space set aside to isolate disruptive students within the institutional setting. This space could be an unoccupied classroom, a study carrel, or a desk space outside of the regular classroom setting. Students assigned to AEPM are closely supervised by a trained member of the security staff, who monitors the academic work and behavior of the isolated youth. Students placed in AEPM are told why they are assigned, are given the appropriate coursework, and are told the steps they must take to earn their way back to the normal classroom setting.

AEPM is important to successful behavior management available to classroom teachers. Its effectiveness is limited to the judicious use of the program to target the most difficult behaviors. This model is an integral part of the education management system, and it is the accepted educational behavior management approach used at each DJJ facility statewide.

### **Staffing Plan**

Adequate educational staffing was a problem at all facilities. The MOA required that the Associate Superintendent for Educational Services develop an educational staffing plan to ensure that a sufficient number of certified general, special education, and substitute teachers were

provided to give all youth the opportunity to attend school full time. In addition, the MOA required that each teacher be provided with sufficient time to plan lessons, grade assignments, and participate in educational meetings. To meet these staffing guidelines, several assumptions were made:

- Staffing for the YDC's would be based on population, program capacities, and specialty program needs.
- Staffing for the RYDC's would be based on average daily population figures.
- YDC principal and assistant principal allocations would meet Georgia's School Standards.
- RYDC principals would be allocated using a regional principal concept. Selected principals would administer several sites in each region.
- Special education technical assistants would be allocated regionally to assist special education teachers with their responsibilities to meet state and federal guidelines.
- Sufficient psychological and related services would be provided to meet the needs of the special education program.
- School counselors would be available at each YDC site to support students with educational planning.
- Lead teachers would be provided at each RYDC site.
- The Georgia Professional Standards Commission would certify teachers.
- All students who qualified for special education services would be identified and served. Special education staffing and class enrollment would meet all state and federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1990) standards.
- A projected incidence of 40% special education and 60% regular education student populations at each site would be used in allocating teaching staff.
- Trained substitute teachers would be provided at each site.

***Staffing formula.*** In conjunction with staff, the Associate Superintendent developed a formula to ensure that each site was staffed adequately to meet all state and federal staffing guidelines. The staffing formula used objective criteria to equitably allocate teachers and support staff at each site in the DJJ system. Each director and principal was notified of staffing allocations, and positions were filled to meet the new formula.

## **Staff Development**

The Associate Superintendent was charged with the responsibility to design and implement in-service training for educational staff to carry out this comprehensive plan for educational improvement. An action team of administrators, teachers, consultants, and other stakeholders was appointed to create a model that could be used statewide to train educational staff. This model included statewide meetings, regional meetings, pilot site meetings, and site-based meetings. Training consultants assisted the educational staff with this initiative.

Training was conducted for educational staff in these broad areas: program direction, curriculum, special education policies and procedures, records management, and student behavior management. In response to the critical need for fully certified special education teachers, more than 40 teachers have enrolled in the DJJ Special Education Teacher Certification Project. This project enables provisionally certified teachers to receive credits toward certification in the area of special education online at their home school sites.

### *Phase IV*

## **Implementation**

Most strategic plans fail at the point of implementation. Translating innovative ideas into action is a very difficult undertaking. Often times, there is a resistance to change, operational distractions, and confusion as to who is going to be accountable for what. Two conditions are crucial to the successful implementation of the plan. First, the individuals responsible must relentlessly support the implementation of the plan. Second, the action plan must become a normal part of staff workload. People must clearly understand their role in the successful implementation of the plan. The Office of Education was blessed to have a commissioner who supported this effort. He based his reorganization plan on his commitment to providing a quality educational program for all youth committed to the **DJJ** system. He saw to it that we got the resources and support we needed to successfully implement this reform.

Selected YDC and RYDC sites were used to pilot the educational management system. Teachers were trained at each pilot site, and their input was used to refine and improve the system. After 6 months of piloting the changes, a “train the trainers” model was implemented statewide. Teachers and administrators at the pilot sites were used to train all of the other teachers statewide in program implementation. It has taken about one year for full implementation of this educational reform.

## *Phase V*

### **Evaluation**

Most important to the continued maintenance of the SIP process is evaluation. It is during this phase that the organization defines the degree to which it has been successful in accomplishing its designated goals and objectives. The Associate Superintendent appointed an action team to develop and provide an evaluation instrument to determine progress toward the goals and to assure compliance with state and federal standards. The action team developed evaluation instruments in three areas: program evaluation, teacher evaluation, and student evaluation.

***Program evaluation instrument.*** This instrument was developed to enable the educational program to comply with Correctional Education Association Standards (CEA), DJJ Quality Assurance Standards, American Correctional Association Standards (ACA), Georgia School Board of Education Standards, and IDEA (1990) guidelines. The instrument contains performance ratings for standards in 30 areas. These standards are rated as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, with specific comments and ratings in each standard area.

The program evaluations instrument is used from three perspectives: site evaluation, DJJ Office of Education evaluation, and DJJ Quality Assurance evaluation.

- **Facility Self-Evaluation:** Principals at each site review records; observe programs and classroom activities; and interview staff, students, teachers, and administrators to determine standards compliance. They submit written reports to the DJJ Office of Education, with corrective actions indicated.
- **DJJ Office of Education Evaluation:** A team of administrators, Office of Education personnel, and other staff review these self-evaluation reports. This team then visits the site and conducts an audit. They review records; observe programs and classroom activities; and interview staff, students, teachers, and administrators to determine standards compliance. The team evaluates the steps that have been taken to correct noted deficiencies and prepares a written compliance report.
- **DJJ Office of Quality Assurance Evaluation:** The DJJ Office of Quality Assurance conducts an annual formal audit of the educational program. This department reviews documentation; observes programs and classroom activities; and interviews staff, students, teachers, and administrators to determine standards compliance and program

quality. Written reports are submitted to the Commissioner and the Associate Superintendent of Education.

***Teacher evaluations.*** Teacher evaluations are conducted by using the State of Georgia Performance Management Instrument and the DJJ Curriculum Assessment Instrument. Principals and site directors who document employee performance conduct these evaluations. The DJJ Curriculum Assessment Instrument is used to provide input for the Georgia performance management form (PMF). The PMF is an annual teacher performance evaluation that leads to salary increase recommendations and supports permanent status decisions. The PMF incorporates job and individual responsibilities, terms and conditions of employment, salary recommendations, employment status, and an employee development plan into the overall rating of the employee's job performance. Each employee is provided with a copy of the report's overall ratings and an employee development plan.

***Student evaluations.*** Students are evaluated in several ways. They are tested and graded on work completed in CAPS. Grades are recorded on the tracking sheets and provided on the student withdrawal forms or student transcripts with appropriate course titles and course codes. Students are also responsible for passing the tests in all areas of the Georgia statewide testing program.

### **Summary**

Significant changes have been made in the DJJ educational system. Have they been successful? These indicators would lead us to believe that we are headed in the right direction. More than 900 students have been identified and are receiving special education services. This is an increase of more than 650 students over the number identified 2 years ago. The Georgia Department of Education recently determined that DJJ was in compliance with all federal and state regulations regarding special education at every YDC and RYDC school site. They added these comments: *"The special education program in DJJ is exemplary; great strides have been made to identify and provide services to identified youth."* Four hundred and thirty-seven students completed one full year or more in a vocational program and received certificates from postsecondary technical colleges. Three students successfully passed the first of two Computing Technology Industry Association (COMPTIA) A+ exams. The exams will confer internationally

recognized certification as computer repair technicians. One student received certification as a welder from Central Georgia Technical College and earned more than \$3,000 while working as an apprentice off campus. Another student earned \$3,600 while working in heating and air-conditioning with his certification from the technical college. A recent audit report from the State of Georgia Vocational Department stated, *“The vocational program in DJJ has made remarkable strides. Students are actively engaged in quality vocational programming.”*

Teachers indicate they are much better prepared and are experiencing fewer discipline problems as a result of the new curricula. They now have lesson plans and student activity sheets for students in each academic area. The DJJ school system fully participates in the Georgia Standardized Testing Program. Significant increases in all areas of the statewide testing program have been noted over the past 2 years. Of the 308 students who took the GED in 2001, 196 passed and received certificates. This 64% pass rate exceeded the state average rate of 58%. All schools in Georgia readily accept DJJ withdrawal forms and transcripts. Students are now earning high school diplomas based on academic credits earned in YDC programs. Students are often heard to say, *“This is school, and it really counts.”*

Recently, a student at the Dalton RYDC ask if he could remain a few more days so that he could get caught up with his work before he returned to his home school. Dustin wrote, *Sir, I just wanted you to know that I appreciate all of the help you have given me in the body shop. Not only have I learned about fixing cars [but] I have learned where I am in life. I just know that things are going to work out for me. I pray that all of the people who have helped me through this time will continue to help others and make a difference in their lives to. Thanks.*

Has the Georgia DJJ arrived at the mythical “there” yet? No, not really. DJJ educators believe, however, they are on the right track. These educational initiatives are providing youths with meaningful skills and the knowledge necessary to stay in school and to be successful in the workplace. Teachers are convinced that they have improved the odds for incarcerated youths to become productive members of society.