



Evidence for a Purpose

A Research Agenda to Guide Policy Change in Juvenile Justice Education

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Introduction

The foundational purpose of a juvenile justice system is *rehabilitation*, recognizing that nearly every young person incarcerated today will return to their community. Education is a core component of that rehabilitative function, and the right to public education for incarcerated students is enshrined in both federal and state laws. Students in custody ought to receive the same education opportunities as their peers in traditional public school settings, including their protected rights to special education services.¹ States, however, consistently fall short in rehabilitating incarcerated students (Sidebar 1). There are many factors contributing to that failure, but the lack of high-quality education in juvenile facilities is both significant and solvable.

The shortcomings of juvenile justice education systems are neither new nor poorly understood. Although aggregated data on education outcomes for students involved with the juvenile justice system is limited, it all tells a clear, consistent, and troubling story. For example, results from a rare statewide study in Massachusetts showed that just 12 students — less than 1% of 1,545 incarcerated students — successfully completed a postsecondary degree after being released from custody. About a quarter (26%) earned a high school degree within five years of entering ninth grade, and less than half (44%) earned a high school diploma or GED within five years. The highest percentage — at 46% — was for students who dropped out of school entirely.² These education outcomes are similar to those found in studies of incarcerated students in other jurisdictions.³

The weight of the evidence is undeniable: Far more often than not, **juvenile justice education systems fail students**. And the students being failed are some of the most vulnerable and marginalized in society, students who desperately need access to high-quality education. Many students arrive in juvenile facilities far behind academically while also managing complex trauma histories,⁴ adverse childhood experiences,⁵ and significant unmet mental, behavioral, and physical health needs as they try to catch up.⁶ Moreover, students with disabilities,⁷ students who are (or who are perceived to be) LGBTQIA+I,⁸ and Black and Native American or Alaska Native students are all overrepresented in juvenile facilities.⁹

Decades of research have shown that juvenile justice education does not and has never worked. This agenda calls for a new phase of research focused on how state and local policy can lead the way in reforming and redesigning the system.

SIDEBAR 1

Defining Students in Custody and Juvenile Justice Education

This research agenda focuses specifically on a subset of students involved with the juvenile court system: those in the custody of a public agency and incarcerated in juvenile facilities. For more on defining terms such as “juvenile justice education,” “facilities,” and “court-involved,” see Bellwether’s reports, [Double Punished: Locked Out of Opportunity](#) and [Transforming Education Data Sharing for Nebraska’s Court-Involved Students: Improving Academic Outcomes Through Cross-Agency Collaboration](#).

Juvenile justice education must be comprehensively redesigned.

Rather than being centered on education as a primary rehabilitative strategy for students, most juvenile facilities are designed solely with a safety and security orientation. When the agencies responsible for providing education (i.e., local education agency) and security (i.e., department of juvenile justice) are different within a single facility, which is often the case, security preferences almost always win out over education. Whereas the master schedule dictates every minute of the day in traditional schools, classrooms in juvenile facilities are defined by volatility. Real or perceived security threats result in frequent lockdowns and school closures. Students are often pulled out of class unexpectedly for court appearances, to meet with probation officers, or for other appointments. The length of the school day also might be shorter and classroom times irregular. All students need consistent routines and structure in their learning environment, and especially students who arrive in juvenile facilities already having experienced significant disruption in their lives and education.¹⁰

On top of a learning environment that lacks structure and routine, students in juvenile facilities are provided with fewer educational opportunities than their peers in traditional settings, and the opportunities these students do receive are generally of lower quality.¹¹ Students are taught by teachers who have less training,¹² appear less prepared to deliver content-area instruction than teachers in public schools,¹³ and receive little if any professional development for providing instruction in juvenile facilities.¹⁴ Teachers are presented with an enormously challenging task, which is to teach mixed-grade classrooms, with students who come and go constantly without warning, and who have tremendously varied and almost always significant needs.¹⁵ When students somehow manage to earn credits in these learning environments (if they receive them at all), those credits often are not transferred across juvenile facilities or to their school upon release, ensuring students are even further behind academically when they return to their community.¹⁶ Poor long-

term outcomes for incarcerated students seem almost intentional when understood in the context of the foundationally flawed design of juvenile justice education.

State and local policies shape the design of juvenile justice education — and are tools to improve outcomes for incarcerated students.

A complex interplay of federal, state, and local policies across multiple sectors — including, but not limited to, education, juvenile justice, and child welfare — shapes how and why students become involved with the juvenile court system. Although issues such as policing and disciplinary practices in K-12 schools are critical for understanding how students enter the juvenile justice system, this research agenda focuses specifically on state and local policies that most directly affect the education students receive once they are in custody. Similarly, while diversion programs and other alternatives to youth incarceration are important for understanding how to keep students out of the system, they fall outside the scope of this agenda, which focuses exclusively on juvenile justice education programs that serve students in state or local custody, as well as the agencies that govern, fund, and hold these programs accountable for outcomes.

With that scope in mind, this research agenda begins with three foundational state policy domains that must be coherent and mutually reinforcing in any educational system: governance, finance, and accountability. This is essential in a system as fragmented as juvenile justice education, where several different agencies and organizations all play a role in providing education services to students. First, because so many state agencies touch the lives of incarcerated students, the foundational policy question centers on who is responsible for education in a state's juvenile facilities. **Governance** is the term used to describe who has the authority to make decisions about education in juvenile facilities.

A more precise understanding of governance is necessary for determining whether the entities responsible for providing education services are receiving the funding needed to produce high-quality learning environments. **Finance** policies for juvenile justice education are complex, even more than typical student funding formulas. Students enter the juvenile system at unpredictable times, have lengths of stay that vary from just a few days to years, and arrive with many needs, academic and otherwise. Given this complexity, it is essential that those responsible for providing education services in juvenile facilities have adequate resources and also have authority to make day-to-day funding decisions.

Accountability naturally flows from aligned governance and finance policies. When those responsible for providing education in juvenile facilities have the authority to make programmatic decisions and receive adequate funding, there ought to be no one else to blame for poor student outcomes — or to get credit for success. Furthermore, when these three policy levers are aligned, those who are responsible for providing education services in juvenile facilities are then held accountable for local policy decisions such as:

- **Program Structure and Curriculum**
- **Screening and Assessment**
- **Academic Interventions**
- **Teacher Quality**
- **Classroom Management**
- **Special Education Services**
- **School Reentry and Transition**

These seven types of local policy decisions are covered in the second half of this research agenda.

Improving the design and coherence of state and local policy is critical to creating better learning environments within juvenile facilities, but very little is known about the specific characteristics of these policies and what effect different policy configurations have on student outcomes. This leaves leaders to make their best guess and reveals an urgent need for better data and more research on juvenile justice education policy.

Better data and research will lead to better state and local policy.

In general, “there is very little research on education programs in juvenile justice facilities.”¹⁷ Much of the existing research on juvenile justice education has focused on documenting poor outcomes for incarcerated students and diagnosing the underlying problems that lead to those outcomes. While past research has built a compelling and urgent case for reform, this agenda takes the position that little can be gained from studies that simply confirm what is already clear: The juvenile justice education system does not work. The most pressing question now is how to fix it, and what role state and local policy should play in driving reform and system redesign.

Moreover, while juvenile justice education may appear to be a growing field, most research focuses on individual interventions, education programs, or juvenile facilities. Very little research is at the system level or focused on state policy reforms. At best, current research only describes what these policies are and how they operate. Policy analysis with a focus on how best to reform systems is astonishingly rare.

This is not a critique of the research itself, which continues to surface important insights, or of researchers, who have dedicated their professional lives to improving outcomes for incarcerated students. In fact, every high-quality study — broadly defined in methodological terms — offers at least one actionable insight that can help inform policy or practice. That said, the problem is not a lack of insight, but an absence of infrastructure for synthesizing and translating that insight into something decision-makers can use to improve experiences and outcomes for young people. This agenda aims to help fill that gap: to identify where existing evidence already supports action, and where policymakers and practitioners must rely on judgment and values to move forward in the absence of research (Sidebar 2). The goal is not to describe the problem — it is to guide the policy change that can begin to solve it.

SIDEBAR 2

Creating This Research Agenda

The first step to outlining critical questions for future research is taking stock of what is known already. To do so, a broad search was conducted in Google Scholar using variations on the term “juvenile justice education,” including words and phrases such as “incarcerated,” “detention,” “youth,” “state,” “policy,” “federal,” “correctional,” and “interagency.” Reviewing the websites of more than 30 organizations focused on juvenile justice helped surface relevant research not typically found in academic journals. The research referenced in key articles from the initial search also provided additional studies relevant to the policy issues discussed in this agenda.

It is important to clarify that this is not a formal literature review, this search process was not systematic, and not all research important and relevant to juvenile justice education policy is cited in this agenda. Instead, the goal was to survey the landscape of research to identify key pieces of literature, describe critical gaps in the knowledge base, surface promising practices that policymakers and practitioners can immediately incorporate into their daily work, and provide direction for future policy research. Juvenile justice education policy is among the most difficult areas of social science to conduct research on, and in many cases not much evidence exists to guide the work of policymakers and practitioners. That said, policymakers and practitioners must make decisions now based on the best available evidence.¹⁸

Finally, rather than a standalone project, this research agenda can serve as the foundation for an evolving repository of studies, information, and facts that can inform juvenile justice education policy. Moving forward, the aim is to further analyze each topic area identified in this agenda to offer deeper insights and more detailed guidance for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and funders. In the end, this effort seeks to elevate the work of juvenile justice education researchers and begin building a multidisciplinary, cross-sector network of professionals working to advance evidence-based solutions.

This research agenda is intended for multiple audiences, including:

- **State policymakers** (i.e., legislators and state agency officials), by offering insights into the best available evidence that can inform decision-making, highlighting gaps in knowledge, and providing recommendations on how to integrate research findings into policy.
- **Researchers**, by summarizing the current state of the literature, identifying areas where further investigation is needed to strengthen the evidence base, and outlining the challenges and opportunities juvenile justice education policy research presents.
- **Juvenile justice education program leaders**, by surfacing promising practices supported by evidence and identifying areas to initiate proactive program improvement efforts where either little or no evidence exists and where policymakers have yet to act.

Although not directly referenced in the recommended next steps in the sections below, this research agenda is also useful for **funders** by identifying critical areas of research that require investment to drive meaningful improvements in juvenile justice education policy.

Improving the design and coherence of state and local policy is critical to creating better learning environments within juvenile facilities, but very little is known about the specific characteristics of these policies and what effect different policy configurations have on student outcomes.

This research agenda has one additional purpose, which is to build stronger connections among research, policy, and practice in juvenile justice education. Today, the linkages among the people working in each space — as well as the funders who support them — are limited. Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders must work in close concert to identify and implement policy reforms that ensure all incarcerated students receive the high-quality education necessary to make a healthy transition into adulthood.

Though these groups must work in closer partnership, it is clear who needs to lead: State policymakers are best positioned to initiate, lead, and sustain efforts that reform juvenile justice education. Researchers have a role in showing them the way. But in the meantime, education program leaders should not wait around for policymakers to act and researchers to guide. To illustrate this relationship and in an effort to provide actionable takeaways for each group, this research agenda includes a table of recommended next steps by each state and local policy area for state policymakers, researchers, and education program leaders (Table 1).

TABLE 1: HOW THE RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS IN THIS RESEARCH AGENDA ARE ORGANIZED

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.

The best policies keep students in their community.

A notable and clear finding from the research is that keeping kids in their communities, rather than behind bars, gives them the best chance at making a healthy transition into adulthood while also improving public safety. As the National Research Council concluded after a comprehensive review of the literature, “multifaceted community-based interventions show greater reductions in rearrests than institutional programs” and “committing youth to large institutions that fail to provide for their developmental needs is both costly in financial terms and ineffective in furthering the goal of crime prevention.”¹⁹ Effective community-based programs keep students involved with the juvenile justice system close to their community and trusted adults in their lives, include developmentally appropriate interventions, encourage prosocial behavior, provide

high-quality education opportunities, and are grounded in a cognitive-behavioral — rather than punitive — approach to youth development.²⁰

A range of other changes can be made at the system level to reduce the likelihood that students encounter law enforcement and the juvenile courts, including reforms to school discipline policies and court sentencing procedures. Although many of these reforms have been enacted in parts of the U.S.,²¹ leading to a drop in the number of students behind bars during the past few decades, they are not universal, and youth incarceration appears to be on the rise again.²² As a result, tens of thousands of students are incarcerated today, and more will be in the future. State policymakers and practitioners are responsible for providing high-quality education to students in their custody, and researchers and funders have an important role to play in providing the data, recommendations, and support that can inform policy reform and programmatic improvements.

Challenges and Opportunities in Juvenile Justice Education Policy Research

Producing actionable policy research in juvenile justice education is a challenging task due to a complex mix of logistical, ethical, institutional, and political barriers. At its core, the structure of juvenile justice is inherently fragmented with multiple agencies more concerned with managing risk and liability than improving the quality of education programs. Within this restrictive environment, researchers and analysts must navigate not only facility-level constraints and administrative obstacles,²³ but also norms and practices within the academic research community that limit what is considered rigorous or valid evidence.

A prevailing belief within the broader research community is that only certain types of research designs — particularly randomized controlled trials and quasi-experiments — can produce findings that are valid, generalizable, and actionable. However, these types of research designs are seldom feasible in juvenile facilities, costly, often unethical, time consuming, and frequently irrelevant for addressing the structural and systemic challenges that characterize juvenile justice. Students in state custody also move across facilities and schools frequently and unpredictably, making it difficult to sustain interventions for long enough to collect adequate data. Facility lockdowns, staff shortages, and high student mobility also disrupt interventions and data collection.²⁴ Institutional review board (IRB) procedures, though well intentioned, can often delay or prevent researchers from gathering even the most basic information on juvenile justice education programs.²⁵ At their worst, these procedures prevent research from occurring altogether and, as a consequence, render the experiences of incarcerated students invisible to researchers, policymakers, and the broader public.



The challenges of gaining access to juvenile facilities and students, restrictive IRB procedures, and rigid adherence to conventional standards of rigor have all resulted in a narrow body of evidence with limited utility. For example, reviews of the literature often cite fewer than 20 studies that are of sufficient “quality,” most of which focus on small, isolated interventions that provide little insight into broader system reform. As a result, the field has accumulated a fragmented knowledge base that is difficult to translate into policy insights or guidance for practitioners. Moreover, the disconnect between researchers and juvenile justice professionals — many of whom view researchers, evaluators, and consultants with suspicion — has led to studies that lack face validity and fail to resonate with those responsible for pursuing reform on the ground or in state capitals.²⁶

Actionable policy research must be relevant, easily adapted, and aligned with the priorities of policymakers and practitioners. State and local policy decisions are not made in controlled environments — they are shaped by personal values, political priorities, financial constraints, and agency norms and practices. Research that is narrowly designed to determine “what works” in ideal conditions will rarely speak to the questions policymakers and practitioners need and want answers to.²⁷

Perhaps most importantly in relation to this research agenda, actionable policy research addresses questions that lead to system-level change, such as: How can fragmented governance models be reformed? What policies best support cross-agency coordination among state education, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies? What are effective strategies for building data-sharing infrastructure that allows for the secure and timely transfer of education records? Answering these questions requires human-centered approaches and close partnerships with students, practitioners, agency leaders, and policymakers. Supporting this type of research and these kinds of partnerships also depends on funders recognizing that the high costs and long timelines associated with this work are not barriers but instead necessary investments to creating more effective juvenile justice education programs.²⁸

Tens of thousands of students are incarcerated today, and more will be in the future. State policymakers and practitioners are responsible for providing high-quality education to students in their custody, and researchers and funders have an important role to play in providing the data, recommendations, and support that can inform policy reform and programmatic improvements.

Guiding Principles for Future Juvenile Justice Education Policy Research

These principles are meant to guide future research on juvenile justice education policy. Following them can make it more feasible to conduct research in juvenile settings, ensure that research is actionable for policy and/or practice, and build closer partnerships among those working to improve education conditions in juvenile facilities and outcomes for incarcerated students.

Build long-term, trusting relationships centered on shared goals. Long-term partnerships between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and, in some cases, funders are necessary for identifying and addressing pressing problems of policy and practice. Building long-term relationships across lines of professional difference, maintaining open communication, and committing to a mutual goal of improved learning conditions and student outcomes in juvenile facilities should serve as the basis of these partnerships.

Conduct policy- and practice-relevant research. Research for research's sake does not serve the needs of incarcerated students, nor will it likely be relevant to policymakers and practitioners. The questions researchers pursue, the methods they employ, and the insights they generate should be informed by the expressed or demonstrated needs of students, practitioners, and policymakers.

Employ human-centered research designs. In a human-centered approach,²⁹ the focus is on the needs of incarcerated students, those most directly impacted by the teaching and learning conditions in juvenile facilities. This type of approach requires grounding research, analysis, and potential solutions in how students are experiencing policy and practice challenges by talking directly with them.

Expand definitions of rigor and quality. Policy research is inherently practical and solution oriented. Instead of rigid adherence to advanced research designs and conventional notions of rigor, researchers should employ the methods that are best suited to answer the question in front of them, whether those are experimental designs, mixed-methods approaches, or interview-based research. The priority should be on transparency, and rigor should be measured by the actionability of the findings.

Commit to ethical and flexible research practices. Researchers, funders, state agencies, postsecondary institutions, and professional associations must all advocate for and pursue more streamlined IRB processes that uphold ethical standards while enabling timely, relevant research in juvenile facilities. Simplifying access to facilities, data, and students — without ever compromising student safety and privacy — must be the goal.

As this agenda turns toward a review of existing evidence, these principles can serve as a framework that guides future research. Researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders must work in close partnership to conduct research that not only documents problems and challenges, but also produces solutions to the persistent policy barriers that prevent students from accessing high-quality education behind bars.

Future Directions for State Policy Research

Research on state governance, finance, and accountability policy is severely limited, despite the influence these policies have on shaping the teaching and learning conditions within juvenile facilities. Existing studies are largely descriptive, focusing on policy design without examining how different designs influence student outcomes — largely because the data needed to answer these questions does not exist. The best available evidence points to fragmented governance models, opaque finance systems, and ineffective accountability mechanisms. Future research should prioritize identifying more coherent policy models and supporting the development of data systems and infrastructure that enable policymakers to track short- and long-term education outcomes for incarcerated students.

Governance

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Many state governance models in juvenile justice education are fragmented, resulting in multiple agencies holding responsibility for providing education to incarcerated students. The more fragmented the governance model, the more cross-agency communication and coordination are needed. Despite this need, communication and coordination across state agencies are generally weak. One significant consequence of poor cross-agency coordination is ineffective education record transfer practices that lead to delays in students receiving education services or enrolling in the correct courses.

Incarcerated students can transition in and out of a wide range of facilities depending on their temporary legal status and the nature of their offense. Some students may never be detained, whereas those incarcerated may reside in local detention facilities, state-run secure facilities, residential treatment centers, group homes, boot camps, and other types of placements. Governance is the term used to describe which agency is legally responsible for providing education services in each of the different facilities.

Governance determines every aspect of a juvenile justice education program, including the overall program design, the courses and opportunities available to students, what curriculum is used, how student achievement is assessed, classroom management and student discipline policies, how special education services are delivered, and everything related to teachers, such as hiring, firing, evaluation, professional development, and much more. Governance models also dictate what courses students are assigned to, how credits and high school diplomas are awarded, and the process used to share education records across juvenile facilities and public schools in the community.

Research on governance is surprisingly dated³⁰ or limited, and the best available evidence comes from a pair of 50-state landscape analyses.³¹ Both studies revealed that, in most states, multiple agencies share responsibility for education services in juvenile facilities, which leads to fragmented governance models.³² Fragmentation creates a situation where, for instance, one agency has authority over hiring teachers, curriculum and assessment, and credit accrual, while a different agency holds power over classroom management and student discipline policies. Another common complication occurs when the agency that governs education services in pre-adjudication detention (e.g., local education agency) is different from the one in post-adjudication confinement (e.g., department of juvenile justice). This model — local

education agency in pre-adjudication detention and department of juvenile justice in post-adjudication confinement — is employed in seven states. A total of 16 different governance models exist across the country.³³

When more than one agency is responsible for providing education to students as they move through the juvenile justice system, more communication and coordination are required from the individuals working in different state agencies.³⁴ Researchers have identified insufficient cross-agency communication and coordination as a persistent problem that significantly disrupts the education pathways of incarcerated students.³⁵ One outcome of poor cross-agency communication and coordination are delays in the transfer of students' education records and information across facilities.³⁶ In the best-case scenario, complete and accurate education records arrive at facilities before students do, allowing them to be enrolled in the correct courses and receive the services they are entitled to immediately. More commonly, though, the records arrive after a student has left the facility or not at all, leading to a situation where they may repeat courses they have already taken and/or they are denied the services they need. The worst-case scenario occurs when students engage in no formal education while incarcerated as insufficient records create extended delays in their placement.³⁷

Weak cross-agency coordination and data-sharing practices also make it more challenging for students to receive course credits while in custody. In a survey of juvenile justice officials from 34 states, only 9% of respondents reported that students in local detention facilities always earn credit for the coursework they have completed. The corresponding percentage for long-term facilities was 17%. Many students also *do not* have credits transferred to their school after being released, with 31% of survey respondents reporting students *do not* receive credit for the coursework they completed while incarcerated.³⁸

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Governance

Strengthening governance structures in juvenile justice education is critical to improving service delivery, academic continuity, and long-term outcomes for incarcerated students. **State policymakers** can lead by auditing governance models, enacting legislation to standardize key practices such as credit transfer and diploma pathways, and fostering cross-agency coordination. **Researchers** can support this work by evaluating the effects of reforms on student outcomes and system alignment. **Education program leaders** can implement local policies and procedures to reduce education disruptions for incarcerated students (Table 2).

TABLE 2: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR GOVERNANCE POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Commission state or regional audits to determine governance structures and identify gaps, ambiguity, and bottlenecks in service delivery.	How do different governance models impact education disruptions for incarcerated students and the quality of educational services they receive while incarcerated?	Document and report instances of education disruptions within and across facilities (e.g., missed instruction, placement in inappropriate courses, lost credits).
Explore funding or mandate the development of a centralized and/or interoperable education records system accessible by all juvenile facilities and public schools.	How does centralizing education record transfer affect outcomes for incarcerated students?	Develop and implement facility-based procedures to ensure education records are requested, reviewed, and applied to student programming immediately upon intake.
Pass legislation that requires partial-credit policies in all juvenile justice education programs and public schools, along with guidance on how to calculate, document, and transfer these credits.	Do partial-credit reforms lead to students earning more credits and high school degrees?	Communicate proactively with students' resident school district to advocate for the acceptance of partial credits earned during incarceration.
Create or expand pathways to modified diplomas for incarcerated students that align with state — not district — requirements.	Does modifying high school graduation requirements for incarcerated students improve education attainment?	Review students' academic histories upon intake and identify pathways to graduation that align with their needs, including modified diploma options.
Establish a permanent cross-agency governance working group focused on funding, data sharing, accountability, and systems alignment.	How can states design governance models to ensure greater alignment with funding structures, clear lines of accountability, and more effective cross-agency coordination?	Build collaborative relationships across agencies (e.g., joint professional development, shared planning tools) to strengthen coordination even within fragmented systems.

Finance

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

States vary widely in terms of which agencies are responsible for funding juvenile justice education and how resources are allocated to programs. It appears that some funding arrangements can disincentivize the provision of high-quality education programming. Precise per-pupil, or per-classroom, funding data are rare, and therefore virtually nothing is known about whether that funding is adequate.

State and local finance policies dictate how much funding juvenile justice education programs receive and who has control over how resources are allocated. Finance policies should provide an adequate level of funding for education programs and incentivize the types of decisions that produce high-quality learning environments. Ideally, the agencies and individuals responsible for operating these education programs have control over finance decisions since they are best positioned to know what their programs and students need. Similarly, when those providing the funding are also held accountable for student outcomes, it creates an incentive to invest the resources that will create and sustain high-quality learning environments.

Analyses of finance policies for juvenile justice education are scarce, despite the attention afforded to funding formulas for traditional public schools. The best available evidence comes from a single 50-state landscape analysis.³⁹ That study found that most states appropriate funding for juvenile justice education, but in some cases local education agencies are responsible for financing these programs. Regardless of the source, how funding flows to education programs differs widely across states. Some states use their traditional funding formulas that are weighted or supplemented to account for the needs of incarcerated students.

Other states require the local education agency to front the cost of educating students in state custody and reimburse them on the back end. In some cases, the last local education agency that a student was enrolled in before being incarcerated is responsible for reimbursing the juvenile justice education program provider, whether that is another local education agency, a state agency, or another organization. These funding arrangements, where the local education agency is responsible for providing funding for students who do not belong to their district, or do only temporarily, can create incentives for local education agencies to spend only the bare minimum resources needed to provide legally compliant education services.⁴⁰

Although the source of funding and how it is allocated is an answerable question, the amount of per-pupil funding and what proportion of those resources pays for education services is difficult, if not impossible, to determine in most states.⁴¹ The best available evidence comes from a study in 2000, which found that per-pupil funding for incarcerated students ranged from \$4,212 to \$16,782 (adjusted for inflation) across 20 states.⁴² The lack of this basic financial information makes it difficult to determine the adequacy of funding for juvenile justice education programs. For example, the *Guiding Principles for Providing High-Quality Education in Juvenile Justice Secure Care Settings (Guiding Principles)* released in 2014 by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice included a principle on providing the “[n]ecessary funding to support educational opportunities for all youths within long-term secure care facilities, including those with disabilities and English learners, comparable to opportunities for peers who are not system-involved.”⁴³ A systematic literature review found zero studies aligned with the funding guiding principle.⁴⁴

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Finance

Almost no research has been conducted on finance models for juvenile justice education, leaving policymakers and practitioners with little information to guide reform efforts. While **researchers** work to identify effective finance models, **policymakers** can take steps to incentivize programs to provide high-quality education using funding mechanisms. **Education program leaders** should identify what funding they need, explore partnerships for cost-sharing, and use data to improve the alignment between resource allocation and short- and long-term student outcomes (Table 3).

TABLE 3: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR FINANCE POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Mandate a study to examine different types of finance systems (e.g., per-pupil funding, per-classroom funding) for juvenile justice education.	What are the effects and trade-offs of different types of finance systems for juvenile justice education?	Closely track how head count varies across an academic year and how the funding for the education program does or does not account for that variation.
Require agencies to publicly report per-pupil and per-classroom expenditures for incarcerated students, disaggregated by facility type, student characteristics, and length of stay.	Is funding for juvenile justice education programs adequate?	Conduct internal needs assessments to identify gaps between current funding and what is needed to meet state and federal education standards.
Eliminate or reform funding arrangements that penalize local education agencies for serving students in custody temporarily or those placed outside their resident school districts.	What finance models incentivize service providers to invest in providing high-quality education?	Partner with local school districts, community colleges, or nonprofits to share costs for staff, credit-bearing courses, or student reentry services.
Match funding allocations to the cost of services that are expected to produce meaningful student outcomes (e.g., short-term academic growth, course completions, credit accrual, successful transitions back to school).	How can finance models reinforce accountability mechanisms for juvenile justice education?	Engage in data-driven continuous improvement planning that aligns program budgets with short- and long-term education outcomes, including successfully transitioning back into K-12 education.

Accountability

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

The very little that state policymakers, researchers, and the general public know about the quality of juvenile justice education programs comes from individual studies on specific programs at a given moment in time, or through anecdotal evidence. Accountability data collected by states play almost no role in the evaluation of programmatic quality due to flawed designs and indicators. Most states also do not have clear policies or procedures in place for what happens when programs consistently underperform, and accountability is nonexistent as a result. Nor do states have effective systems for identifying and scaling successful juvenile justice education programs.

Accountability policies determine how juvenile justice education programs are evaluated against clear expectations for student outcomes. When these accountability policies are effective, they set clear and achievable goals, accurately measure program quality, and create incentives that drive improvement. When programs consistently underperform, effective accountability systems provide the support and resources needed to reach improvement goals and turn around or close persistently ineffective programs. The flip side of governing agencies exerting more control over how programs function when they underperform is granting effective programs more flexibility and autonomy.

A fundamental part of every school accountability system is the collection of data and other information to support program evaluation. However, the best available evidence suggests that juvenile justice education programs often do not meet federal education requirements for data collection⁴⁵ and lack consistent assessment and accountability practices.⁴⁶ Perhaps the greatest challenge facing policymakers and practitioners when it comes to accountability is identifying valid, reliable, and relevant performance indicators for juvenile justice education. The traditional



metrics used for school accountability, such as annual state assessments, are largely not applicable in juvenile justice settings where students are often enrolled in education programs for a very short amount of time, whether it is just a few days, weeks, or months. Compounding the indicator problem is that small program enrollments and even smaller student subgroups result in small n-sizes, meaning that even when data are collected, it often is not reported publicly because it would be possible to identify individual students.⁴⁷ The result is that researchers have very little data to analyze individual juvenile justice education programs or to make comparisons across programs, states, or time.

Research on how states use data and information for accountability purposes has not advanced past describing the basic components of these systems, and almost nothing is known about the effectiveness of different accountability designs. A 50-state landscape

analysis revealed state variance in which agencies control accountability policy. In some states, the fact that multiple agencies require that juvenile justice education programs submit data on performance is the direct result of a fragmented governance model. Regardless of whether one or more state agencies have data reporting requirements, it is unclear what, if any, mechanisms are used to hold programs accountable for making measurable progress. Only one-third of states have explicit mechanisms in place, such as technical assistance, direct intervention, or program closure.⁴⁸ Even in these states, officials may be reluctant to close education programs given the challenge of finding providers. A 2010 survey of principals in juvenile justice education programs also revealed significant gaps in accountability knowledge and practices, with approximately 21% of principals not knowing what indicators they were held accountable to.⁴⁹

A fundamental part of every school accountability system is the collection of data and other information to support program evaluation. ... Perhaps the greatest challenge facing policymakers and practitioners when it comes to accountability is identifying valid, reliable, and relevant performance indicators for juvenile justice education.

Equally important, it is unclear what systems states use to identify successful juvenile justice education programs. Although the lack of data overall makes it difficult to find effective programs, it is likely that some do exist throughout the country. Identifying these programs, publicly recognizing them as successes, and allowing them to have high levels of autonomy and flexibility can produce incentives for other programs to achieve similar levels of success. Increased flexibility and autonomy can include providing waivers from state regulation that allow effective programs to pilot innovations that improve teaching and learning. Capturing best practices and lessons learned from effective programs should also inform technical assistance and other supports provided to struggling programs.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Accountability

Policymakers need access to data, information, and analyses that can guide the design of meaningful and effective accountability systems for juvenile justice education programs. **Researchers** have a role in helping surface what goals and indicators are relevant, meaningful, and achievable — and in providing technical assistance for situating those indicators within a broader accountability system. **Education program leaders** can also work to identify high-quality indicators while also seeking out external support from peers and experts to aid in program improvement (Table 4).

TABLE 4: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Convene a working group (e.g., agency officials, teachers, juvenile facility administrators, incarcerated students, and formerly incarcerated students) to develop a set of realistic, evidence-based educational goals for juvenile justice education.	What are relevant and achievable goals for juvenile justice education programs?	Work with incarcerated students and staff to identify meaningful, measurable program goals.
Pilot alternative data collection strategies (e.g., performance-based portfolios, progress monitoring tools) that better align with short enrollment periods.	What indicators and processes can be used to evaluate the quality of juvenile justice education programs in ways that are valid, reliable, and fair and that protect student privacy?	Collaborate with state agencies, local school districts, and researchers to test and pilot indicators tailored to the goals of the juvenile justice education program.
Establish clear consequences for persistent underperformance — including but not limited to additional oversight, leadership or staffing changes, program restructuring, or program closure — and incentives for consistently effective programs.	What accountability mechanisms are most effective in juvenile justice education?	Seek mentorship or partnerships with higher-performing juvenile justice education programs to share strategies and tools for improvement.
Explore creating improvement grants or incentives that provide targeted resources to address identified gaps (e.g., teacher shortages, needed instructional materials, access to technology).	How can states address underperformance and spur programmatic improvements in cases where they are unable to close consistently poor education programs?	Leverage support from local school districts or higher education institutions to bring in professional development or instructional coaching.
Encourage innovation through pilot programs that explore new accountability structures, with protections for student rights and data privacy.	What types of school accountability systems are best suited for juvenile justice education?	Gather insights and perspectives from incarcerated students to support internal accountability and drive changes in curriculum, instruction, and support services.

Future Directions for Local Policy Research

State policy reform often does not occur quickly, in a linear fashion (or at all), and as a result it is unlikely that governance, finance, and accountability policies will become coherent and aligned overnight. Moreover, as is the case with all education policy, most decisions are made at the local level — within individual juvenile facilities. The following sections describe the existing evidence related to seven local policy issues, surface the best available evidence, and identify the critical questions researchers can help answer in the future.

Rather than addressing every local policy issue related to juvenile justice education, this agenda prioritizes a core set of policy domains that most directly impact teaching and learning conditions inside juvenile facilities:

- **Program Structure and Curriculum**
- **Screening and Assessment**
- **Academic Interventions**
- **Teacher Quality**
- **Classroom Management**
- **Special Education Services**
- **School Reentry and Transition**

While issues such as family and guardian engagement, for example, are critically important to students' long-term educational success, they fall outside the primary scope of this agenda because they are constrained by a wide range of social, legal, and logistical factors — such as visitation policies, geographic distance from facilities, and family involvement in other systems. Similarly, the physical design and infrastructure of juvenile facilities — though relevant to educational delivery — are not discussed in this agenda because they are typically governed by correctional agencies and are outside the control of education leaders. The goal of this research agenda is to offer clear guidance to state and local leaders on where education policy change can have the most immediate and systemic impact

on educational opportunity for incarcerated students, where more research is needed, and where education program leaders must act despite limited or nonexistent evidence.

Overall, like with state policy, research is fairly limited, especially with respect to program structure and curriculum, screening and assessment, teacher quality, and special education services. Regardless, enough solid evidence exists on almost all local policy issues to guide some decision-making, particularly with respect to academic interventions, classroom management, and school reentry and transition.

Program Structure and Curriculum

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

When and where teaching and learning occur within juvenile justice education programs is primarily dictated by facility safety and security policies. What is taught and how instruction is delivered is largely determined by program leaders, who must adhere to federal, state, and local policy mandates. Outside of who makes decisions, very little is known about the structure of these programs, how instruction is delivered to students, or what curriculum is used and whether it aligns with state standards.

The structure and curriculum in juvenile justice education programs shape the type of educational opportunities students engage in while incarcerated. Program structure — including the program design, instructional delivery mechanisms, classes available, academic calendar and schedule, and composition of classrooms — is dictated and constrained by facility safety and security policies. Instructional delivery models are varied,

ranging from traditional classroom settings to fully technology-based learning environments, and should be designed to accommodate the challenges of a highly mobile student population with significant academic, mental health, behavioral, and special education needs. Curriculum refers to the academic content and subjects that incarcerated students have access to. Ideally, the curriculum students have access to is both aligned with state standards and matched to each student's assessed needs.

While high-quality instruction and curriculum alignment are essential in juvenile justice education, facilities are primarily structured around a safety and security orientation rather than prioritizing an environment that supports strong teaching and learning. Specifically, classrooms in secure settings are subjected to frequent lockdowns often in response to real or perceived security concerns. These lockdowns, along with the unpredictability of the school day, make it difficult for students to receive adequate and consistent

instructional time and disrupt the flow of education services for students. When students are pulled out of class for various appointments or for security-related reasons, the already irregular school hours become even more unpredictable, further hindering engagement with school.⁵⁰

There is a significant gap in research and guidance on education program design and instructional delivery models that work well — or can be adapted — in settings where teaching and learning operate under the strict limitations imposed by facility regulations. Very little, if any, research exists on the different types of education program models (e.g., traditional, competency-based education, project-based learning, arts integration) employed in juvenile justice settings. Career and technical education (CTE), for instance, can help incarcerated students develop skills for employment after release. Yet, one analysis found that only seven states fully leveraged federal funding to expand CTE access in juvenile facilities — and even those states faced significant challenges, including program entry criteria that excluded many students.⁵¹ Similarly, dual enrollment offers a promising bridge to postsecondary education, but only 1% of students have access to opportunities that allow them to earn college credit while incarcerated.⁵²

Although the research base is thin, innovative models are being implemented in some settings. Co-location models, which situate juvenile facilities near or on the campus of community colleges, represent one such emerging approach. A new alternative school in the San Francisco Bay Area that serves students involved with the juvenile justice system will be housed on the campus of the San Mateo County Community College District and run by the San Mateo County Office of Education. The Gateway School will be specifically designed so that students are “physically immersed in a college environment and gain mentorship and positive role models.”⁵³ Future research should examine the effects that co-location models like this have on short- and long-term student outcomes in ways that can inform broader reform efforts.



Research on instructional delivery approaches is also scarce. For example, no comprehensive data exists on the percentage of students who receive instruction only in person, via a mix of in person and online, or fully online. The lack of information on the use of online education in juvenile settings makes it difficult to determine how these programs are influencing students' relationships with their peers and teachers, their engagement in school, and academic achievement. In addition to better understanding access to online education and its effects on students, research is needed to understand how to provide students with opportunities to build the technological skills necessary for success in postsecondary education and future employment.⁵⁴ In the ideal state, incarcerated students are able to engage in online education that increases their access to courses, provides personalized academic support, and builds their technological skills. While online education holds promise for incarcerated students, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice caution in their 2014 *Guiding Principles* that "[t]echnology should not be used as a substitute for teachers and classroom instruction in a secure setting any more than it would replace classroom teaching and engagement in a regular educational setting."⁵⁵

To reach the ideal state where technology is used appropriately to increase education opportunities and improve student outcomes, juvenile facilities must overcome a host of implementation challenges. In many states, there are policies in place that prohibit or greatly restrict access to technology and the internet. One 2014 survey found that internet access for incarcerated students varies widely. In 62% of the states surveyed, students had no access to internet technology, and in 73% of states, only their teachers had access.⁵⁶ Safety and security concerns related to students accessing prohibited websites, contacting victims, or engaging in illegal activity also pose a challenge. In some cases, that has required instituting rules and regulations that govern how students can access the internet and what they can use it for.⁵⁷ The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice's *Guiding Principles* advocates for using cybersecurity methods (e.g., firewalling) to restrict students' access.⁵⁸ More research is needed to

understand what other policy changes can promote safe, secure, and appropriate use of education technology in juvenile facilities.

When it comes to curriculum, one survey of 131 principals suggests that the majority of juvenile justice education programs (66%) use state- or local-provided curriculum. Yet, approximately one-third of principals noted their program's curriculum was somewhat, very little, or not at all aligned with state assessments — and accountability from state education agencies was nonexistent.⁵⁹ Overall, though, research on curricula is limited. A 2022 systematic literature review uncovered only eight peer-reviewed studies focused on curriculum and instruction, with literacy and general instruction being the only focus areas across all eight studies.⁶⁰ The lack of research and information on these basic components of juvenile justice education programs makes it very difficult to determine what types of policy changes are needed to produce high-quality learning environments in juvenile facilities aligned with the needs of incarcerated students.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Program Structure and Curriculum

Improving the program structure and curriculum in juvenile facilities should be informed by student needs and requires alignment among facility administrators, education program leaders, and teachers. **State policymakers** can lead by supporting innovations that balance safety with academic access, promote curriculum quality, and ensure appropriate use of educational technology. **Researchers** can contribute by examining how instructional models from other areas of K-12 education apply to mixed-age, high-need classrooms in secure settings. **Education program leaders** play a key role in adapting curricula, integrating instructional technology in developmentally appropriate ways, and providing professional learning that supports individualized, high-quality instruction (Table 5).

TABLE 5: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CURRICULUM POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Fund pilot programs that restructure daily operations to prioritize uninterrupted instructional time to satisfy both state-mandated instructional time requirements and facility safety regulations.	How can juvenile justice education programs balance security and educational quality in ways that support both student safety and academic achievement?	Track and report how security-related disruptions impact instructional time to build a case for operational reforms.
Support and fund innovative program models (e.g., CTE pathways, dual enrollment, co-location with community colleges) that expand access to meaningful, credit-bearing instruction for incarcerated students.	What are the most promising program models for improving postsecondary access for incarcerated students, and what conditions support their successful implementation in juvenile justice settings?	Pursue partnerships with community colleges to offer dual enrollment opportunities, expand access to advanced coursework, and support smoother transitions to postsecondary education after release.
Mandate curriculum review processes specifically for juvenile facilities that take into consideration the needs of incarcerated students as well as facility constraints.	What accountability mechanisms can state policymakers use to ensure that juvenile justice education programs adopt high-quality curricula aligned with state standards?	Collaborate with state or local curriculum experts to adapt existing instructional materials for use with incarcerated students in secure facilities.
Develop state guidance on the use of educational technology in juvenile facilities, including policies and procedures for ensuring access, monitoring student safety, and providing teacher professional development.	How can technology be effectively integrated into juvenile justice education programs to enhance learning outcomes?	Train teachers on how to blend in-person and digital instruction to support deeper learning and accommodate students' varied academic levels and learning needs.
Support partnerships between juvenile justice programs and schools that have successfully implemented individualized learning models to inform the design of instructional approaches that accommodate mixed-age classrooms.	What can juvenile justice education practitioners learn from research in other areas of K-12 focused on providing instruction to mixed-age classrooms with students who have significant academic and other needs?	Explore providing professional development on how to manage and differentiate in mixed-grade classrooms with students who have significant academic and other needs using real-world scenarios.

Screening and Assessment

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Screening, assessment, and progress monitoring are essential to high-quality education, yet they are rarely and inconsistently implemented in juvenile justice education programs. Ideally, academic screening should occur during intake, with regular assessments and progress monitoring aligned with state standards to guide instruction, even for students in short-term detention. Despite the limited use and research overall, some guidance and best practices exist to inform the work of practitioners.

Screening, assessment, and progress monitoring are critical components of any high-quality education program. Understanding what students already know and can do is necessary for instructional planning, targeted academic interventions, and adjusting instruction over time based on what is working and what is not. Unfortunately, very little is known about the prevalence of screening, assessment, and progress monitoring inside juvenile justice education programs.

Ideally, initial academic screening in juvenile facilities should happen upon entry into a facility, typically during an intake process that involves interviews, reviewing academic records, and diagnostic assessments. Regular classroom and standardized assessments should provide a more detailed understanding of students' skills and challenges, especially in reading and math, ideally aligned with state standards. Progress monitoring, or formative assessment, involves the regular collection of data to evaluate student learning and should guide ongoing instruction, even for students who are incarcerated for a short duration.

A 2010 survey of 131 juvenile justice education program leaders showed that these programs are far behind their counterparts in traditional public schools when it comes to assessment practices. Approximately 20% of respondents said that students in their program *did not* participate in state assessments, despite being required to by federal law. Of those who did have assessment data, approximately 20% reported not using the results at the school level. Perhaps most astonishing, fewer than half of respondents (48%) knew whether their program made Adequate Yearly Progress.⁶¹ Not surprisingly, it appears some teachers are skeptical of the validity of standardized assessments in juvenile facilities,⁶² suggesting a need for professional development and alternative approaches to gathering the academic achievement data needed to monitor progress and hold programs accountable.

Though screening, assessment, and progress monitoring are understudied in juvenile justice education, some evidence does exist to inform decision-making at the local level. A notable example comes from 2010 guidance from the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, which includes five action-oriented recommendations for improving literacy in juvenile facilities. The recommendations are grounded in education research and best practices. Although focused on literacy, the guide includes some best practices in screening and diagnostics.⁶³

Screening, assessment, and progress monitoring are essential to high-quality education, yet they are rarely and inconsistently implemented in juvenile justice education programs.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Screening and Assessment

Effective use of screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools is essential for meeting the academic needs of incarcerated students and guiding instructional decision-making. **State policymakers** can support this work by funding tool development, mandating intake screenings, and offering technical assistance for implementation. **Researchers** can explore how these tools are best used in juvenile justice settings to inform instruction and accountability reforms. In the absence of state mandates or guidance, **education program leaders** should work to adapt and integrate existing screening and assessments into intake procedures, academic interventions, and daily instruction (Table 6).

TABLE 6: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Provide funding to education programs to develop and implement screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools in all types of juvenile facilities, including short-term detention and long-term confinement.	How can state and local education agencies fund and support the purchasing or development of screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools for juvenile justice education programs?	Purchase or create informal (e.g., interviews and surveys) and formal screenings (e.g., diagnostic tools ⁶⁴) at intake to gather a holistic view of each student's academic and personal background.
Offer guidance and technical assistance for training and support related to using screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools.	What approaches can state and local education agencies employ to train and support teachers in juvenile justice education programs to effectively implement screening, assessment, and progress monitoring tools?	Train teachers on incorporating brief, frequent formal ⁶⁵ and informal progress monitoring tools (e.g., quizzes, performance tasks, reading inventories ⁶⁶) into daily instruction across content areas.
Mandate formal screenings at intake to gather a holistic view of each student's academic and personal background.	What state accountability mechanisms can incentivize juvenile justice education programs to assess students regularly and use the resulting data to guide instruction?	Share assessment and progress monitoring results among staff and with students to promote collaborative planning and student engagement.

Academic Interventions

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Several high-quality studies demonstrate that targeted interventions that rely on explicit instruction can produce academic gains for incarcerated students, particularly in reading. Much less is known about math and other subjects. Despite promising evidence, implementing academic interventions is a persistent challenge from a scheduling and logistical standpoint, resulting in many incarcerated students not receiving the amount of targeted, explicit instruction they need.

Academic interventions in juvenile justice education programs refers to explicit efforts to accelerate learning for students who often arrive in facilities several grade levels behind in multiple subjects. These interventions include both core academic instruction and supplemental supports aimed at closing skill gaps. Academic interventions have been studied extensively in general education settings, but much less research has been dedicated to investigating the effects of systematic, explicit instruction and targeted interventions for students in juvenile facilities.⁶⁷

Although far less is known about academic interventions in juvenile facilities in comparison with general education settings, academic interventions are among the most researched topics in juvenile justice education and have been the subject of several literature reviews and syntheses.⁶⁸ This body of research, however, is heavily skewed toward literacy; very little is known about effective interventions in math or other subjects.⁶⁹ Even with literacy, few studies meet rigorous research standards, and adequate fidelity of implementation is challenging to achieve within the confines of juvenile facilities. As one research team noted, “[W]hat we do not yet know about effective practices for incarcerated adolescents may outweigh what we do know.”⁷⁰

Despite these limitations, the best available evidence offers a path forward for practitioners and policymakers. For example, Corrective Reading, a direct instruction-based literacy program, has demonstrated positive

effects on reading fluency and accuracy in several studies.⁷¹ Similarly, Read 180, a computer-assisted reading program, has shown more promising effects than similar computer-assisted interventions.⁷² It is worth noting that researchers caution the positive effects tied to these programs may have less to do with the specific curriculum and more to do with the use of explicit strategy instruction that is personalized to individual learners.⁷³

Researchers also note that implementing new policies or practices aligned with the best available evidence on academic interventions poses significant challenges from a scheduling and logistical standpoint. Although struggling readers require at least 50 minutes of daily, intensive intervention to make meaningful gains (and likely longer),⁷⁴ the structure and security orientation of juvenile facilities often limit the amount of instructional time available to students and make it impossible to sustain a consistent instructional routine.⁷⁵ Similarly, valid, reliable, and efficient screening and assessment procedures are needed to appropriately identify a student’s instructional levels to ensure the appropriate interventions are employed⁷⁶ — yet most juvenile facilities lack systems and resources to support these types of procedures.⁷⁷

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Academic Interventions

Implementing high-quality academic interventions in juvenile justice education settings requires targeted policy action, strong infrastructure, and cross-agency collaboration. **State policymakers** can play a key role by better enforcing instructional time mandates in juvenile justice education programs, expanding access to evidence-based practices, and supporting the use of valid and reliable diagnostic tools.

Researchers can help identify scalable practices and evaluate intervention implementation and associated outcomes. **Education program leaders** can act now by tailoring instruction to student needs, protecting academic time, and building the conditions for sustained, tiered academic support (Table 7).

TABLE 7: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Require juvenile facilities to submit annual instructional calendars and daily schedules for review to ensure compliance with state instructional time requirements.	How can state policy enforce a minimum amount of instructional time and protect academic schedules within juvenile facilities?	Advocate with facility administrators to protect instructional time during daily planning, especially for high-need students.
Create a menu of state-approved, evidence-informed intervention models that meet rigorous criteria but allow for local customization.	What infrastructure is needed to adapt and scale the core components of promising programs — such as Corrective Reading and Read 180 — without overreliance on any single program model?	Build internal capacity by training all teachers in the principles of structured intervention models.
Offer funding to programs piloting and evaluating content-area interventions in juvenile settings, specifically in reading and math.	How can states support the adoption and sustained use of evidence-based, content-area academic interventions — including in math — in juvenile facilities?	Use available screening data to identify subject-area gaps, tailor instructional materials, and create daily intervention blocks of at least 50 minutes.
Identify a set of state-approved, valid, reliable, and efficient diagnostic tools for reading and math interventions that are appropriate for and can be adapted for use in juvenile justice education programs.	What screening and diagnostic tools should be standardized across facilities to ensure appropriate instructional placement and that the right students are targeted for academic interventions?	Implement intake protocols that include diagnostic assessments and interviews to create an academic profile for each student within the first 72 hours.
Incentivize partnerships between local education agencies and juvenile justice education programs to implement tiered systems of academic support through shared staffing models, interagency agreements, and funding for integrated professional development.	How can local education agencies and juvenile justice education programs collaborate to support implementation of tiered systems of academic support in juvenile justice settings?	Collaborate with local education agencies to share data, strategies, and resources within a tiered system of academic support — especially when students are transitioning in and out of custody.

Teacher Quality

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Teachers in juvenile justice settings face significant challenges in creating high-quality learning environments, stemming from the design of classroom spaces and strict security constraints. Incarcerated students need the most skilled and effective teachers, given their academic struggles and the complexity of their needs. Yet, teachers in juvenile facilities often do not receive specialized training, are often underprepared, and receive limited support both inside and outside the classroom.

Teacher quality policies guide decisions about who is hired to teach in juvenile facilities, what minimum qualifications they must have, what professional development and support they receive, and how they are evaluated. Teacher quality is critical in juvenile facilities. Teachers are often tasked with teaching to mixed-grade classrooms, to students who arrive with a complex set of significant needs, and in classrooms that are defined by unpredictability and disruption.⁷⁸ Perhaps there is no place in K-12 education that is as complicated to teach as inside juvenile facilities, especially in secure buildings.

Teacher quality is known to be one of the strongest predictors of long-term education and life outcomes.⁷⁹ Despite their widely accepted importance, teachers in juvenile justice education are understudied. The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice issued clear guidance in 2014: All teachers in juvenile justice facilities should meet state certification requirements, receive specialized professional development, and undergo regular performance evaluations aligned with state standards.⁸⁰ Yet evidence suggests that these principles remain aspirational, with most facilities struggling to fully implement them.⁸¹ Since juvenile justice teachers are rarely identified in state data systems, little is known about their training, credentials, or performance.⁸² Research on how to prepare teachers for juvenile justice settings has been described as “woefully inadequate.”⁸³



The research that does exist consistently finds that teachers in juvenile facilities often lack the preparation, resources, and support needed to be successful. Preservice and in-service training typically focuses on regulatory compliance and managing student behavior, rather than on pedagogy, academic content, or evidence-based instruction.⁸⁴ Teachers in these settings also appear to lack training in special education,⁸⁵ behavior management,⁸⁶ and providing mental health support to incarcerated students.⁸⁷ Overall, “there has been increased public scrutiny over the preparation of teachers; however, this has occurred mostly outside of the juvenile justice system.”⁸⁸

Structural barriers further complicate efforts to improve teacher quality. Because of security constraints, many teachers work in isolation, without access to collaborative professional learning communities, peer mentorship, or in-person coaching.⁸⁹ Technology-based professional development and virtual coaching models show promise for mitigating isolation and providing real-time support, yet implementation is uneven.⁹⁰ Additionally, alternative certification pathways that focus specifically on teaching in secure settings can improve compliance with special education laws and support teacher retention. In contrast, one-time training sessions appear less effective, as they offer fewer opportunities for teachers to apply new learning to daily practice.⁹¹

Research also indicates a significant gap between teachers’ familiarity with evidence-based instructional practices and their consistent use in the classroom. While most teachers report awareness of academic evidence-based practices, such as direct instruction, error correction, and frequent opportunities to respond, fewer report regular implementation, particularly of behavior management strategies.⁹² Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies on teacher knowledge, use of evidence-based practices, or the impact of professional development in juvenile facilities. Most existing studies are limited to case studies, descriptive in nature, anecdotal, or based on self-reported surveys.⁹³

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Teacher Quality

Improving teacher quality in juvenile justice education programs requires coordinated action across policy, research, and practice. **Policymakers** need guidance on how to attract, support, and retain high-quality teachers in these complex settings, while **researchers** can help fill key knowledge gaps. **Education program leaders** should work to translate research into current practice by providing proactive, ongoing professional development to teachers (Table 8).

TABLE 8: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR TEACHER QUALITY POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Expand or create alternative certification pathways specifically designed for teachers in juvenile justice education programs.	What are the most effective models and incentives for recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in juvenile justice settings, and how can states expand access to alternative certification pathways?	Build partnerships with local postsecondary institutions or alternative certification programs to create pipelines of preservice teachers with training specifically designed for juvenile justice education programs.
Require cross-agency collaboration among state departments of education, juvenile justice, and child services to ensure professional development addresses the full range of student needs.	What role can state and local education agencies play in developing and providing professional development tailored to the context of juvenile justice education programs?	Implement job-embedded professional development models, such as instructional coaching or learning walks within and across juvenile facilities.
Develop observation and evaluation rubrics tailored to juvenile justice education programs that prioritize evidence-based practices.	What accountability mechanisms and other incentives can make it more likely that teachers in juvenile justice education programs adopt evidence-based instructional practices?	Create checklists and instructional look-fors to help teachers self-monitor and improve their use of evidence-based practices, such as explicit instruction, scaffolding, and positive behavioral supports.
Support research and pilot programs that test alternative teacher evaluation tools designed specifically for the goals that juvenile justice education programs are trying to achieve.	How can state and local education agencies adapt assessment and teacher evaluation systems to accurately capture the value that teachers have for student outcomes?	Use formative teacher feedback systems (e.g., instructional observation and coaching) to inform training and professional development efforts.
Explicitly include juvenile justice education in broader state education workforce strategies and data systems to track hiring, certification, and retention patterns.	How can state and local governments collaborate to support the hiring and training of high-quality instructional staff in juvenile justice education programs?	Develop regional recruitment and training initiatives in partnership with local education agencies and teacher preparation programs.

Classroom Management

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Managing classroom behavior remains a persistent challenge in juvenile justice education programs, and many teachers report feeling underprepared to address it effectively. Incarcerated students often present with a wide range of behavioral issues rooted in trauma, unmet mental health needs, and other complex factors. Historically — and still in most facilities — the dominant approach to behavior management has been reactive and punitive. This is despite a growing body of strong evidence showing that cognitive-behavioral approaches are more effective, and schoolwide models such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) show promise for scalability and positive, long-term effects.

Managing disruptive student behavior is a persistent and well-documented challenge to teaching and learning in juvenile justice education. Incarcerated students collectively have a high prevalence of mental health needs that are linked to past trauma, special education eligibility, and a range of emotional and behavioral challenges.⁹⁴ Students with disabilities and those experiencing severe emotional disturbances are overrepresented in juvenile facilities, complicating efforts to provide adequate accommodations while maintaining safe and productive learning environments.⁹⁵ Teachers in these settings appear largely unprepared to manage disruptive student behavior, and attempts to address behavior are often isolated, inconsistent, and grounded in reactive, punitive strategies.⁹⁶

The best available evidence supports more proactive, instructionally grounded models of behavior management. Cognitive-behavioral interventions, including behavioral skills training, self-monitoring, and tolerance training, have shown strong potential for reducing disruptive behaviors and increasing compliance and engagement among incarcerated students.⁹⁷ Studies demonstrate significant reductions in problem behaviors when students are provided

with clear expectations, frequent feedback, positive reinforcement, and opportunities to practice and generalize new skills.⁹⁸ One study found that most facilities (84%) appear to have adopted a multi-tiered framework for behavioral interventions, but many struggle with an overreliance on disciplinary practices that remove students with more serious behavioral challenges (Tier 2 and Tier 3 in multi-tiered frameworks) from the classroom, often resorting to restraining or secluding students rather than implementing cognitive-behavioral approaches.⁹⁹

Among the most promising systems-level interventions is PBIS, a multi-tiered framework for promoting positive behavior through preventive measures, improving school climate, and providing proactive support to students. Originally developed for use in public schools, PBIS has gained traction in secure juvenile settings, with promising results. Early implementation in Texas juvenile facilities, supported by legislation, led to reductions in behavioral incidents and improved student outcomes.¹⁰⁰ Subsequent research across multiple states has demonstrated that PBIS can be adapted successfully in juvenile facilities, including residential and medical settings, and still maintain high levels of implementation fidelity.¹⁰¹ Staff reported that the approaches were manageable and well received, and they helped them do their jobs more effectively.¹⁰²

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Classroom Management

Addressing student behavior in juvenile justice education requires coordinated efforts to build evidence-based support systems that are informed by valid and reliable student data. **State policymakers** can drive progress by funding interventions, mandating frameworks like PBIS, and strengthening cross-agency data infrastructure. **Researchers** can play a key role in evaluating long-term outcomes and supporting the scaling of effective models. **Education program leaders** are essential for translating these efforts into practice through targeted training, partnerships, and on-the-ground implementation (Table 9).

TABLE 9: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Convene a cross-agency working group to clearly define which agencies are responsible for setting, implementing, and overseeing policies related to student behavior in juvenile facilities — and to determine how data can be shared across systems to support effective behavioral interventions.	How can cross-agency data systems be improved to evaluate the impact of behavioral interventions on educational, mental health, and recidivism outcomes?	Collaborate with facility administrators to establish protocols for documenting the use of behavioral interventions and linking those interventions to student outcomes.
Provide targeted grants or dedicated funding streams for Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavioral supports.	What are the most effective strategies for scaling Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for incarcerated students with significant behavioral and mental health needs?	Build partnerships with community mental health agencies or school districts to deliver Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions that facilities alone may not be equipped to handle.
Offer funding for specialized, trauma-informed professional development that includes cognitive-behavioral strategies.	What are the staffing and professional development models that best support consistent, high-quality implementation of cognitive-behavioral interventions in juvenile facilities?	Train staff in core cognitive-behavioral strategies, such as self-monitoring, problem-solving, and social skills training.
Enact legislation that requires all juvenile justice education programs to adopt a PBIS framework adapted for juvenile facilities.	How can state legislation and regulations drive and sustain high-fidelity implementation of schoolwide PBIS in juvenile justice education programs?	Adopt and adapt a PBIS framework and create a PBIS leadership team within each facility to guide implementation, train staff, and monitor progress.
Commission longitudinal studies that track students post-release, linking behavioral support participation to outcomes such as reenrollment, credit recovery, and recidivism.	How do multi-tiered systems of behavioral support affect long-term academic and rehabilitative outcomes for students who have been incarcerated?	Follow up with formerly incarcerated students and families post-release (when possible) to gather information on what supports were most helpful for reentry and adjustment.

Special Education Services

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Students with disabilities are vastly overrepresented in the juvenile justice system and face significant barriers to accessing the services they are entitled to under federal law. Decades of research and litigation have shown that fragmented and complex governance structures, inadequate cross-agency data sharing, security protocols in facilities that often take precedence over education, and persistent staffing shortages all contribute to making the delivery of special education services one of the most intractable issues in juvenile justice education — a problem with few tested solutions.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all students with disabilities to a free appropriate public education, including those in juvenile justice education programs. These federal protections require that students with identified disabilities receive specialized instruction and related services tailored to their individualized education program (IEP), regardless of placement. The law also ensures procedural safeguards and the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Yet, decades of lawsuits have shown that implementation is often inconsistent, especially for students in secure settings.¹⁰³ One study found that the percentage of students with disabilities in juvenile justice settings varies widely by state — from 9% to 78% — with a median of 33%.¹⁰⁴ In that same study, the highest percentages of classifications for incarcerated students with disabilities were emotional disturbance (48%) and specific learning disabilities (39%).¹⁰⁵ Surprisingly little research has been conducted on the long-term academic outcomes of incarcerated students with disabilities, largely because the limited data available to researchers treats incarcerated students as a homogenous group,¹⁰⁶ a problem that also hinders efforts to hold these programs accountable (when program data are made publicly available, which is rare).¹⁰⁷

Students with disabilities in juvenile facilities face numerous barriers to receiving consistent and appropriate special education services. Well-documented challenges with transferring academic and special education records between schools, juvenile facilities, and other placements means that many students receive delayed or no special education services.¹⁰⁸ Another major challenge is the fragmented and often unclear responsibility for service delivery when students transition between facilities, school districts, or other placements. In Nebraska, for example, funding is delivered through a reimbursement model, and responsibility for services depends on a student's legal status and what type of facility they reside in, but there is not an effective system in place to ensure that districts fulfill their obligations to students with disabilities.¹⁰⁹ Disagreements between districts and facilities over service provision and payment can delay or interrupt services, even though students legally remain enrolled in their resident school district.¹¹⁰

Compounding the problem, insufficient numbers of qualified special education staff and poor record-sharing practices can prevent timely updates to or implementation of IEPs.¹¹¹ Security policies in juvenile justice facilities, such as restrictions on technology use, limited movement within the facility, and prioritized safety protocols, often take precedence over educational programming and can severely constrain the delivery of special education services.¹¹² Finally, oversight of educational quality in juvenile facilities is generally weak despite formal accreditation,¹¹³ and in many cases special education services for incarcerated students are established only through litigation.¹¹⁴

Security policies in juvenile justice facilities, such as restrictions on technology use, limited movement within the facility, and prioritized safety protocols, often take precedence over educational programming and can severely constrain the delivery of special education services.

Special education in juvenile justice settings is one of the more extensively researched topics in juvenile justice education due to both the high percentage of students with disabilities in custody and the legal protections afforded to them. Despite this large body of research, significant gaps remain, and most research to date has focused on documenting noncompliance issues and barriers to providing services within juvenile facilities. Moreover, there is little research on how specific policies at the state and local levels influence implementation fidelity for IEPs or broader education outcomes for students with disabilities. Despite the lack of evidence, an issue brief from the National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Neglected or Delinquent Children and Youth points to some other promising practices for state and local policymakers to consider.¹¹⁵

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Special Education Services

Ensuring students with disabilities receive the services they are entitled to under federal law remains one of the most urgent and complex challenges in juvenile justice education.

Policymakers need better information about how governance, funding, staffing, and oversight systems influence service delivery and compliance with IDEA. **Researchers** can help identify effective policy approaches that improve service delivery, while **education program leaders** are key to implementing practices that ensure timely identification, consistent service delivery, and successful reentry (Table 10).

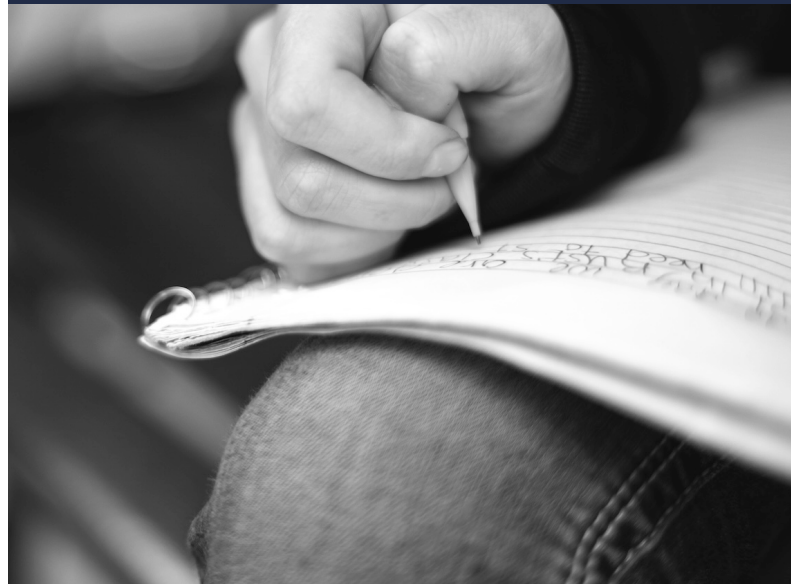


TABLE 10: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Conduct a statewide audit of special education compliance in juvenile facilities, including service delivery, staff qualifications, and procedural safeguards.	What state policy approaches strengthen or hinder the implementation and quality of special education services in juvenile justice education settings?	Work with legal counsel and district liaisons to ensure IEP obligations are clearly documented and followed throughout placement transitions.
Convene a cross-agency working group to improve data transfer protocols and response times for record requests and evaluations related to special education services for incarcerated students.	How can states improve interagency data sharing and oversight to ensure compliance with IDEA in juvenile facilities?	Assign a designated special education case manager to monitor documentation, follow up with resident school districts, communicate with families or guardians, and coordinate with receiving schools during the transition out of state custody.
Offer bonuses, stipends, loan forgiveness, and other incentives for certified special education teachers working in juvenile facilities.	What models of staffing, training, and professional development most effectively attract, support, and retain special education teachers in juvenile facilities?	Build partnerships with postsecondary institutions and alternative certification programs to create a pipeline of qualified special education staff.
Reform existing funding mechanisms to directly allocate special education dollars to the agency responsible for service delivery in juvenile facilities, reducing confusion and delays in the delivery of services.	What state policy approaches can simplify governance models and produce financial incentives to provide high-quality, timely services to incarcerated students with disabilities?	Advocate for clear governance structures and funding mechanisms in partnership with district special education directors and state agency officials.

School Reentry and Transition

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Formerly incarcerated students face numerous barriers and individual-level challenges when they attempt to reenter school after being released from custody. These barriers and challenges require a robust system of academic and wraparound support that is coordinated across all the agencies responsible for school reentry and transition services. Unfortunately, cross-agency coordination related to school reentry is weak, many schools are resistant to (re)enrolling incarcerated students, and most students ultimately do not receive the transitional support they need to successfully return to school.

School reentry and transition services are meant to help students successfully reengage with school following their release from custody. These services are critical for reducing recidivism, promoting educational attainment, and supporting long-term success into adulthood. Yet formerly incarcerated students face a confluence of individual-level challenges and institutional barriers that make their return to school particularly difficult.¹¹⁶

Successful school reentry can reduce the likelihood that students recidivate. One study that followed 4,147 students in Florida found that those who made more academic progress while incarcerated and attended school regularly after their release were less likely to be rearrested.¹¹⁷ However, the unfortunate reality is that most formerly incarcerated students do not successfully return to school. The best available evidence suggests that between 46% and 57% of students eventually drop out after being released from state custody.¹¹⁸

Incarcerated students are often navigating a complex set of individual-level challenges and risk factors, such as significant academic skill gaps, unmet mental health needs, and behavioral challenges.¹¹⁹ Many students also face environmental challenges including poverty and housing instability, which create barriers to regular school attendance and classroom engagement.¹²⁰

These factors, compounded by the stress of reintegrating into both school and community life, highlight the critical need for comprehensive, coordinated, and individualized reentry planning and transition services.

Transition services and support for formerly incarcerated students are generally not coordinated well across state and local agencies. Most state governance models are fragmented, with multiple agencies responsible for education, mental health services, and social services more broadly. These agencies typically operate in silos that limit the sharing of information and hamper communication and coordination.¹²¹ A common scenario involves a lack of clear protocols or designated coordinators to manage transitions, which often results in the delayed transfer of critical education and mental health records, leaving school officials unprepared to meet returning students' needs. Most reentry services are also short in duration, and few programs are initiated during incarceration or maintained for the length of time necessary to meaningfully support school reentry — ideally nine months or longer.¹²² The lack of sustained, coordinated support leaves students and families without the tools and guidance they need to navigate an already complex, challenging, and stressful process.

Finally, even when cross-agency coordination is effective, many schools demonstrate a resistance to reenrolling formerly incarcerated students. When students are accepted back to the same schools where their original alleged offense occurred, it can re-trigger trauma and intensify feelings of alienation.¹²³ Students can also experience stigma, negative stereotypes, and even overt exclusion by school staff when they return to the same school or when their new school discovers their involvement with the juvenile court.¹²⁴ School personnel may interpret a student's involvement with the juvenile court as an indication of future behavioral problems, and such labeling contributes to an overreliance on probation officers to manage behavior and increased disciplinary referrals in school.¹²⁵ This type of school environment may push students toward dropping out or engaging in behaviors that increase their chances of returning to the juvenile justice system.¹²⁶

Despite the clear barriers that formerly incarcerated students confront when trying to reenter school, policymakers and practitioners have few evidence-based practices to draw on. The “most significant” finding from a 2020 systematic literature review on reentry practices was “the lack of scientific inquiry examining the process of school reentry” and the fact “that few, if any, articles explicitly examined best practices in supporting youth in the transition from juvenile justice settings back to the school environment.”¹²⁷ Instead, like much of juvenile justice education research, the best available evidence points to the problem and barriers students face. That research does, however, highlight several promising practices that can mitigate the barriers students confront when they return to school, including emphasizing the importance of strengthening cross-agency coordination and creating cross-agency “reentry support teams” to manage transition processes.¹²⁸ These support teams should coordinate student support systems that include educational interventions, mental health services, family involvement, and community-based resources.¹²⁹ These coordinated support services, sometimes referred to as wraparound services or systems-of-care models, should be long term, integrated within juvenile justice education programs and schools, and tailored to individual student needs.¹³⁰

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

School Reentry and Transition

Improving school reentry and transition services for incarcerated students requires action across policy, research, and practice. **State policymakers** play a critical role in helping reduce the stigma formerly incarcerated students too often experience, strengthening cross-agency coordination, and incentivizing schools to support successful transitions. **Researchers** can help evaluate the impact of different policy approaches, while **education program leaders** are positioned to implement strategies that foster engagement and long-term reentry success (Table 11).



TABLE 11: RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS FOR SCHOOL REENTRY AND TRANSITION POLICY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

State Policymakers	Research Questions	Education Program Leaders
Initiate reform efforts to improve juvenile justice education systems.	Help show policymakers the way by analyzing policies, creating options, and evaluating solutions.	Take action now to serve students well based on the best available evidence and professional judgment.
Enact legislation that prohibits exclusionary reenrollment practices based solely on a student's juvenile court involvement.	What type of legal practices and state policies can reduce the stigma formerly incarcerated students typically encounter upon reentering school?	Collaborate with local education agencies to create and provide training for school staff on stigma reduction strategies for formerly incarcerated students.
Commission the development of new longitudinal data systems or mandate that existing data systems track education, justice, and employment outcomes for incarcerated students.	What policies and data infrastructure allow states to track the short- and long-term educational outcomes of students reentering school from juvenile justice settings?	Create transition tracking systems to monitor reentry outcomes, including academic progress, attendance, and access to special education services.
Conduct evaluations of different reentry approaches and models and publish guidance on effective policies and practices.	How do different state and local policy approaches to school reentry and transition services affect short- and long-term education outcomes for incarcerated students?	Coordinate early school reentry meetings with families or guardians, facility staff, and school personnel to identify needed supports and schedule services well ahead of a student's release.
Mandate the designation of reentry liaisons in both education and juvenile justice agencies responsible for coordinating services.	What state policy approaches reduce fragmentation and improve interagency coordination among the different agencies responsible for school reentry and transition services?	Document and share gaps in coordination that disrupt reentry planning, using this data to advocate for systemic solutions.
Fund pilot models where juvenile justice education programs and receiving schools benefit financially from successful reentry of formerly incarcerated students.	How can states design funding and accountability mechanisms that incentivize schools and districts to successfully transition formerly incarcerated students back into school?	Collect regular feedback from students, families, and receiving schools about the effectiveness of reentry supports — and use this data to demonstrate need and refine transitional services.

Conclusion

Improving juvenile justice education in the United States requires more than a commitment to better teaching and learning within juvenile facilities — it also demands a systems-level understanding of how policy shapes educational opportunity and outcomes for incarcerated students. This agenda highlights that much remains unknown about existing policies, and the best available research is seldom translated into clear, actionable guidance for state and local leaders.

Moving forward, two additional priorities are critical to strengthening the connection among research, policy, and practice to better serve students in juvenile facilities. First, researchers need more accessible and comprehensive analyses of the current policy landscape to clarify how governance, funding, and accountability policies vary across states and to better understand how local policy decisions are made and implemented. These analyses can serve as a foundation for identifying which policy configurations are most conducive to creating high-quality learning environments inside juvenile facilities. Second, researchers need to build better mechanisms for adapting and applying lessons from general education to the juvenile justice context. This includes not only identifying practices supported by the best available evidence, but also studying how these practices can be tailored to incarcerated students and adapted to the constraints of juvenile facilities.

Bridging these gaps will require closer collaboration among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders — and a shared commitment to ensuring that every student in state custody has the opportunity to receive a high-quality education that supports a healthy transition to adulthood. ✨



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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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