

Teacher Retention in the Georgia DJJ: A Plan That Works

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Maintaining a qualified teacher work force is one of the most significant challenges in correctional education. About one-third of all new teachers leave teaching within the first five years of employment.¹ Teacher attrition is much higher for teachers of students with behavioral and academic needs (e.g., students who are deficient in reading and mathematics). Considering the many educational and psychological challenges facing incarcerated students, retaining juvenile justice teachers is a difficult task.

The Georgia DJJ strives to recruit, train and retain effective teachers. As the 181st school system in Georgia, the DJJ must meet the mandates of the No Child Left Behind legislation by employing highly qualified teachers in each academic area. The department has taken many steps to ensure that students are taught by highly qualified teachers in a school system that meets all state and federal standards.

National Juvenile Justice Reform

Historically, juvenile justice administrators have struggled to implement measures that improve the quality of educational opportunities for youths and also improve working conditions for educators in juvenile justice schools. In 1980, the federal government enacted the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA),² which provides the federal government with the legal authority to

address dangerous conditions and practices in juvenile justice facilities. One aspect of CRIPA calls for improvement or reform of the educational, vocational and aftercare services provided to incarcerated students. Often, the outcome of federal legal action is a memorandum of agreement or a consent decree agreement between the federal government and a state with the purpose of improving the educational services provided to students. Since 1980, more than 30 CRIPA agreements have been made across the country between correctional systems and the federal government. One such memorandum of agreement occurred between the federal government and the state of Georgia in 1998. Georgia agreed to implement reform measures to provide incarcerated students with better educational services. They also agreed to allow the federal government to monitor and review compliance with federal laws and constitutional standards. Since then, considerable actions have been, and continue to be, taken to establish an improved correctional education system.

Impact on Georgia DJJ Teachers

In conjunction with meeting the mandates of the memorandum of agreement, a needs assessment involving 360 teachers in the DJJ school system was conducted in October 1998. Teachers were asked to list two of the greatest challenges or weaknesses of the DJJ school program. The results of this assessment revealed several major areas of

concern, including resources, behavior management, standards and guidelines, and teacher involvement. Teachers expressed frustration about the lack of resources, the outdated textbooks, and the need for more supplies and materials to provide a quality instructional program. Teachers also indicated a need for better behavior management in the classrooms and asked for a uniform discipline policy to create an atmosphere conducive to learning. Teachers discussed low teacher morale and turnover due to inconsistencies in the education program and pointed out the need for standards and guidelines to make the system “act as one.” Teachers said they often felt isolated and wanted more involvement in the education change process. It was recognized that addressing these issues was crucial, not only to improving education for incarcerated youths but also to retaining effective and motivated teachers.

Resources. Teachers expressed concern that they were unable to meet the varied needs of their students without updated textbooks. To address this issue, textbook selection committees of DJJ teachers were formed in each academic area to adopt textbooks that would best meet the unique needs of the youth population. To ensure consistency in all facilities, teachers felt that it was necessary for all sites to receive the same books and materials so youths transferred from one facility to another could participate in a seamless academic program. As one teacher noted, “We need a consistent curriculum to meet the needs of the transient population.” In reality, the schools did not have a standardized curriculum, and courses being taught did not meet state curriculum standards. When youths returned to their home schools, they were not awarded credits for work completed in DJJ classrooms. It was not uncommon for a student to say, “This isn’t school because they don’t count our credits when we go back to our home school.”

To remedy this, the DJJ Office of Education worked with the Georgia Department of Education to see that all courses were aligned with the standards, objectives, course codes and numbering system of the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum. As in many correctional education programs, DJJ teachers are challenged to teach students of various abilities and grade levels in the same room at the same time. A unique strategy called curriculum activity packets (CAPS) was developed to provide teachers with individualized lesson plans and student activity sheets for every course in the curriculum. Teachers were involved in writing the packets, which coincided with material in new textbooks as well as the state curriculum. This instructional management system, based on the concept of mastery learning, provided students with the opportunity to move along at their own pace. Teachers knew that students who completed their CAPS would receive grades and course credits that transferred to their home school and that met state graduation requirements. Teacher satisfaction increased as they became facilitators, tutors and managers of a meaningful educational process.

Behavior management. The need to implement a sound and consistent behavior management system geared toward rewarding students for good behavior and for making amends for unacceptable behavior was identified as a critical issue. Teachers noted inconsistencies in the handling of school-related behavior problems. At many sites,

students who were isolated from the classroom for minor offenses did not receive educational services. Some students perceived being removed from school as a reward for disruptive behavior. As a result, policy was developed mandating that students removed from the classroom would still receive educational programming. The alternative education placement model (AEPM), an in-school suspension program, was developed as a structured approach to managing disruptive students. Placed in AEPM by teachers, students are informed of the reason for removal from the classroom, given their CAPS assignments and told the steps to earn their way back into the regular classroom. A trained AEPM officer monitors the student’s academic work and behavior and closely supervises students assigned to the program. Teacher satisfaction is enhanced by their ability to make decisions that control the learning environment.

Standards and guidelines. Before the memorandum of agreement, teachers and administrators had recognized that the operation of the DJJ school program across the state was “consistently inconsistent.” In the 1998 needs assessment, one teacher wrote, “Consistency, is it even possible?” To address the inconsistencies, educational policies and procedures that met state and federal guidelines were developed. These standards formed the foundation for subsequent accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Education standards are now available on the DJJ intranet and accessible to administrators and teachers on their desktop computers. Any DJJ teacher can download policies, standardized forms, CAPS, tracking sheets, school calendars, testing schedules, transcripts, student schedules and other education information. The DJJ school system prides itself on being transparent and accessible to all staff in the juvenile justice system. Confusion and inconsistency has been replaced with order and uniformity.

Teachers and administrators throughout the state also recognized the need for standards in educational staffing. Thus, a comprehensive plan for educational staffing was developed to provide a consistent allocation of general, special education and substitute teachers in the system. Staffing for each school site was based on population, program capacity and specialty program needs. With a projected student population consisting of 40 percent special education students and 60 percent regular education students, providing enough certified special education teachers presented a problem. Since state colleges were not preparing enough special education teachers, the DJJ Office of Education developed its online Teacher Certification Project. This program enabled more than 100 DJJ regular education teachers to obtain add-on special education certification. The department has been able to meet the increased requirement for special educators while retaining many veteran teachers. Also instrumental in recruiting and retaining experienced teachers is the DJJ salary schedule. Teachers are paid on the Georgia teacher salary schedule (based on degrees and experience); however, since they are paid on a 12-month basis with a supplement (opposed to most Georgia teachers who are paid on a 10-month basis), the DJJ teacher pay scale exceeds that of the local school system in many areas of the state.

Teacher involvement in the change process. The needs assessment indicated that teachers often felt they were isolated and wanted more input and involvement in the education program. Failure to involve them led to confusion and low teacher morale. Teachers now play an integral role in designing the instructional program and serving on committees for textbook adoption, software selection and curriculum development. They also participate in accreditation committees that develop school improvement plans. Two statewide training conferences are held each year for all DJJ teachers, who help determine topics for the sessions. At the conference, teachers are given the opportunity to network with colleagues as well as share best practices with others from across the state. Professional learning units, approved by the Georgia Department of Education, are awarded to the teachers for conference participation. These credits, which can be sufficient to obtain recertification, are valuable in retaining qualified teaching staff.

DJJ Study of Teacher Satisfaction

To determine the impact of the reform measures and the overall satisfaction of juvenile justice teachers in Georgia, all DJJ teachers were surveyed by researchers from Georgia State University in 2003.³ The extensive quantitative survey focused on common attrition and retention factors. The most salient positive study findings were:

- Eighty percent of teachers were very satisfied or satisfied with their jobs;
- Sixty-three percent of teachers indicated a desire to stay in juvenile justice for a very long time or until retirement;
- Eighty percent of teachers reported a high degree of self-efficacy, suggesting a belief that they make a positive difference in the lives of their students;
- Three-fourths of teachers indicated being somewhat or strongly supported by administrators, with two-thirds indicating that administrators assisted them with solving their problems;
- Seventy-seven percent of teachers indicated that their access to instructional materials was better or much better because of reform measures;
- Fifty-four percent indicated that they were more satisfied with their workload because of reform measures;
- Seventy-five percent felt that reform measures had improved their ability to make curriculum modifications and implement effective instructional techniques;
- Seventy percent suggested they were better able to meet the diverse needs of their students; and
- Sixty-three percent of teachers indicated that they were more equipped to address student behavioral issues as a result of changes made in the system.

In addition to the quantitative findings of the study, teachers made positive comments. Some of those statements included:

- “My experience as a teacher with the juvenile justice system has been rewarding and challenging. The

rewards I’ve gained are seeing some of my students excel academically and move onto better things.”

- “I truly love working with this type of child. The professionals I have worked with in the educational field are super people at every level.”
- “It has been a very rewarding job. It has opened my eyes to the special needs of underprivileged children. It has taught me to have more compassion for unfortunate kids who have lacked parental support and moral guidance.”⁴

The outcomes from this study supported the expectation that the DJJ system’s improvements led to greater teacher satisfaction, a key factor in teacher retention.

Current Situation in Teacher Retention

The department requires that all of its teachers be certified to maintain employment. As a school system and the recipient of federal Title II-A grant funds (Improving Teacher Quality), the DJJ is required to comply with the No Child Left Behind requirements for highly qualified teachers. In the 2005-2006 school year, intensive efforts were made to ensure that all teachers in core academic courses were highly qualified as defined by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Special attention was given to the complex requirements for special education teachers. As a result of intensive efforts on the part of administrators, supervisors and teachers, the DJJ school system met the Aug. 31, 2006, deadline of employing 100 percent highly qualified teachers.

Achieving compliance with the highly qualified teacher requirements was complex and required an analysis of the number of classes needed in each core academic area at the middle school and high school levels. A high priority was finding ways to retain veteran DJJ teachers while meeting federal mandates. Each teacher’s credentials were evaluated and changes were made in teaching assignments when necessary. The department provided individualized planning and support so that teachers could pursue all available options in order to maintain employment with the school system. Teachers renewing their teaching certificates were also required by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to demonstrate technological literacy. In order to retain qualified teachers, DJJ offered grant-funded reimbursement for the technology training program and, as a result, all teachers facing certificate renewal met the requirement. To ensure that each school maintains a staff of highly qualified teachers and paraprofessionals, principals are responsible for ongoing monitoring. Any changes in teaching assignments are evaluated for their impact on the highly qualified requirements. When vacancies occur, the principals work with the DJJ’s Office of Human Resources to recruit appropriately certified personnel for specific vacancies.

Moving in the Right Direction

There are numerous reasons why teachers do or do not stay in the profession. Teacher retention is impacted most by the teacher’s personal characteristics, qualifications, and feelings about work and the work environment.⁵

ENDNOTES

Although the Georgia State University study suggested that the system was moving in the right direction, a major area noted for improvement was job stress. About 56 percent of the teachers indicated experiencing weekly to daily stress. The sources of this stress were student behavioral concerns, too much to do and too little time, too much paperwork, students with overwhelming needs, and too many administrative directives. Quality school systems are constantly surveying, testing and setting goals based on data and input from school personnel. Efforts are under way to better understand and address the many issues of concern shared by teachers in the Georgia DJJ. A new needs assessment was administered to all teachers at the statewide DJJ Teachers Conference in fall 2007, with the results again being used to improve teaching and learning in DJJ schools.

The department has managed to obtain and retain an excellent corps of teachers while meeting the rigorous requirements for highly qualified teachers. Despite both national and statewide teacher shortages, experienced teachers are remaining in the DJJ system. The average number of years of teaching experience for DJJ teachers is more than 10 years, and recently, the DJJ has seen an increase in its applicant pool. At the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year, there were only six vacancies in an educational staff of approximately 350 statewide. Administrators at these sites reported that they had applicants for the majority of the vacant positions. It is clear that since the 1998 memorandum of agreement, the DJJ strategies to improve educational opportunities for students and to attract and retain qualified teachers have proved effective.

¹ Ingersoll, R.M. 2001. Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3):499-534.

² Abrams, D.E. 2006. Reforming juvenile delinquency treatment to enhance rehabilitation, personal accountability and public safety. *Oregon Law Review*, 84(4):1001-1092.

³ Houchins, D.E., M.E. Shippen and J. Catrett. 2004. Juvenile justice teacher attrition and retention. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 27(4):374-393.

Houchins, D.E., M.E. Shippen and K. Jolivet. 2006. System reform and job satisfaction of juvenile justice teachers. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 29(2):127-136.

⁴ Houchins, D.E., M.E. Shippen and K. Jolivet. 2006.

⁵ Billingsley, B.S. 2004. Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the research literature. *Journal of Special Education*, 38:39-55.

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