

ANNA CHALLET

Reigniting Education in Juvie

Education is a right, even behind bars

Frequently overlooked in California's ongoing discussions about criminal justice reform are the places at which many individuals have their first experience of being detained—juvenile halls. In 2014, California had more than 86,000 juvenile arrests and more than 51,000 juvenile court dispositions.

Further overlooked is the fact that kids continue going to school while they're awaiting legal proceedings or after they've been committed to a facility (which might be a juvenile hall, a camp, or a ranch). Like all kids, young people in the juvenile justice system are entitled to an education—the California constitution does not make an exception for kids who are locked up. They enter what are known as “court schools,” for weeks, months, or even a year or more at a time. It's a window that offers kids caught in the system a chance to change their course, and the system a chance to connect with kids who have few connections.

They connect with various teachers as well, which are the same mix seen at any public school—some who have been doing this sort of teaching for a long time and are committed to working in justice settings and others who are there for much shorter periods of time. The subjects taught, hours per day for instruction, and people teaching vary.

More than 47,000 kids spent time in one of California's seventy-six court schools in 2014. The vast majority came from low-income households and were Black or Latino.

The schools offer an opportunity to change kids' lives while they're a captive audience. But in California, that opportunity is being wasted because the schools are failing. In a state preoccupied with reforming education and moving away from mass incarceration, the schools that exist at the intersection of these movements are habitually ignored, under-resourced, and not held accountable.

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Ayanna Rasheed. Photograph by Anna Challet.

In a study released this spring, Youth Law Center (a national firm based in San Francisco that works on behalf of kids in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems) found that more than 40 percent of the kids in court schools don't make any progress in reading or math while they're there. Many even find that their skills actually decline. Most of the kids aren't even assessed academically, despite assessments being a federal requirement for long-term students.

"Juvenile court schools can be the first stop on moving young people into the prison pipeline, or they can be an opportunity to intervene," says Youth Law Center (YLC) managing director Maria Ramiu. According to Ramiu, the kids in court schools have "high aspirations for what they want to do with their lives." They're hungry to learn, and the system meets them with low expectations.

YLC's findings are borne out by the experiences of many young people who have spent time in the juvenile justice system. Ayanna Rasheed, now twenty-two and living in Oakland, entered the child welfare system as a baby. Today,

she's studying to become an emergency medical technician and wants to do advocacy work on behalf of kids in foster care. Her adolescence was marked by a series of unstable housing situations, and she spent much of her ninth-grade year in a juvenile facility in San Joaquin County.

Rasheed says that all of the students were taught the same material, regardless of grade level: "The math was the same math we learned in sixth grade." To her knowledge, she didn't receive credits for any of the work she did there; she says none of it appears on her transcript.

Moreover, she expresses frustration that none of the teachers made much of an impression on her. "They need to put some heart in it," she says.

And yet, Rasheed's experience isn't universal. For Eddie Chavez, nineteen, who spent time in juvenile hall in Fresno County, court school ended up being a turning point in his life. "You have to focus no matter what because you have a guard watching you, and it's so quiet, and you can't mess around," he says. "I think that's what was able to keep me

focused on my work, because I can't focus in regular schools. Regular schools just aren't for me."

Chavez recalls having a substitute history teacher for about a week in the court school who brought in a suit of armor and had the students try on the parts while they were learning about the Middle Ages. He also had an art teacher who, in addition to teaching Chavez how to draw, drew him a portrait of his girlfriend and his new baby who were waiting for him on the outside. Chavez still has the portrait. He says he ended up earning the most credits he'd ever gotten in any school.

While he was still in detention, he came into contact with Barrios Unidos, a violence-prevention organization. A mentor would come to the detention center and talk to youth about job training, work opportunities, and education before their release. Chavez ended up joining the organization's character-building program when he got out and started going to support groups. The organization helped him get a job at thrift store in Fresno.

Chavez's experience was exceptional, and far too many juveniles wind up with ones like Rasheed's. Overhauling the system to be more responsive to the needs of young offenders in court schools is a mammoth undertaking. Change will come slowly, if at all. Yet, a number of alternative facilities are creating new models of providing treatment and education, improving the futures of young people in the system.

Margot Gibney was the founding executive director of Youth Treatment and Education Center (YTEC) in San Francisco, the city's first juvenile "drug court," which provided treatment, therapy, and high school classes for juvenile drug offenders. An independent study of the school's students (between 2006 and 2010) found that their recidivism rate after one year was less than 10 percent, says Gibney.

The educational approach at YTEC echoed the suit of armor moment that captured Chavez's imagination. Describing her time there, Gibney recalls, "The kids were rapping the Constitution, creating machines to talk about the Industrial Revolution. We'd have family nights and the parents would come in and kids would teach what they learned, and the parents could see their children in a positive light instead of just coming to court and hearing about all the awful things they'd done."

Gibney also says it's crucial to have highly trained staff who have first-hand knowledge of the communities that the

kids come from. "Their education and where they go with their education is such a strong determinant in the options and opportunities for their lives," she says. "You have to help them find the things that they can get really excited about."

Dr. Teri Delane fits that bill. She's principal of Life Learning Academy, a charter school on San Francisco's Treasure Island that serves at-risk youth and those involved in the juvenile justice system. Delane spent time in juvenile detention after being kicked out of high school because of heroin abuse. She says that what saved her life was becoming part of a community at the Delancey Street Foundation, a nonprofit in San Francisco that supports people dealing with substance use disorders.

Life Learning Academy serves sixty students, about 40 percent of whom are on probation. Delane says that in the school's eighteen-year history, they've never had an act of violence on campus. And, she notes, they have a 95 percent graduation rate.

For Delane, "It is not just about staff and everybody else giving to the student. It is the students becoming their own community and helping each other," she says. "It's not about just giving kids things. One of the most important things is giving back—a piece of your life has to be giving back. The kids work together and they give their word to nonviolence."

At the same time, she says, "We try to close the circle around them. In that circle are family support, community support, mentor support, job support, friendships, and a safe environment in which to live."

About a third of the kids in the school are currently homeless or unstably housed. Despite this, they get themselves up and make it to school every day. Many are sleeping couch to couch, and Delane knows of one who sleeps in Golden Gate Park. Finding housing for her students is critical, and the school is working on raising the money to open a residential facility behind the campus. "There will not be kids in our school that do not have a safe place to live and a safe place to thrive," she says.

The decision to house kids who don't have homes is an obvious one, with an enormous pay off. It's a lot like the approaches trialed by successful alternative models for educating juvenile offenders and at-risk youth.

Margot Gibney emphasizes the need for caring adults who have high expectations and hold kids accountable. "The



Eddie Chavez. Photograph by Charlie Kaijo.

research shows that if there's at least one person in a young person's life that follows them and provides support in a positive way, that can be the strongest determining factor. However, if you have a team of people, a community, then you just take those benefits and you maximize them," she says. "Young people don't need programs—they need family, they need community, they need opportunities and safety."

They also need the support of an educational system that takes their aspirations seriously. At minimum, this ought to include teachers and mentors who understand these kids as the future of California, as those who will be shaping this state in the coming years.

Youth Law Center's findings about the failure of court schools, operated by County Offices of Education, come at a time when the State of California has dramatically reordered the way schools are funded. With the desire to direct

more money to districts with higher numbers of underserved youth, a major reform measure, the Local Control Funding Formula, went into effect in 2013; it allocates more money to districts with higher numbers of high-needs students. While all students in the juvenile justice system are considered high-needs, at this point it is unclear what impact this is having with court schools.

What seems to be the case is that while California education reform is addressing important areas, court schools go completely ignored. If this is true, the education reform movement is entirely missing the opportunity to address the needs of a cohort of students who want to learn and whose futures hang in the balance. **B**

Note

Charlie Kaijo contributed to the reporting.