



**STATE OF WASHINGTON  
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES  
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**

1500 Jefferson Street, SE • P.O. Box 40975 • Olympia WA 98504-0975

Wednesday, July 8, 2020

To: Members of the Improving Institutional Education Programs and Outcomes Task Force

**SUBJECT: Improving Education for At-Risk Youth**

Dear Task Force Member:

As we start the work of the Institutional Education task force I think we should “begin with the end in mind.” Youth in institutions have the same rights under “Basic Education” as other youth. These are laid out in RCW 28A.150.200.

*The legislature defines the program of basic education under this chapter as that which is necessary to provide the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the state-established high school graduation requirements that are intended to allow students to have the opportunity to graduate with a meaningful diploma that prepares them for postsecondary education, gainful employment, and citizenship.<sup>1</sup>*

We need to agree that the goal of this task force is to design a program of education that is likely to give students the opportunity to graduate with a meaningful diploma. It’s not just to do a tweak to the funding formulas. What we have today doesn’t work for the students we serve. It wouldn’t work for anyone, but it particularly doesn’t work for at-risk youth.

The kids served in institutions (overwhelmingly part of the incarceration system) are overwhelmingly children of color. This is a result of 400 years of racism in America, a racism that is buried deeply into our culture in ways that people are only beginning to see. If we care about walking the talk on removing racial bias in the world, we need to focus on these young people.

*Among students with a history of detention, only 16% graduated from high school, compared to 72% of students who had not been detained. Among youth who spent more than a month in juvenile detention, only 8% graduated. ERDC*

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<sup>1</sup> RCW 28A.150.200(2)

*found similar inequitable outcomes for high-school dropout rates and postsecondary enrollment.<sup>2</sup>*

*A [2012 report by DSHS RDA](#) found that only 14% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in JR had graduated from high school in the following six years, compared to a 79% extended graduation rate for the general population at that same time.<sup>3</sup>*

These statistics are connected, as youth who graduate and earn post-secondary certification rarely recidivate.

These youths often attend programs put on by multiple school districts, all with different curricula and graduation requirements, and different and unconnected student information systems. For foster children (and 40% of JR youth have been in the foster system<sup>4</sup>), every placement change results in the loss of 4-6 months of school attainment. They never connect to a single adult who cares about them and pushes them to succeed in school.

Most county detention facilities are not set up for long-term residency. The length of stay for a particular youth might be as long as two years in such a facility. They are unlikely to experience any education success, and if they do not we will see them back in the incarceration system.

Young people who are incarcerated at JR facilities have usually had extensive experience with this pipeline, and uniformly complain that the work is not challenging, and that the system does not seem to care if the education they receive leads anywhere.

It is really, really difficult to organize the data about young people involved with the incarceration system. OSPI does not break out information about these young people, even though we have the data scattered in multiple databases. Most of my information comes from a handful of reports you will be able to read during this task force. One key suggestion I make is that we require regular reporting on the educational experience of these youths, as we will not get anywhere solving a problem we cannot measure. The agency will make recommendations on what data we would like to have included in regular educational outcome reporting.

The only way this effort will produce the change we need to see in the world is if it focuses on ensuring that children in institutional settings receive an education that gives them a REALISTIC

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<sup>2</sup> Education Outcome Characteristics of Students Admitted to Juvenile Detention, ERDC 2019, <https://erdc.wa.gov/publications/justice-program-outcomes/education-outcome-characteristics-students-admitted-juvenile>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/rda/reports/research-11-181.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Blue Ribbon Commission Report prior to creation of the agency. [https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BRCCF\\_FinalReport.pdf](https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BRCCF_FinalReport.pdf)

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opportunity to be successful in the world. The current system is dysfunctional. We should do something different.

When a small group of us in the Legislature redesigned the school funding system over a decade ago we created the concept of the “model school” as a way to anchor the cost structure in what people could understand as a functional design for a school. We fought hard about what was the entitlement – was it just enough school that highly prepared students with strong families and minimal trauma in their lives could be successful, or did we have a more inclusive view of who should be served? The paragraph from RCW 28A at the beginning of this letter was the result of that discussion – there was bipartisan agreement that there needed to be enough resources to give every child a fair opportunity. The model school helped people see that some schools would need more funding for remediation than others, and the formulas reflect that.

Children involved in the juvenile incarceration system have complex lives, have usually experienced much trauma, and do not have the level of support young people born closer to opportunity experience. If we want to be successful in designing a funding system I would urge the task force to take a similar approach – focus on designing a model that will work, then figuring out what that will cost. That’s what these young people are entitled to, and that’s what we need to do if we want to end cyclical experiences with the incarceration system.

We should at least address:

- Consistent graduation requirements, curriculum, and student information. A youth’s current credits should not be lost when changing school districts, nor should it take months for their records to catch up to them.
- Expectations. We should expect and support young people in achieving the goals in the basic education act.
- Consistent adult relationships. Young people at the deep end of the pool would benefit from a consistent education coach or advocate.

I would urge the group to think big. Do we really need to have education provided by the school district a facility is in? What has worked in other states and other countries? The long-term gains in outcomes for children and reduction in generational trauma can be stunning.

Sincerely,



Ross Hunter  
Secretary