Child Advocacy Program
Art of Social Change:
Child Welfare, Education, & Juvenile Justice

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READING PACKET for Session #11
April 13, 2017

A Lawyer’s Journey Through Education and
Juvenile Justice Reform

James Forman, Clinical Professor of Law, Yale Law School;
Visiting Professor, Stanford Law School
Speaker Biography

Session Description

Readings:                            Pages

James Forman:


James Forman Jr. is one of the nation’s leading authorities on race, education, and the criminal justice system, and a tireless advocate for young people who others have written off.

Professor Forman attended Yale Law School, and after he graduated, worked as a law clerk for Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. After clerking, he took a job at the Public Defender Service in Washington, D.C., where for six years he represented juveniles and adults in felony and misdemeanor cases.

Professor Forman loved being a public defender, but he quickly became frustrated with the lack of education and job training opportunities for his clients. So in 1997, along with David Domenici, he started the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, an alternative school for dropouts and youth who had previously been arrested. The Maya Angelou School has been open for almost twenty years, and in that time has helped hundreds of vulnerable young people find a second chance, begin to believe in themselves, graduate, get jobs, and attend college.

Professor Forman started teaching law in 2003, and he currently teaches at Yale Law School, and this year is a Visiting Professor at Stanford Law School. Professor Forman teaches a course on Race and the Criminal Justice System and a clinic in which his students fight against the school to prison pipeline by representing young people facing expulsion from school for discipline violations. Last year he took his teaching behind prison walls, offering a seminar on criminal justice which brought together, in the same classroom, 10 Yale Law students and 10 men incarcerated in a CT prison.

Professor Forman has written many law review articles, in addition to pieces for the New York Times, the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, the Nation, and the Washington Post. He has just finished a book, titled Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America. It will be released on April 18, 2017.

He will be giving a book talk at Harvard Law School on April 13, 2017 at noon in Room WCC 2019 Milstein West A/B. Lunch will be provided.
Session #11  
April 13, 2017  

Session Description  

Professor James Forman will share his lifetime career experience working to promote better opportunities for youth caught up in the juvenile justice system. He will talk about his personal evolution from serving as a juvenile public defender, and his frustrations with the limits of what he could do for his clients in that role, through his creation of a charter school in the Washington, D.C. juvenile justice system, to his current advocacy work as a law professor. This class will bring together issues of juvenile justice, education reform, and mass incarceration.
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A Circle of Trust: The Story of the See Forever School

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Yale Law School

David Domenici

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In April 1997, we left our jobs as lawyers to start a school for court-involved kids. We had $50,000, donated office space, and lots of energy. We had no staff, site, curriculum, or other funding. But we had a mission—we wanted to create the best school in the country for kids who had been arrested. And we were in a hurry. We knew kids who needed the school—and they needed it right then—not years down the line. Five months later we opened our doors to 20 kids and a small staff, crammed into a row house in the heart of Washington, DC. This is the story of how we got started.

Back Story I: James Forman, Jr.

“Tell the judge I want a program,” pleaded Eddie, “tell him I don’t need to be locked
up.” Eddie was 16 years old, charged with breaking into a house to steal a TV and VCR, and I, a new public defender in Washington, D.C., was representing him. Eddie wanted desperately to go home, and he promised to do everything right this time: he would go to school, attend counseling, and pass his drug tests. I believed him. But I wasn’t sure the judge would.

Being a good juvenile defender requires learning a lot about your client’s childhood, and the more I learned about Eddie’s, the more depressed I became. At eight his stepfather began to physically abuse him. At 10 he began to act out in school, fighting with other kids, refusing to do his homework, and eventually repeating two grades in elementary school. Later he was referred to an “alternative” school, where instead of getting the best of what our school system had to offer, he got the worst. I had been to the school, and it was a place where teachers never assigned homework, nobody talked about college, and kids walked the halls afraid of being jumped.

I had become a public defender so that I could fight for kids like Eddie. My parents were active in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and I knew that their generation had banged down doors so that I could walk through them. For me that had meant Brown University, Yale Law School, and a clerkship for Sandra Day O’Connor. At the same time, I knew that a large part of the African-American community had not reaped such rewards. More and more poor blacks were going to prison, not college. Despite the civil rights movement’s victories, a black
man born in my generation who dropped out of high school was more likely to go to prison than was a black man of my father’s generation.

And as much as I loved my job, I was constantly frustrated by the lack of good choices for kids like Eddie. The government’s only solution was juvenile prison, at a cost of over 50k a year. But when I scoured the community for good alternatives to prison, I kept coming up empty. There were not many programs, and those that existed were often low-quality, under-resourced and poorly staffed. As a result, even when I won a case, my clients often returned to the same bad circumstances they were in before I met them. Recidivism was not inevitable, but it was too common.

In Eddie’s case, I didn’t convince the judge. Eddie was sent to juvenile prison, where he would be held until he was 21 or the Youth Services Agency decided to release him, whichever came first. A few months after Eddie was sent away, I got a call from a friend of a friend. His name was David Domenici, and though I had met him once or twice, I didn’t know much beyond the basics: his dad was a U.S. Senator, he worked at a corporate law firm, and he did a lot of work with kids. David explained that he wanted to meet to discuss an idea: he was worried about kids who dropped out of school, hung out on the streets, and were assigned to terrible alternative schools. He was thinking about creating a program—a good program—for these kids.
Back Story II: David Domenici

After graduating from college in 1986, I went to work in New York for an investment bank. A friend and I invited students from Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn to our offices one afternoon a week. We ostensibly taught them about business and finance—what we really did was get to know them and share cookies and snacks courtesy of Lehman Brothers. Our weekly visits grew into a summer program, in which four students agreed to come to Washington, DC, work part time, and experience living in a college dorm.

I then decided to attend Stanford Law School, but I didn’t want to give up on our summer program. So along with a small group of my classmates, I helped create a program called DCWorks, in which rising high school seniors spent the summer preparing for college and work. DCWorks targeted low-income, minority students who were doing ok, but who needed a boost if they were to attend college. A perfect candidate would have Bs and Cs—not be a troublemaker, but also not a “star”.

During my second summer of law school I interned at the Public Defender Service (PDS) in Washington, DC, and there I met a whole new set of teens—these were kids who had dropped out of and been kicked out of school, who had all Fs and Ds on their report cards; kids who weren’t going to show up at the counselor’s office and pick up a flyer about some summer internship program. Kids like Eddie, James’s client.
After graduation I took a job as a corporate lawyer in DC, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the teens I had met at PDS. At the suggestion of a mutual friend, I called James to discuss my idea of starting a student-run business and tutoring program for kids who had been arrested. I asked James if he thought his clients would sign up, and if he’d be interested in working together. He said “yes” to both. After our meeting, I cashed out my 401k plan (from a few years practicing law) and focused on finding a space out of which to run the program.

The Pizza Shop

A few weeks after that meeting, we purchased a small pizza delivery business located between a liquor store and a nail salon on a tough corner of Northwest DC. We presented teens from the court system with the following proposition: come for two hours of after-school tutoring, after which you’ll get to work in the kitchen, learn how to take orders, prepare food, and manage all the finances, marketing and other operational aspects of a small business.

We had great fun and our students learned all about the pizza delivery business. Kyle, who was 16, closed out the register at night, signed all of our checks, learned Excel, and balanced our books. Students went with us to the warehouse district to pick up food supplies, ran the mixing machine, and made homemade pizza and lasagna. But we quickly realized that the Pizza Shop wasn’t the solution we were looking for. The young people we were working with were still stuck in terrible
schools (or not attending school at all), and a few hours a day of tutoring and work wasn’t going to alter their life trajectories.

Then we were introduced to two prominent attorneys in town, Reid Weingarten and Eric Holder. Former prosecutors, Reid and Eric had always wanted to do something to benefit the young men they had met in the juvenile system. They had formed a nonprofit—which they called the See Forever Foundation—and had raised about $50,000. But they weren’t sure of their next move. In the early part of 1997, we struck a deal. We would use their money to start a school, which we’d open as soon as possible. By April, David had quit his job and James had taken a leave of absence from his.

We decided that we would open a few months later, in September. This meant that we had slightly over four months to, among other things, find a building, hire teachers, recruit students, and raise money to make it through the year—not to mention develop a curriculum that would work for our target students. But the decision seemed obvious. We were young, passionate about the mission of serving kids from the juvenile system, and (somewhat self-righteously) convinced that if we didn’t do it, nobody else would.

By late August, it was clear that we were going to face some challenges at start-up. We were not sure that we had legal authority to operate a school. We were not a charter school (we would soon apply to become one the following year), and although the head of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) had personally pledged
his support months earlier, we had yet to receive formal confirmation. (Eventually, on August 27th, the Deputy Superintendent of Alternative Education sent a fax stating that there had been a “misunderstanding” and that “DCPS would not be able to support our efforts or ensure” that our kids would earn credit.) We opened our doors anyway, as an independent, tuition-free, private school.

Finding a site for that first year was difficult. We couldn’t secure an agreement with DCPS to use any of their sites, and other buildings that could work for a small school were in short supply. Over the summer we found a row house in the middle of a residential street that we thought would work; luckily for us, a Neighborhood Legal Services branch had been there before, so we were able to obtain an occupancy permit because of a DC law that allowed us to grandfather in, based on past use of the site for a nonprofit.

Our little building was homey, but its inadequacies quickly manifested themselves. The basement—where we had just installed our newly donated computers, flooded during a downpour shortly before we were scheduled to open. The building didn’t have enough room for a designated cafeteria, so the social studies room would have to double as one. Other things also were troublesome—only two bathrooms, no air conditioning (ouch), sparse technology (we would have to rely on hotmail accounts), and little office space. And although we had raised $300,000, our projected budget for the year was about twice that (we counted on our ability to raise the rest once we were up and running).
Though many things were hard, finding students was easy. We had only one non-negotiable admissions criterion: a student had to have been arrested. We leafleted the courthouse, spreading the word among judges, prosecutors, probation officers and public defenders. By mid-August we had kids 20 kids who wanted to come, probation officers and parents asking us to start, and judges who said they would not consider the kids truant if they were in our care. So we opened our doors as an independent, tuition-free program—designed for court-involved kids, and funded entirely by grants and individual donations.

Our Students

We ended up with a student body that was entirely African-American, overwhelmingly low-income, performing at the 5th or 6th grade level despite being 15-17 years old, and had accumulated few high school credits. We were reminded how far behind they were when we reviewed the applications, each of which included the following math problem: “You have $10.00. You order 3 slices of pizza. Each slice costs $1.75. How much change do you have after you pay for the three slices? (Please show your work. We are interested in seeing how you try to solve the problem.)” Of the first 20 students to enroll, about ten missed this question. Our students’ academic transcripts often looked like a bomb had dropped on them. Many were like that of a student named Perry (who would go on to be a star): Five Fs, one D and nearly 100 days missed last year.
Academic struggles were only part of the challenge. Most of our students had seen things that no child should have to witness—friends and relatives shot, parents on drugs, fathers lost to the prison system. As a result, many suffered from depression and exposure to trauma, for which they rarely had received treatment. And our students were not only victims. Some had caused great harm to others, including acts of violence. (Many of our students had committed crimes that are rarely prosecuted in affluent neighborhoods, including drug crimes and minor fights in school; others had done more serious things, but our position was that no offense disqualified a student from admission.)

Many of our students were angry about the hands they had been dealt. Even though they hadn’t traveled much, they knew that just across the city other kids—wealthier, and often (but not always) whiter—lived on cleaner streets, with better schools, parks and libraries, and less hostile police. Working within the context of this anger was one of our central challenges. We adopted the philosophical position of the principal of an all-black school in Atlanta, about whom Sara Lawrence Lightfoot wrote in *The Good High School*, who believed: “Recognize the rigged race but run as hard as you can to win.” Yes, we said, this world won’t always be just; yes, the police will too often harass and disrespect you; yes, you may even have to be twice as good, or twice as respectful, or twice as prepared. All of us must work to change those conditions, because the race shouldn’t be rigged. But while it is, “run as hard as you can to win.”
Searching for Models

Our search for good models to emulate was depressing. When we asked people for examples of good schools serving kids who had been arrested, they typically said, “I don’t know of any, that’s why you should start one.” At the suggestion of some colleagues, we visited the “best” alternative school in Baltimore, and left dismayed. Only a handful of kids were present; when we asked to see the math curriculum, we were told they “focused on the basics.” “Job training” consisted of a computer class where students learned keyboarding. Further, the school was located on a remote site, nowhere near where students lived, and not easily accessible by public transportation. The school’s hours were 9:00am to 2:30pm.

Charter schools were just beginning to take root in DC and around the country, but it seemed that few people were starting charters that would recruit the kids we wanted to serve. Some told us, “Honestly, it’s too late.” Others warned that these kids would bring down test scores and make it harder to create good behavioral norms.

Though we could not find specific models, there did seem to be consensus on what was needed. We talked to experts—educators, juvenile justice specialists, judges, public defenders, and social workers. What worked, we asked? For the most part, they agreed—small classes, high expectations, a rigorous curriculum, relevant coursework, and caring relationships. This lined up fairly closely with what kids from the Pizza Shop had told us. Their list had included small classes, a chance to work and
make money, counseling, and teachers who were willing to both challenge and support them. And everyone agreed that to be successful, a program would have to be comprehensive.

_A Comprehensive Program_

Our school day went from 9:30am until 8:00pm Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, we let out early—at 4:30pm. School included job training, counseling, after school activities, dinner and tutoring. All of our students had jobs (and got paid)—our Pizza Shop morphed into a catering operation, which our students named Untouchable Taste (this was an example of letting student autonomy go too far; our customers were perplexed by the name, which our students had chosen because, in their view, something really good was “untouchable.”) In addition, we built counseling into the school schedule. Each of our students had one session of group counseling a week, and many of them had individual sessions as well, led by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

We ran afternoon enrichment classes, followed by dinner and an hour of tutoring. Our tutors were all volunteers; staying open so late allowed us to recruit local college students and young professionals who were busy during the day but could spare an hour a week in the evening. We had a lot of kids who really needed someone to help them complete their homework. In addition, we wanted to confront the barriers that separated low-income black students from older, more privileged
adults (many of whom—but not all—were white). By the middle of our first year we had 60 volunteer tutors (15 a night, four nights a week) coming to the school for one hour a week. Many ended up doing much more than helping kids with their homework—they built strong relationships, became mentors, and came to us with their concerns when students were faltering. A number of our tutors that first year ended up working with their students until graduation two to three years later; some even continued to support students after they left for college.

High Expectations

The importance of high expectations has become something of a cliché in education circles. Who can be against the idea? But this is an example of the chasm separating the juvenile justice and education worlds. While educators increasingly talk about what percentage of students leave high school prepared for success in college, the juvenile justice world speaks of reducing recidivism rates. The juvenile system’s low bar for success influences the programs serving court-involved youth. Schools serving these kids often view their task as getting most kids to school each day, keeping fights to a minimum, and finding an occasional kid who can pass the GED test.

We sought to hold ourselves accountable for more, and we made a practice of telling kids and families the first time we met them that, “this is your first step towards college, your first step toward a job you enjoy, your first step toward the life you
want.” Sometimes those meetings took place in the courthouse or the public
defender’s office, with kids who had recently been released from jail. We received a
lot of blank looks in response. Talking about college and the future was so different
from what they had been conditioned to hearing that we may as well have been
speaking another language.

Of course, one conversation doesn’t change anything. To take effect, the
message must be repeated, tirelessly and consistently, by every member of the staff,
from the principal to the receptionist to the student interns and school volunteers.
More than that, the talk must be backed up by specific action.

Curriculum and Instruction

We used a modified project-based curriculum. We relied heavily on the ideas
espoused by the Coalition of Essential Schools—key tenets included studying material
in depth (less is more), focusing on relevance, and asking critical questions. We
wanted to help students build the habits of mind they would need to be successful at
college and in life. At the same time, we knew that many of our kids lacked basic
skills, and we didn’t think we could address them fully without specific, targeted
instruction focused on building up these skills—this was the “modified” part of the
curriculum.

For example, we read Angela’s Ashes and compared African-Americans moving
north to the Irish coming to America. But we also studied basic geography because
most of our students didn’t know the 50 states, much less what or where Ireland was.
We studied slavery, and Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. We read the
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Beloved, and Selma, Lord, Selma. And students
wrote essays and gave speeches and participated in mock debates. But we also had to
teach basic grammar and punctuation. For many students, we had to actually teach
them to read (this meant working on basic decoding skills and expanding sight word
vocabulary) through intensive tutorials, often using middle and elementary school
materials.

We supplemented our curriculum with extended day classes, often taught by
volunteers or community partners. These included dance, art, speech and debate,
peace and nonviolence workshops, jazz appreciation, digital music production, street
law, and yoga. (Although many of these classes worked out great, some were failures,
as some volunteers missed class and others could not manage the students.)

Unfortunately, the quality of our curriculum and instruction varied widely
during our first year. Our talented and experienced English teacher smoothly turned
our broad ideas into daily lessons. But other subjects were more difficult. For
example, the original math curriculum, which David wrote, included a two week
project entitled “Understanding the Black-Scholes: Risk and Reward in the Stock
Market.” But our math teacher had just graduated from college, had never heard of
Black-Scholes, and kept asking David what textbook we were going to use to teach
Algebra (she eventually grew into a solid instructor and now heads the math
department at an Atlanta high school). And we didn’t find a social studies teacher until just before the Labor Day weekend.

Although we suffered from spotty instructional quality, it was not because our teachers didn’t care enough. Many critics of schools serving low-income students emphasize that many teachers do not believe that poor kids are capable of excelling. This is what some call the will problem. We all had the will (i.e., we believed that our kids could achieve at the highest level and that it was our duty as a school to get them there), but we did not—with the same consistency—have the skill (i.e., we did all have sufficient mastery of the incredibly complex craft of teaching, especially teaching adolescents who were many years behind grade level). In order to get better we needed a strategy for professional development (we had little PD beyond our 10 days of training in August). As leaders of a start-up school we had too much on our plate and we did not offer sufficient teacher observation and support. Passion and willingness to work late into the night carried us far that first year, but we were hurt by the lack of a plan to assess and support teachers, and an inability to evaluate and revamp curriculum and instruction based on student performance.

School Climate

We opened our doors during a time when the nation was panicking over a rise in juvenile crime, school shootings dominated the news, and zero tolerance policies were in vogue. Especially given the students we served, not a day went by without
somebody asking us how we were dealing with school safety. Our students cared about this as much as anyone. On the school’s application, we asked students to tell us the best and worst parts of their last school. We were shocked by how many described lack of safety as the thing they liked least about their schools (“too many fights” was the most common single answer). We knew that school safety was a big deal, but the kids we served were typically thought of as the trouble-makers. Their applications were a good reminder of how even the “tough” kids crave safety and security.

Yet we had no metal detectors or security officers. We felt that our kids were constantly being reminded that society sees them as threats; our school needed to be one place where they were viewed as scholars. So we tried to create a community based on trust, mutual respect and nonviolence. We started the year with a week-long, overnight retreat at Trinity University, a local college. (Overnight retreats have remained important to us; we take one in the fall and one in the late spring—but they now are for two days, not seven). One of our first exercises was to break up into small teams and create a school constitution—using magic markers, butcher-block paper and masking tape, we created the school we all wanted. It would be a school where teachers would “respect students,” come “prepared to teach,” and “help students for real.” A school where students “do their work” and “ask for help if they don’t understand something.” A school where everyone was responsible for “keeping See Forever a safe and fun place to learn and work together.” And that meant “no
fighting” and “no weapons.” We chose these rules as a group (though we had some non-negotiables—we rejected the student demand for “no homework on Fridays”), and the Rights and Responsibilities we created adorned the school hallways throughout the year.

It was hard to keep up the spirit of that first week (and like all constitutions, ours was broken almost as soon as we created it). But we tried, and school climate and culture was probably the area we got most consistently right in our first year. Students and staff ate meals together. Teachers often stood outside and greeted students when they came in the morning and left in the evening. We stood up for each other. When the police came around after school questioning kids about why they were on the street at 8:00pm, the adults reminded the police that our school had just let out, that our kids had had a long day, and that they were headed home. We went to court with kids—and told it straight to their judges. We took their report cards to the hearings and reported directly on student progress (and problems). We drove kids to the doctor’s office and got them glasses when they needed them. If students needed a place to stay, staff opened up their own homes and took them in for short periods of time (and eventually we opened up residential homes).

We finished each week with a full school “circle-up.” We talked a lot about the civil rights movement that first year, and we told students we wanted to create “a circle of trust,” a phrase used by SNCC in the 1960s. All staff and students gathered in one room, made a big circle, and gave each other shout-outs. The rules were
simple. Nothing negative; say something nice, say something sincere, or don’t say anything. Kids thanked staff for helping them and congratulated each other for improving their reading or for coming on time every day; staff would shout out kids for working extra hard on an essay or helping to defuse an argument.

Families

The relationship between schools and families can be complicated, and this was especially true for us. After all, the parents of our students had typically been underserved by the same terrible school system. They lived in neighborhoods that the rest of society had largely abandoned—areas that had been denied economic and infrastructure investment. It was so tempting to give up on them—to think, “Well, if they cared more, this kid would not be so far behind, or so messed up.”

Fortunately, we also were reminded of the opposite—of how most of our students had somebody in their lives pulling and praying for them, hoping that they would have a future that is brighter than the odds suggest it will be. One night, more than any other, drove this point home. One of our rituals was a quarterly Family Night, at which students shared their work and received awards. We defined family broadly; we invited parents, grandparents, siblings, probation officers, lawyers, tutors, pretty much anybody who played a role in our students’ lives.
About halfway through the year one mother—Perry’s mom, Mrs. Randolph—came to us to suggest that at our final family night parents should be given the opportunity to speak on behalf of their child. The theme would be “you made me proud, when . . . .” Her reasoning was compelling. She explained that she and Perry had a good relationship when he was young and through elementary school. But in about the 8th grade Perry had begun a prolonged downward spiral, including skipping school, using marijuana, withdrawing from her, hanging out with kids who were up to no good, and eventually getting arrested. What she summarized in a few minutes was two years of agony for her, as she suffered the parental nightmare of feeling like she was losing her child to the streets. During these years, she reflected, she did nothing but yell at Perry. Every day brought another disappointment followed by an interrogation or accusation. (“The school called me again, saying you haven’t been going!”).

More than anything else, Ms. Randolph said, she was just so tired. Tired of yelling, tired of crying, tired of being mad at her son. And now, for the first time in years, things were different. He was going to school, and he said he liked it. Because the hours were so long he had less time to get into trouble. Now she got calls from the school just to let her know that Perry had written an excellent essay, or intervened when two students began arguing and helped keep it from turning into a fight. (One of our rules was that a student’s advisor needed to call every parent in the first week
to inform them of something good the student had done.) Perry had even stopped smoking marijuana. (Mostly.) But Ms. Randolph realized that during the bad years she had almost forgotten how to compliment him—she was stuck in a criticism rut and needed help getting out. And she wanted to do it publicly, and encourage other parents and guardians to do the same. And so the parent-led “you made me proud when . . .” Family Night was born. Ms. Randolph went first, other parents followed, and there was not a dry eye in the house.

Progress is Slow and Unsteady

In Hollywood, the school savior story always goes something like this: kid has all sorts of problems; kid meets caring teacher or is admitted to a good school; kid works hard, loves learning, and turns his or her life around. In the Hollywood version, learning gains are quick and dramatic, and kids rarely stumble on their road to success (and when they do falter it is slightly, and for dramatic effect, as the audience knows they will recover). Our experience was rather different.

We had many disappointments that first year, and losing kids was, by far, the hardest part of the job. We wanted to believe that if we worked hard enough, put enough structures in place, loved the kids enough, held them to high enough standards, that they would all make it. But it wasn’t to be. We had kids who came to school for awhile, said they wanted to change (and, we think, believed it when they said it), but ended up not making it. Their problems were too deep-set, the external
forces pushing against them too powerful. Shawn, for example, got arrested for carjacking one weekend, and we lost him for good. Barry dropped out, saying he just couldn’t take the hours. Cynthia was arrested and expelled after trying to steal $2,000 by changing the amount of a See Forever check from $20.00 to $2,000.00.

Even the kids who ended up succeeding stumbled along the way. For example, Darren had dropped out of school in the 7th grade, when he was 13 years old. He showed up at our school at the age of 17. Incredibly talented—in math, with poetry and spoken word, with computers—he took to the school immediately, and after a few months was a top student, and a staff favorite. But one day he just stopped coming. His family’s phone was disconnected, his friends didn’t hear from him, his probation officer couldn’t find him, and we went by his house repeatedly and found no one. Two weeks later he showed up at school as if nothing had happened. It turns out his mom had been hospitalized and he and his brother had moved in with an aunt in Maryland. After his mom was released they returned home and he was ready to get back to school. He said this happened regularly (his mom suffered from a degenerative heart disease). Why hadn’t he called us? Because this didn’t seem like a very big deal to him—he had been drifting in and out of school for years—and he didn’t think we’d really care if he took a two-week break. After all, he pointed out, he had returned to school eventually.

Darren got back on track, but as summer approached, he started coming late, often high. We talked about it with him, we sent him home when he showed up high,
we tried to get him to go to counseling or treatment. He refused. After he missed much of the summer, we offered him a deal. To stay in the school he had to move into one of the residential houses, and come to school on time and not high. He agreed. And although we had plenty of other bumps he graduated and went on to college.

He did well his first semester. In mid-winter he called from the local jail and said he had been arrested for possession of marijuana—he got caught smoking in his dorm room. He ended up on probation, and finished the year. He eventually earned his BA. A remarkable accomplishment given where he was when we met him—but not quite the Hollywood script.

*Selecting a School Name*

In the fall of our first year, we applied to become a public charter school starting the following year—September 1998. As part of this process, we decided to change the name of the school. We wanted our students to be able to go to a school with a more standard name—one that wouldn’t raise questions on a transcript, or college application. Our kids faced enough scrutiny already, and going to the See Forever School just added to that. In addition, we thought that giving our kids a role in selecting the name of the school would be empowering. So, we decided to have an essay and speech contest. Students were given a list of 20 people; they had to chose one and write an essay about why the school should be named after him or her, and
then read their essay aloud at a family night. The prize was straightforward—the
winner got to name the school.

In the spring of 2008, 10 students presented their essays to a packed house at
the little church next to our school—we used it as a gathering place for family nights
and other events our first year. Students, family members, and staff got to vote. Two
students tied for the best essay and speech—one recommending that the school be
named after Malcolm X, and the other after Maya Angelou. We had not thought
about what would happen in the case of a tie. We had been fervently—and secretly—
hoping that Maya Angelou would be the winner, because she is a close friend of
James’ family and had agreed to have the school named after her if she prevailed in
the contest. After deliberating overnight, we (in this case, James and David) chose
Maya Angelou.

A few months later, Sharon, who wrote in favor of Maya Angelou, gave her
speech a second time—this time in front of over 350 people, including Dr. Angelou,
at our first annual fundraiser. In making her case for the name, Sharon pointed out
that Dr. Angelou “grew up as a poor little girl. She had only her family and her mind.
She went through racism as she grew up. Her stepfather raped her. Her mother and
father sent her and her brother away when they were young. She had a baby at a
young age.” She then compared herself and her classmates to Maya Angelou: “Like
Dr. Angelou did when she was a child, See Forever students have had a lot of
problems, too. We have problems in our neighborhoods, our homes, and inside of
ourselves. But like Dr. Angelou, the students of See Forever are using hard work and education to create a new future.” She concluded: “We know, and Dr. Angelou knows, that there are people who say we are criminals, drug dealers and kids who want to make the society a living hell. We know that we will prove those people wrong. The Dr. Maya Angelou Charter School will treat people by the way they carry themselves and not by their history.”

Sharon, and many of her classmates from that first year, did prove people wrong. They’ve grown up to be caring, productive adults who contribute to their community (two of them actually work at one of our schools), and have jobs and livelihoods that they enjoy. Others have struggled—some are marginally employed, others are locked up in adult facilities, and at least one lost his life to violence. This chapter is dedicated to each of them—the original class of the See Forever, our original circle of trust.

Epilogue

In the fall of 1998, we opened up as the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, with 50 students. James returned to the Public Defender Service and David stayed on as the school’s principal. We moved out of our row house and into a DCPS building. The following year, we purchased and renovated a new site and grew to 70 students. A few years later we opened a second high school, and then a middle school. And in the spring of 2007—10 years after we quit our jobs to start a school primarily for kids coming out of Oak Hill—we were asked to run the school inside
Oak Hill (the District’s long-term secure facility for adjudicated youth), which we call the Maya Angelou Academy.⁴ Over 600 students now attend our schools.

As a part of becoming a public charter school, we could no longer have our special admissions criteria: that all students had to have been arrested. The Maya Angelou Public Charter School campuses are now open to all comers, but remain committed to serving the City’s most underserved students. Our public charter high schools are designated as ‘alternative schools’ by the District, meaning that more than 50% of our students are either involved in the juvenile delinquency system, foster care system, have dropped out of school, or were expelled from their previous school.

We’ve remained best friends. David is the Director of the Center for Education Excellence in Alternative Settings at the University of Maryland and James is now a Clinical Professor of Law at Yale Law School. Memories of that first year working and learning with Sharon and her classmates continue to sustain us and remind us why this work is valuable and meaningful.

⁴ We describe this effort in What it Takes: The Story of the Maya Angelou Academy, in Justice for Kids: Keeping Kids Out of the Juvenile Justice System (Nancy Dowd, ed. NYU Press forthcoming 2011).
What it Takes to Transform a School: Inside a Juvenile Justice Facility

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What It Takes to Transform a School inside a Juvenile Justice Facility

The Story of the Maya Angelou Academy

DAVID DOMENICI AND JAMES FORMAN JR.

"Do you want to apply to run the school inside Oak Hill?" The question came from Vincent Schiraldi, the new head of Washington, D.C.'s juvenile justice agency, in November 2006. He wasn't making any promises—there would be a formal Request for Proposals before any decisions were made—but he wanted to gauge our interest.

Schiraldi was not a typical juvenile justice administrator. He was a former social worker who had spent the bulk of his career as a critic of the way our nation treats incarcerated youth. Schiraldi understood education's transformative potential, and one of his first priorities was to improve the school at Oak Hill, the city's facility for juveniles who had been adjudicated delinquent.

Incarcerated teens suffer tremendous educational deficits: they disproportionately have attended failing schools, typically read and do math at the elementary school level, and often have dropped out or been kicked out of school before being arrested (Sedlak and McPherson 2010; Balfanz et al. 2003). In theory, commitment to a state facility offers them an opportunity to receive an education. In practice, however, most schools in correctional facilities are woefully inadequate (Dohrn 2002). In a typical facility, academic expectations are low, the curriculum is not rigorous, special education services are wanting, and the teaching staff is underskilled and demoralized. What Franklin Zimring said almost thirty years ago is still largely the case: "the training school neither trains much nor schools effectively" (Zimring 1982, 72).

Oak Hill was no exception. The all-male facility had long been a horror show—assaults were commonplace and drugs and weapons were easy to find. The Washington Post warned that it had become "little more than a
warehouse that rehabilitates no one" ("DYRS" 2010). The school within Oak Hill—then called the Oak Hill Academy—was little better. Everything about the place told the young men incarcerated in Oak Hill that education was not a priority: guards sat in classrooms with walkie-talkies blaring, students came, went, or slept without interruption, and fights were routine.

Schiraldi was determined to change this. In an innovative move, he solicited proposals from successful educators to run the Oak Hill Academy, which until then had been part of the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). Schiraldi called us because since the late 1990s we had run two charter high schools that worked with some of the city's most underserved kids. Our schools—both named after the poet Maya Angelou—are open to any who apply, but we actively recruit teens who have dropped out or been expelled, have truancy issues, or have been arrested. We also serve a higher than average number of special education students.

Despite our background, we had serious doubts about taking on the challenge of running the school at Oak Hill. After all, we had never operated a school inside a prison. The list of possible pitfalls was long: Would qualified teachers apply to work in a juvenile facility? How would we manage discipline? Could we create a school that felt special and welcoming, or was it naïve to think we could establish such an atmosphere within the confines of a jail? Considering how far behind the students would be academically, could we help them make significant progress when we would only work with them for about nine months?

We eventually overcame these doubts, submitted a proposal, and were chosen to run the school, which we renamed the Maya Angelou Academy. We launched our program in the original Oak Hill compound, but after two years it was relocated to the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, a brand-new facility that replaced Oak Hill. Three years after it opened, the Maya Angelou Academy is far from perfect, but outside evaluators have been impressed with the speed and extent of the turnaround. In July 2010, the monitor overseeing the court-ordered reform of Washington, D.C.'s juvenile justice agency called the school an "extraordinary educational program" (Special Arbiter's Report 2010). The educational expert the monitor hired reached a similar conclusion:

The Maya Angelou Academy at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center is one of the best education programs in a confinement facility I have had the opportunity to observe. Scholars in the model units are receiving an excellent education. The strength of the leadership and the
staff, the people and material resources available to them, and the processes and program design all contribute to the overall effectiveness of the program. (Exhibit 6A 2010)

After decades of documenting the school’s failures, the Washington Post finally had good news—citing the monitor’s report, it noted that the school had been transformed “from one of the nation’s worst programs to one of its finest” (“DYRS” 2010).

Drawing on the lessons of our collaboration with Schiraldi and D.C.’s Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), we have written this chapter in the hope of fostering similar transformations elsewhere. We call on juvenile justice administrators, reform activists, and policy analysts to do whatever is in their power to bring high-quality schools to youth correctional facilities. Similarly, we call on education reformers to do more to create such schools in facilities across the country. Though our focus here is on education inside juvenile facilities, we also believe there has to be a larger commitment to educating these same young people before they enter and after they are released—themes to which we will return at the end of the chapter.

At first blush, such an appeal might seem unnecessary. After all, most people know that education is critical to a young person’s future, and most people assume—even if they do not know for sure—that schools in juvenile facilities are not very good. Despite this, however, we have found that the education and juvenile justice communities largely inhabit parallel universes. The two groups rarely talk to each other—when we attend a conference of educators, members of the juvenile justice community are rarely present, and educators do not typically attend juvenile justice gatherings. (At the conference that led to this book, for example, there were only a handful of educators present, and no other charter school operators.)

There are many reasons why these two groups do not collaborate, most of them understandable. Apart from a few visionary leaders like Schiraldi, juvenile justice administrators have not thought to establish educational partnerships with high-quality charter school providers (or other unconventional school operators). Juvenile justice reformers, for their part, have been largely concerned with reducing the number of young people who are incarcerated (including reducing the number tried as adults), not with developing quality schools for those who remain behind bars. More radical reformers are reluctant to invest in improving schools inside juvenile prisons because they believe that doing so reinforces a system they would like to abolish. Finally,
many juvenile justice advocates are lawyers (as are we), and law schools train students to think about pretrial rights (such as right to counsel and the right against illegal searches and seizures); by contrast, few criminal procedure classes or juvenile rights classes focus on what happens after a young offender is convicted and sent to a facility.

It is equally understandable that education reformers have not focused on juvenile facilities. Many wonder—as we did—whether the techniques they have developed running schools in the community will work in a correctional setting. Others are just starting their schools, or expanding, and do not have the capacity to take on an additional—and somewhat different—challenge. More than a few would prefer to work with the same group of kids for multiple years, rather than the nine months to a year that juvenile offenders typically spend in a facility. And some wonder if this is the best way to spend their own limited resources. Given that there are so many law-abiding young people who need better schools, these educators opt to work with them.

We do not seek to rebut these considerations here. Indeed, we would not want to—we endorse efforts by juvenile justice reformers to reduce the number of incarcerated youth, and we are thrilled that so many education reformers are creating high-quality schools outside of juvenile facilities. We view these efforts as of a piece with our own. On the other hand, we hope that our story can motivate some juvenile justice and education reformers to work together to improve other schools for incarcerated youth. By focusing on the nitty-gritty details of running such a school, we hope to suggest concrete practices that can strengthen their efforts.

We have divided our account of the Maya Angelou Academy’s development into the following sections: “People,” “Culture,” “Curriculum,” “Instruction,” and “Transition.” After describing the school, we discuss our results. We conclude by examining the policy implications of our experience and asking what the education and juvenile justice communities could do differently to achieve the central aim of this book—keeping kids out of the juvenile system.

**People**

It is now widely believed that improving teacher quality is the single most important thing a school can do to influence academic achievement (Gordon et al. 2006; Jordan et al. 1997). As Chris Barbic, founder of the high-performing YES Prep charter school network, is fond of saying, “We bet the farm on people.”
Yet teacher quality in schools in juvenile facilities is notoriously low. This does not surprise many people. We wondered ourselves whether we would be able to recruit dedicated, high-performing teachers. But we saw one ray of hope. Even though many teachers would shudder at the thought of entering a juvenile facility every day, we also suspected that there was a subset of teachers who would be drawn to our social justice mission. Those behind bars have few allies, to be sure, but there are some in our nation—including some educators—who are appalled that we have the world’s largest prison system and that we lock up so many juveniles in such terrible conditions. Those were the people we needed to find.

To get them, we had to send the message that the Maya Angelou Academy was going to be a high-quality school, even though it was in a juvenile facility. So every time we opened our mouths, wrote a flyer, or sent an e-mail, our message remained the same: We were going to create the best school in the country for kids who are locked up. We were not sure this would end up being true, but we figured if we did not believe it, nobody would.

Everything about our recruitment process emphasized our mission. Our outreach materials stressed the school’s uniqueness. Our job postings declared that we would “provide these students with the best education they have ever had” and that we sought only those who had “an unyielding belief that with the appropriate supports, coupled with high expectations, all students can significantly improve their academic skills.”

During interviews we probed candidates about high expectations in various ways. While some of our questions were tailored specifically to our school, we modeled much of our hiring process on what we have learned from organizations like New Leaders for New Schools, and from presentations by high-performing schools at conferences sponsored by the New Schools Venture Fund. We asked candidates to provide examples of how they created a classroom culture of high expectations even in the face of obstacles. We asked how they would approach working with teenagers who could barely read, students who had been labeled as needing special education throughout their school lives, students with little understanding of what it meant to be successful in school. We also asked each teacher candidate to respond to a writing prompt and to teach a sample lesson.

Our selection process served multiple ends. Most directly, it helped us identify talent. But it also served as a recruitment tool. We were trying to signal to candidates that this would be a rigorous school, with high standards for students and teachers alike. Having a rigorous selection process was essential to that message.
The process also gave us some insight into the quality of the teaching staff at the existing school. Our contract gave us complete hiring and firing authority. Existing teachers at the Oak Hill Academy—all of whom were DCPS employees—were not guaranteed jobs at the Maya Angelou Academy. They could apply to work for us, and we promised to interview all who applied. If they chose not to apply, or if they applied but were not hired, they would be reassigned within DCPS.

About ten of the existing teachers applied for jobs, and the interviews were dispiriting. One candidate proudly stated that "crossword puzzles and word-finds keep students motivated." Another told us that because most of the students could not read, he focused his efforts on the handful that could, and let the rest sleep.

We did not hire any of these ten teachers. Looking back, we realized that—although we had not set this as a goal—we had not ended up hiring any teachers with experience in a correctional setting. In hindsight, we think this was mostly a good thing, because no one came into the job dragged down by the low expectations of most correctional schools. (In saying this, we do not mean to suggest that there are not excellent, hard-working teachers in correctional schools; we mean only that the culture of those schools makes such teachers rare.)

Make no mistake: Finding the right teachers has not been easy. But through aggressive recruiting, we have found a number of highly experienced, talented teachers who, as we thought, wanted to make a difference by working with our students.

It is worth emphasizing the "reach" of our informal recruiting network. Many of the people we hired had heard of our program through friends and colleagues, not advertisements. Our inaugural faculty included a former Teach for America (TFA) corps member who had been teaching social studies at one of D.C.'s highest-performing public charter schools. She heard about us through the Children's Defense Fund. On our current math team, we have a teacher with many years of experience at a public school in the Bronx and a special education teacher who worked in alternative settings outside of Boston. Both were attracted to our mission, and after visiting the school, they felt that we had created a place where they could be successful. And our academic dean came to us with a stellar resume—she began her teaching career as a TFA corps member, then became a TFA trainer, was a teacher at one of our schools, and spent a year coaching teachers at DCPS under Chancellor Michelle Rhee. These were the kind of people we needed if we were to build the type of school culture we wanted.
Culture

High-achieving schools are places where a culture of trust dominates. They are safe and nonviolent. Students work hard and respect the building and learning environment. Unfortunately, schools in correctional settings typically have weak, or negative, cultures. Like the old Oak Hill Academy, they are often dominated by low expectations, a culture of violence, and negative behavior by students (and too often by staff).

Fixing this was our first priority. We started with the physical environment. When we walked through the Oak Hill Academy before taking over, we were greeted by drab walls, out-of-date posters, and classrooms cluttered with unused texts and papers from students who had long ago left the school. The divider in the auditorium was nailed shut, and an inside wall was blackened and dark from a recent fire. As a result, what could have been an ideal setting for school ceremonies and performances had become a fire hazard and a place for teachers to hide. Some of the physical obstacles seemed almost gratuitous. For example, although the school was located inside a large, prisonlike facility surrounded by thirty-foot-high razor wire, the school itself was surrounded by an additional ten-foot fence, as if to say to the students, “You are not welcome here” or “This school is a prison within a prison.”

Soon after we took over the school, the hallways were decorated with student art and other work, awards and plaques hung on the walls, and classrooms were tidy. The small, never-used auditorium was open, painted, and ready for our first awards ceremony. And the fence that separated the school from the rest of the grounds was bulldozed over and thrown away.

Words—especially the ones you use to refer to people—matter, too. At Maya Angelou, we call the students “scholars.” This practice began during our first summer, when we partnered with the Children’s Defense Fund and established a CDF Freedom School (the first ever inside a youth correctional facility). In the Freedom School model, all participants are called scholars. We adopted the term that summer and decided to stick with it. We believe that it reminds everyone—teachers, visitors, and the scholars themselves—how we view the young men in our school.

We also believe in celebrating student success. We host an awards ceremony nine times a year, at the end of each curricular unit. Teachers give awards to outstanding scholars in each class, recognizing excellence in such categories as academic performance, leadership, creativity, advocacy, and greatest improvement. Students star in these ceremonies, serving as the emcees, reading poems or essays, and performing songs or dances.
Awards ceremonies are important at all schools, but they are especially important for our scholars. Most of them have failed repeatedly in school, have been suspended multiple times, and became known to school administrators and the larger school community only when they did something wrong. For such students, being rewarded and acknowledged for working hard helps them develop a sense that school can be a place where they can shine.

Awards ceremonies have other benefits as well. At our facility, as in most youth correctional settings, students are rarely allowed to mingle together freely. Instead, they spend most of the day interacting only with other members of their residential unit. A schoolwide ceremony helps to change the culture by establishing that students can come together in one place and behave appropriately.

In addition to celebrating their success, we help our students imagine a future for themselves. Good schools serving low-income populations work relentlessly to get their students to believe that their future includes college. Such schools hang college banners in hallways and classrooms, organize college trips, and invite guest speakers to campus. Schools in correctional settings must take similar steps. Accordingly, we sponsor college trips for students who are nearing their release date. We also host college fairs in the facility and have a "How to Apply to College" bulletin board prominently displayed in the school.

Even as we look to the long term, we know that building a strong school climate also requires attending to day-to-day behavioral norms. Accordingly, we teach and reward the behaviors and attitudes we want to see in the school through a range of incentive-based programs. These programs help students develop the social/behavioral habits that are expected in school or at work.

We use a modified version of the Positive Behavioral Incentive Program (PBIS) to encourage students to demonstrate our school values: Respect, Responsibility, Integrity, Safety, Self-determination, and Empathy (R·IS·E). School and DYRS staff give out stars to students when they exhibit one of the values; the stars are displayed on the school walls and tallied daily in our student information system. The scholars who accumulate the most stars during each curricular unit are acknowledged at our awards ceremonies, earning a Nelson Mandela leadership certificate.

In addition, all teachers provide a daily score for students based on student participation and respect in each class (PR points). Students earn weekly stipends based on their PR points, which are totaled up along with their R·IS·E stars in an easy-to-read report. Each Friday, scholars meet with a
small team of school staff to review their progress from the past week and set goals for the upcoming week.

In all these ways, we act on our belief that a good school inside a juvenile facility shares many characteristics with good schools on the outside. But we also recognize that a school inside a facility faces some distinct issues. While we believe these are matters of tactics, rather than philosophy, they are nonetheless important. In correctional settings, for example, staff includes both school staff and "correctional" or "secure" staff. These two groups—educators and security—often clash. The tension was magnified in our case because the school staff were our employees while the secure staff worked for DYRS. When we first came to Oak Hill, the chasm between school and DYRS front-line staff was wide. Many of the DYRS staff were wary and unsupportive of us. Some believed we were naïve, others doubted our sincerity, and plenty felt we would not last long.

Today, we have largely closed the gap between the two staffs. We were able to do this because (1) we had the support of DYRS leadership, (2) we were relentless, and (3) we were optimistic. The first point is simple but overwhelmingly important. Although many front-line DYRS staff had their doubts about our new school, Schiraldi and his entire leadership team believed passionately in our educational mission. The school would not have opened or survived without them. The lesson we draw for other educators is that this work can only be done with the support of the juvenile justice agency.

Second, we were relentless. We sat down with DYRS leadership and explained what we needed front-line staff to do in order for the school to succeed. The list was basic, but in this setting, our expectations represented a major culture shift: all kids come to school, on time; students receiving medication on a regular basis take it in the morning, before coming to school, instead of disrupting class later by making trips to the nurse; walkie-talkies are turned down in the classroom; DYRS staff and students are in classrooms during school hours, not chatting in the hallways. Making the list of priorities is only the first step; school leadership must enforce the new practices. We estimate that nearly 30 percent of the principal's time during the first two years was spent walking the hallways to make sure these changes were implemented consistently.

Third, we were optimistic. We believed that if we started to turn the tide and if the school started to function like a school, most front-line staff would adapt to and eventually prefer the new routine. We believed that most would eventually embrace the notion that from 8:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. all adults
in the building have one primary objective—to help our students develop the skills they need to succeed when they leave. After all, most of the DYRS staff were good people who had spent years—sometimes decades—stuck in a dysfunctional system. A few were beyond reform (we were optimists, not fools), but the majority, we believed, would like their jobs better if they could spend the day supporting students who were engaged in the learning process, rather than punishing students who were bored, irritated, and restless. Our optimism (supported by DYRS leadership's willingness to hold staff accountable for their performance in the school) has paid dividends. Although disagreements remain between the school and secure staff, the two groups now generally work closely in support of students in the school.

We recognized from the outset that if we did not get school culture right, nothing else about the school would work. A strong culture does not guarantee success (we have seen schools with strong cultures but inconsistent instructional quality, for example). But a negative school culture guarantees failure. Accordingly, each of the practices we have described—adorning hallways and classrooms with student work and inspirational messages, holding awards ceremonies, offering incentives and rewards for positive behavior, exposing students to high-quality programs and colleges before they leave—were all focused on building up a culture where learning and academic achievement can flourish.

**Curriculum**

In designing the curriculum at the Maya Angelou Academy, we were guided by two well-established educational principles: rigor and relevance. First, a rigorous, challenging high school curriculum is a critical determinant of postsecondary success (Adelman 2006). Second, especially for students who have struggled in school, the curriculum must be relevant to their lives (National Research Council 2003). We also knew that core classes would have to be aligned with DCPS curriculum standards if our students were to earn credits that would count when they returned to school in the community. (In many states, schools in juvenile facilities do not use a curriculum aligned to the state standards—a source of great frustration for students who leave only to find that they have not made any progress toward graduation.)

Although we were committed to these general principles, we quickly realized that our status as a school in a juvenile facility would influence curricular decisions. Because our students come and go throughout the year, a curriculum composed of semester-long units would not work. If a student arrives in
November and the next semester starts in January, it is unreasonable to tell
him to study for six weeks if he knows he will not earn credit for the effort.

For this reason, we structured our curriculum as a series of eight modular
units, each of which takes just over a month to complete (this schedule is
supplemented by an eight-week summer program). For the past two years,
the unit themes have been Relationships, Systems, Change, Choice, Power,
Justice, Ethics, and Dreams. Breaking up the school year into short, manage-
able units serves multiple goals. Even students who have been disengaged
from school can quickly delve into the curriculum. And students who are
with us for only a few weeks or months can complete whole units of study—
and earn transferable credits—before leaving.

Here is an example of a unit in action. In the fall of 2008, the Systems unit
focused on the presidential election. In social studies, students learned about
the electoral process, the history of voting rights, and governmental systems.
In math, they learned data analysis by studying the Electoral College system,
conducting polls inside the school, and reviewing the correlation between
demographic groups and voting trends. In English, students focused on mes-
saging, marketing, and public speaking while reading Barack Obama's memo-
ir, Dreams from My Father. The unit culminated with mock presidential
and local elections, while the few students who were eighteen registered and
voted in the actual election.

In addition to our core curriculum, we offer a GED program for selected
students. GED programs have a bad name; they are often dumping grounds
for kids whose schools have given up on them. And it is easy to offer poor
GED instruction—we know, because our GED program floundered during
our first year. But we have since developed a rigorous, engaging program that
is on an upward trajectory. We think that getting it right requires remember-
ing two key points.

First, a school must be thoughtful about the entry requirements for its GED
program. The GED program should be reserved for those students who are
unlikely to graduate from high school (because of their age and accumulated
credits) and who have a real chance of passing the test. The test is not easy, and
students who lack the basic skills necessary for a GED prep class probably need
a more intensive focus on literacy and numeracy, and should not be fooled into
thinking they are ready for the GED. Accordingly, we limit enrollment in our
GED program to students who are at least seventeen years old, have less than
a year of high school credits, have been at New Beginnings for a minimum of
four months, have developed the behavioral skills necessary to function in a
class comprised of students from multiple housing units, and who—based on

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their performance at the academy and on standardized tests—we believe can pass the GED with three to four months of intensive work.

Second, a GED program should not be linked, as it too often is, with vocational education, or "earning a trade." There is nothing wrong (and a lot that is right) with high-quality vocational education. Indeed, we have students who have earned their GED and gone on to construction-related job-training programs. But that should not be the only way a school talks to students about a GED. We talk about a GED as a gateway to college, and each of the last two years we have sent students who passed the GED while with us directly on to college. None of these young men had seen college as a remote possibility when they first came to New Beginnings.

To understand how we approach students who arrive performing at higher academic levels, consider Jeremy, a seventeen-year-old who arrived at New Beginnings in August 2009. Jeremy performed at a higher level than our average student, having scored at the eighth grade level in math and the ninth grade level in English. He entered our GED program in December 2009 and passed the test in April 2010. At this point, however, Jeremy didn't stop working to improve his academic skills (as, admittedly, some of our students do). Instead, he studied for and took the SAT. He also took a mock Philosophy 101 class that we created for a classmate and him during their last month at New Beginnings. The class structure and expectations were modeled on those of an entry-level college class, and although he did not receive any credit, Jeremy worked hard. At this writing, Jeremy leaves for college in just a few weeks, interested in pursuing a degree in architecture (which he learned about in our carpentry class).

Although Jeremy is better prepared academically and socio-emotionally than many of our students, he faces a tough road. His SAT scores are lower than those of most of his college peers, and he has major gaps in his education. Nonetheless, we believe that Jeremy deserves the chance to pursue a college degree. And through our GED program, he obtained a credential that will give him that opportunity.

**Instruction**

Jeremy is not our typical student, of course. The average student enters the academy just under the age of seventeen, with less than a year's worth of high school credits, and functioning at between the fifth and sixth grade levels in reading and math. Just under 50 percent are identified as special education students. But these averages are just that—they hide great variation among
our students, including the staggering fact that nearly 20 percent of our students test at or below the third grade level in reading at entry.

A further complication is that students attend school grouped by their residential units, not by their academic proficiency. As a result, classes are mixed in terms of age, skill level, and educational history. A single class may include both nineteen-year-olds and fourteen-year-olds; students who function at the high school level and students who struggle to read; students who had been attending school regularly prior to their involvement in the juvenile justice system and students who have not been to school in years.

One of our first challenges was to build and implement consistent classroom norms and systems. We use a variety of tactics, some of them versions of the practices Doug Lemov describes in Teach like a Champion (Lemov 2010). All classes start the same way (students enter, get their subject binders, and turn to the warm-up section), and all classes finish with an exit ticket (usually a short question or problem that helps to wrap up the class), after which students return their binders to the shelf.

In addition, students learn that at the academy we provide immense supports but don’t allow distracting behaviors or interruptions to slow us down. Each class activity is timed: a typical class begins with five minutes for the warm-up, and a clock on the SMART board pops up and starts ticking. After five minutes, the clock goes off, the warm-up ends, and the class moves to the next part of the lesson. Then the clock is reset. Fifteen minutes later, the clock chimes, and the class moves to the next activity. When we opened our first school almost fifteen years ago, this process would have been anathema to us; we would have rejected it as too rigid and controlling. But we have changed our thinking. Now we believe that paying close attention to time in this way both maximizes learning time and reinforces the sense of urgency about the educational process that we want all students to feel.

Given our population, teachers must differentiate extensively within the classroom. For example, when teachers assign a newspaper or magazine article, they will typically create multiple versions, paraphrasing complex ideas or using substitute vocabulary where necessary. This enables all students to read and discuss the same article, while ensuring that the reading level is appropriate for each student. Teachers also differentiate final assessments—each version is aligned to the core content and skills taught during the unit, but the assessments vary in their level of complexity, the degree of guidance provided, and the expectations for the writing section. In addition, some students take the assessments one on one with special education staff and may receive additional time and support.
Differentiation is closely connected to individualization. In all classes, but particularly in English and math, we have systems in place to support the development of individual students' skills within the class structure. In math, all students take a diagnostic assessment when they arrive. Using this assessment, students and teachers prioritize basic skills that students need to work on. After the class warm-up, all students refer to their Skills Log, and for ten-fifteen minutes work on math fundamentals. Once a student believes he has mastered a skill, he takes a short assessment. Students only move to the next skill if they receive a grade of 80 percent or higher. Each day, once the “skills” part of the class is over, the full class moves together to the day's objective. Using this balanced approach, students have the time and support they need to tackle long-neglected math skills, while also gaining exposure to higher-level concepts in algebra and geometry—subjects rarely offered to students in correctional settings.

As this discussion indicates, many of our classes are structured in such a way that special education is woven into the fabric of the school. We do provide pull-out classes for some students, but the vast majority of our special education instruction takes place within our standard class rotations.

Keith's story provides a good example of how we work with students who are far behind academically. Keith was placed at New Beginnings in the middle of the 2009-2010 school year. He tested at the third grade level in reading, and a little higher in math. His background included middle school years at a special education school, and a failed ninth grade year at a large public high school.

After completing his intake assessments, Keith told our director of special education that he wanted to improve his reading more than anything. He pointed to the “2.8” next to his reading fluency score and told her he was going to make that number go up, because he didn't want to read like a second grader anymore.

When asked about his struggles with reading, Keith broke down and cried, admitting that he started having problems in second grade. His teachers knew it, he said, but they didn't help him—not in elementary school, not in the special education middle school, and not at the big high school where he got into trouble. He wasn't accusatory, just sad—and, it seemed, a little embarrassed.

For the next six months, Keith worked with one of our reading coaches each day instead of going to science class, using a variety of reading improvement strategies and programs, including the Wilson Reading System. In English, he set weekly goals for learning new vocabulary words, which he would take back to his unit in the evening. During the Structured Reading
Program (SRP)—a twenty- to thirty-minute session built into our English classes, inspired by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project—he read and responded to books he had chosen from a list of titles at his reading level. Over the next six months, he read four books in the SRP and three others in English class, often taking his books back to the unit at night. He won recognition at our awards ceremonies as a member of our “Bookworm Club”—students who complete books or improve their reading levels during a curricular unit—and became a favorite with his English teachers.

Now, just six months later, as he prepares for his release, Keith’s reading fluency score is just shy of the fifth grade level. Keith will be heading to the tenth grade in the fall. Age-wise, he’ll only be one year behind his peers (he is still sixteen). Academically, he is much further behind but doing his best to catch up. We are working with him to find a school where he can keep getting the intensive reading support he needs. But his family just moved to Prince George’s County, Maryland, and options beyond his large, low-performing neighborhood high school are limited.

Transition

Planning for a youth’s transition back to the community must begin the moment he arrives at a correctional facility. This has become something of a cliché in the world of juvenile justice. But the principle is sound and a commitment to it is essential, even if it is hard to implement consistently.

Our transition specialists have the title “advocates,” and their job begins with welcoming each student into the academy and helping him to adjust. They also serve as the school’s primary liaison with the DYRS staff in charge of the student’s living unit. Finally, they help plan and support the student’s transition to school or job training in the community. By assuming all these roles, advocates develop a strong relationship with the student—a relationship of critical importance once he leaves us and reenters a world full of challenges and temptations.

In addition to building a relationship from the start, our advocates locate accurate and up-to-date school records (including special education records where appropriate). This can be difficult and is often done poorly in juvenile facilities (Balfanz et al. 2003). But such records are tremendously helpful for developing an academic plan. In addition, the very act of working tirelessly to obtain the records signals to students that—contrary to what previous bad experiences with juvenile officials might have taught them—we care about them and want to support them.
As students move to within a few months of release, the advocates work closely with them, their parents, after-care workers, and our director of special education, as appropriate, to support their transition. Advocates help students develop a portfolio of their work, awards they have received, progress reports, and a resume. With the support of DYRS, advocates set up and accompany students on interviews with prospective schools or training programs. Advocates ensure that all students have copies of the basic documents they need for work and school (Social Security card, non-driver ID, etc.).

In addition, all students participate in mock interviews as part of their transition process. Advocates help students prepare for these interviews, and friends of the school—from business, nonprofits, and government agencies—come out to New Beginnings to conduct them. The panels score each interview by using a rubric and talk with students afterwards about their performance.

Once students leave New Beginnings, advocates provide ongoing support for ninety days (this is not enough time, but it is all that our funding currently allows). Advocates often accompany students on their first day of school, and they visit students at school or in their homes or group homes once a week. Throughout this time, advocates stay in touch with DYRS after-care workers, school officials, and family members.

We believe that our advocates succeed because of their force of will and personalities, but also because our process allows them to bond with students and provide uninterrupted care. Students at the academy rightfully see the advocate as their closest ally and a source of consistent support—from day one to release and beyond.

Advocates must listen carefully to what a student wants, but they also must be honest with the student about creating a plan that is likely to succeed. For example, sometimes a student wants to go to his neighborhood school to be with friends, even though the friends are part of his problems. Others want to go to a school where they can compete for a football scholarship to college, even though they've never played football. Others want to enroll in a job-training program with academic entry requirements they cannot meet.

Trevon’s story illustrates the role that advocates play in helping our students succeed in their transition. Trevon arrived at New Beginnings in the early fall of 2009. He had just turned seventeen, and had about a year’s worth of high school credits. Trevon scored at the seventh grade level in
reading and the fifth grade level in math. He was quiet, unassuming, and eager to learn.

Trevon did well at the academy. He played on our flag football team, then on our basketball team (where he earned all-league honors), and passed all his classes with a B+ average. Trevon especially liked his art and English classes. His scores went up at an annualized rate of more than three grade levels in reading and 1.3 grade levels in math.

As spring approached, Trevon’s advocate started talking to him about his options once he was released. He didn’t want to return to his neighborhood, where he said he knew he would get into trouble; he was open to going to a small school and said he didn’t mind enrolling in eleventh grade, even though he would soon turn eighteen. These were all indications that Trevon was a good candidate for one of our Maya Angelou charter schools.

In Trevon’s case, his advocate created a transition plan that appealed to his interests, reduced the risk of his getting into trouble over the summer before school started, and placed him in a school where we thought he could succeed. This plan included (a) getting Trevon signed up for D.C.’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and arranging a week-long “tryout” at a summer basketball camp, the deal being that if he did well he could work at the camp for a month and get paid through SYEP; (b) researching our databank of precollege summer programs and encouraging him to apply to a three-week program at Pace University, where he would live on campus and take an arts-focused curriculum; and (c) working with one of our charter schools to get his application in for the fall.

Trevon “passed” his tryout week and spent a month working at one of the city’s top basketball camps. He completed the program at Pace (not without some struggles), and he enrolled at the Maya Angelou Public Charter School as a junior. Ensuring that each piece of this plan came to fruition exemplifies the sort of hard, detailed work our advocates undertake. In Trevon’s case, the Pace experience required convincing the director of the program to admit Trevon, taking him to the train station, buying a set of summer clothes, arranging a cell phone with restricted minutes, figuring out a ride from the train station in New York City to the Pace campus (the advocate’s mother, who lives in New York, was called in to pick him up at the train station and get him to Pace on his first day), calling him daily, and having lots of “I know you can do it” conversations with him. This level of support, planning, and willingness to attend to the individual needs of students in transition is what sets our advocates apart.
Results

With all of these programs and strategies in place, what has the Maya Angelou Academy achieved? Our internal data indicate success in some important areas. First, consider credit accumulation. Students in juvenile facilities are often frustrated by their inability to earn credits towards graduation while they are locked up. If the school does not use a standards-based curriculum that allows credit accumulation, many students feel that their time is being wasted—and in an important respect, they are right. At the Maya Angelou Academy, however, students accumulate credits more than three times as quickly as they did before coming to us. Our average student earns just over six high school credits for every nine months of school with us. These same students averaged just over three credits during their prior two years of school, or about 1.5 credits a year.

In addition to accumulating credits at a faster rate, our students are improving their reading and math skills. During the 2009-2010 school year, students on average advanced 1.4 years in reading and 1.3 years in math. These numbers are especially powerful given our students’ previous rate of improvement. Remember that on average our students are reading and doing math at between the fifth and sixth grade level, although most of them are old enough to be in the eleventh grade. This means that before coming to the academy, our students on average advanced half a year in reading and math for every year they were in school. At the academy, these students have advanced at nearly three times that rate in both reading and math.

Most of our students have experienced significant school failure prior to coming to New Beginnings. They typically do not like school, do not think of themselves as successful students, and do not trust teachers and other educators. We think that changing these attitudes is as important as anything else we do.

We measure students’ attitudes in several areas, both at enrollment and then again when they leave. At enrollment, more than 80 percent of our students tell us they did not like school and did not think they were successful students. At departure, however, more than 75 percent of our students say they enjoyed learning and felt successful at the Maya Angelou Academy. Our students are also much more trusting of teachers when they depart. When we ask them upon arrival if they trusted the staff at their prior school to work in their best interest, more than 70 percent say they did not. But upon departure, nearly 90 percent say they trust Maya Angelou Academy staff to work in their best interest.
We also track whether students remain in school after leaving us. This is a massively important measure, although it is one that we have less control over than some others. Our results here are improving rapidly, though they are not where we would like them to be. In the first nine months we were running the school, approximately 70 students completed our program. Of those, 35 percent were still attending school or job-training programs on a regular basis ninety days after release. The retention numbers have gone up since then. Of the last 70 students who completed the program (as of April 2010), 49 percent were still attending school or job-training programs on a regular basis ninety days after release.

Implications: Reforming Education outside of Juvenile Facilities

While we are gratified when students say, “This is the best school I’ve ever been to,” we are often saddened as well. Shouldn’t our kids have had many great schools before this? And shouldn’t another great school await them when they leave?

Volumes have been written about improving our education system, and we do not propose to join that debate here. Our aim is narrower—we want to talk about education policy as it relates to the kids we see at the Maya Angelou Academy, those who have been the most profoundly underserved, who are the furthest behind, and who are at the greatest risk of ending up at the margins of our society unless we (and they) make different choices.

As we noted above, nearly 20 percent of our students enter the school functioning at or below the third grade level. Even if these students improve their reading two grade levels while they are with us, they nonetheless return to the community years behind academically, functioning well below the level necessary to succeed in a traditional high school, an adult education center, or a GED program. Yet there are almost no programs in the District of Columbia designed and resourced appropriately for them. So they quit.

Why don’t these students have more, and better, options? We have already identified one reason—we do not think that either the juvenile justice or education community has paid enough attention to developing meaningful educational options for this group of young people. But that’s only part of the story. In effect, national and local education policies conspire against these students.

When people ask us about the feasibility of starting a school like the Maya Angelou Public Charter Schools—community schools serving the kids who are most in need—we are encouraging, but also honest. We remind them
that under the federal No Child Left Behind law (which we believe has done some good things), schools must test their students in reading and math and that the world will judge their school according to the percentage of students who meet the state’s definition of proficiency. In some states (and in Washington, D.C.), the last tests are given in tenth grade. So although people may set out to provide a second-chance school for older students, they will face tremendous pressure to avoid accepting any students in the tenth grade (after all, if they do, they will only have a few months to prepare them for the tests). Similarly, it will be in their interest to avoid accepting too many ninth graders who are far behind. In order to have greater numbers of students who are proficient, they will do well to start with a younger group. If they truly want to serve the kids who are coming out of places like the Maya Angelou Academy, we tell them, they will be forced to explain their low test scores and face criticism from people who think they are just making excuses.

But state tests and No Child Left Behind are not the only problem they will face. There is also tremendous funding pressure. Students like those we serve at the Maya Angelou Academy cost more to educate properly than students who are on grade level. They even cost more to educate than the average low-income student. They have particular needs that a good school will try to meet. But where will the money come from?

Consider Anton, a fairly typical Maya Angelou Academy student. Anton was sixteen when he arrived. He tested just below the fourth grade level in reading and just above it in math. He had not earned any high school credits, and had not attended school with any consistency since he completed the eighth grade.

He had committed a crime, but like many of our students, he had also been a victim—he had been shot the year before. His father passed away earlier this year, while Anton was at New Beginnings. Anton does not have any diagnosed learning or emotional disabilities and is not a special education student.

He is doing quite well at the academy. Anton attends classes with ten other students, and in each class there are two members of our instructional staff and two DYRS staff. He receives counseling and behavioral health support on a regular basis, has adults who ensure that he gets up and comes to school each day, and often stays after school to receive additional tutoring. He attends a school with a total of sixty students.

Anton will return to the community with better academic skills, a transition plan, more resilience, and some strategies to cope with the trauma that he has experienced. But there is a good chance that whatever school accepts Anton will lack the resources to truly help him. Anton is involved in the juve-
nile justice system, will be returning from nearly a year of confinement, is five to six years behind in school, and has experienced major trauma. Once released, he needs a community school that will provide what proved successful at the academy, including tutoring, small classes, intensive support with his reading and writing, and consistent mental health counseling. If Anton were a special education student, he would have a chance of finding such a school. But for non-special education students who have his needs, the options are few. Schools that provide such services are almost nonexistent, because we as a society don’t provide the funding to develop and operate them.

In most states there is one more obstacle to creating high-quality schools for students like those leaving the Maya Angelou Academy. In Washington, D.C., and the vast majority of states, the only way to earn a high school diploma is to accumulate the requisite number of Carnegie units. And the only way to earn a unit is to pass a class that meets the District’s seat-time requirement (literally, this means that a student must spend a specified number of hours in class—i.e., in his or her “seat”).

Thus, students who come to us at age seventeen with three high school credits, work hard, and leave us at age eighteen with nine to eleven credits will nonetheless return to their communities needing two more years of high school. For students like these, whose one real success in school was at the academy and who will probably be returning to a large, underperforming public high school, this is too long, and the diploma too far away.

There is a better way. A number of states—including California, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Oregon, and Rhode Island—offer more robust alternatives for earning a high school diploma; these include options for competency-based credit, workplace-based credit, and dual high school-community college enrollments. If our society is to provide a pathway for students such as those who leave the Maya Angelou Academy, then Washington, D.C., and other states must follow their lead.

Conclusion

This volume is dedicated to showing how we might keep our young people out of the juvenile justice system. This includes making sure that kids who enter the system do not return. In this chapter, we have argued that the juvenile justice community should do more to demand quality schools for youth in the system, and that education reformers should do more to create such schools. The story of the Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings is one example of how to build such a school inside a juvenile facility.
At the same time, what happens outside the walls matters just as much as what happens inside. Ensuring that young people do not return to the juvenile system will require that equally good schools are available to them when they reenter the community. This combination—of excellent education inside and outside—is what Jeremy, Keith, Trevon, Anton, and others like them need, and what we as a society have an obligation to provide.

NOTES

As used throughout this chapter, the pronoun “we” does not refer exclusively to the authors but often to the teachers and staff of the Maya Angelou Academy. Their passion and commitment are something to behold, and this chapter is dedicated to them. The authors also applaud the work of Vincent Schiraldi, Marc Schindler, David Brown, David Muhammad, and the entire DYRS team, including the front-line staff at New Beginnings Youth Center. We would like to thank Arthur Evenchik for his comments and editorial assistance, and Patrick Clark, Alana Innirere, and Michael Knobler for research assistance. Finally, we would like to thank the young men of the New Beginnings Youth Center. May you dream big, work hard, and never, ever return.

1. PBIS is a nationally recognized approach to supporting positive school culture, and it is used in many school districts. It was not specifically designed for use in juvenile facilities, although a number of such schools have adopted it.

2. We have changed all of the students’ names for confidentiality purposes.

3. Here and elsewhere, our grade level equivalency estimates are based on students’ scores on the Woodcock Johnson III Achievement series assessment.

4. Between September of 2009 and July of 2010 the percentage of special needs students at the academy averaged 48 percent, and varied from a high of 55 percent to a low of 39 percent.

5. Results are based on students during the 2009-2010 school year who took three sections of the Woodcock Johnson III Achievement series in both English and math at entry and prior to release. Growth rates are calculated by annualizing actual growth rates. On average, scholars were administered the test just over six months apart, and growth rates were then extrapolated to equivalent rates of growth over nine months.

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