

# Policy Opportunities Toward Improvement of Educational Outcomes for Colorado Youth Engaged with the Justice System

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## Abstract

This article considers the relationship between the 2018 federal legislation known as the Title VII--Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and the opportunity for positively impacting educational outcomes for youth engaged with the justice system in Colorado. While FFPSA is largely focused on delivering improved outcomes for children and youth connected to the Department of Health and Human Services through foster care, a subset of this population includes juveniles who have been charged with or convicted of an offense (*H.R.1892 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018*). In Colorado, the corresponding legislation SB19-108 Part 24 Juvenile Justice Reform Act does much to keep students out of incarceration through placement in alternative settings and proactive identification and treatment of mental health challenges (*Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019*). However, the opportunity to address the need for removing barriers related to completion of K-12 education is not leveraged to any significant degree, leaving education largely in a separate silo. Discussion is informed by a small-scale qualitative research study, literature and legislative reviews indicating need for further policy intentionality in addressing intersectionality, disproportionality and re-entry barriers for youth transitioning back into the K-12 setting. Without this, the opportunity for earning a high school diploma as a critical factor in preventing recidivism may be missed. The article concludes with potential implications for policy and practice.

## 1. Introduction

Interaction with the juvenile justice system as a youth negatively impacts high school diploma attainment and successful post-secondary transition ("Achievement gap: Education outcomes of court-involved students," n.d.). As a result, this paper demonstrates the probability that Colorado can further leverage the groundwork laid by Title VII--Family First Prevention Services Act passed by the United States Congress in 2018 and the cascading state-wide legislation (SB19-108 Part 24 Juvenile Justice Reform Act) to improve educational attainment for justice impacted youth.

This legislation was adopted in response to well-documented negative outcomes for youth in foster care (Gypena et al., 2017, p. 74-83) and connected to the justice systems (Lambie & Randell, 2013, p. 448-489). The national recidivism rate is described as: "the three-year success rate decreased by 3.9% - from 61.5% in 2018, to 59.1% in 2019" (Office of Juvenile Justice 2019 Recidivism Analysis, 2019, p. 1). Colorado fares worse with a three-year 63.8% youth recidivism rate likely highlighting gaps in the post incarceration transition process (Recidivism Evaluation of the Colorado Division of Youth Services, 2020, p. 19). In addition to recidivism, long-term negative impacts on life outcomes for juvenile offenders relate to both health (Barnert et al., 2018, p. 342-350) and employment (Apel & Sweeten, 2010, p. 448-479).

The research AIM of the small-scale pilot study discussed in this paper was to explore student re-entry experiences using a semi-structured interview process to learn about barriers and needed supports to educational attainment prior to and post being charged with a felony offense. The goal through gathering the student data, was to take a snapshot of ground level realities to influence further legislation that could increase the likelihood of adjudicated youth obtaining a high school diploma in Colorado.

This is a critical as incarceration affects the lives of a significant number of young people in Colorado and the United States. The most recent data on juvenile arrests indicates that in 2019, 428,053 youth under the age of 18 were arrested (Table 32, n.d.) nation-wide and 5,145 youth were incarcerated in Colorado (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2019, p.5). “Court-involved students were less likely to graduate from high school (20%) compared with their court non-involved peers (74%). Of court-involved students who graduated, 19% had delayed graduation, as opposed to only 5% students in the comparison group” (“Achievement gap: Education outcomes of court-involved students,” 2019). Further, crimes by juvenile offenders’ peak during school and afterschool hours and on evenings of non-school days (OJJDP, 2018). Once justice engaged, youth are statistically more likely to suffer from continual incarceration (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2018).

Detrimental impacts of juvenile incarceration expound over a lifetime with reincarceration, alcohol abuse and dependence and a need for public assistance being added to the list of negative impacts (Gilman et al., 2014. p. 33-47). Finally, it is an expensive way to treat juvenile offenses. Colorado costs for the Youthful Offender System are \$250/person/day, or \$91,363/person/year with aftercare costs at \$104.56/day, or \$38,164/year (Cost per Offender by Facility, 2019).

Colorado’s efforts to work across state agencies to improve outcomes and experiences of juvenile offenders are significant and exemplary. This report provides further guidance on the intersection between conditions for offending, offense, and school re-entry, identifying policy barriers and opportunities.

## **2. Context, Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1 Setting the Context - Disproportionality and Juvenile Justice*

Disproportionate numbers of minority youth are found at every juvenile court processing point. This long-standing problem is referred to as “disproportionate minority contact,” and when held in institutions, “disproportionate minority confinement,” though more recently, it has been titled “racial and ethnic disparities” (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2007).

At a 2018 conference hosted by the American School of Public Affairs of American University, Tim Murray of the Pretrial Justice Institute described disproportionality as: “Our criminal justice system fails at our most fundamental mandate and that’s equal justice. There has never been equal justice in America. We cannot have conversations about transparency and trust unless and until we acknowledge that we have multiple systems of justice that are based on personal wealth, social class, national origin and most of all are based on race” (*Transforming the U.S. Justice System: Rejecting the Status Quo Speeding the Pace of Reform, 2019*).

The large body of School to Prison pipeline research repeatedly stresses the need to address disproportionality to undo the culture of incarceration in America represented by 5% of the world’s population and 25% of the world’s prison population (Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, n.d., NAACP). In the system overall, two-thirds (67%) are children of color: 41% Black and 21% Hispanic (Table 34). Children of color are twice as likely to be placed in residential treatment versus white youth and are disproportionately transferred to the adult system to be prosecuted. Black youth are nine times more likely than white youth to receive an adult prison sentence; American Indian/Alaska Native youth are almost two times more likely and Hispanic youth are 40% more likely (Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2018, n.d.).

Factors contributing to disproportionality include a focus on low-level offenses, unnecessary use of pre-trial detention, expansion of parole/probation, perverse incentives tied to revenue or prison

population as well as aggressive collection of debt related to offenses and incarceration (Eaglin & Solomon, 2015). Within schools, similar disparity exists related to suspensions and expulsions with 1 out of 4 African American secondary school students suspended every year, compared to 1 out of 16 Caucasian students (Nationwide Suspension Rates at U.S. Schools., n.d.) making school success both pre and post offense a challenge for disproportionately impacted populations.

## *2.2 Literature Review – Bright Spotting School Re-entry and Success*

As early as 1985, there were acknowledgements that post-incarceration policy needed to make school re-entry a larger factor in the transition process. “The absence of schools as a factor in the post transition adjustment of potentially resilient youth is glaring. Schools could and should be a mechanism, both for at-risk youth and for potentially resilient youth returning from correctional facilities to access structure, positive adult influence, skills, and problem-solving experiences” (Todis et al., 2001, p. 120). A 2020 review of school re-entry research noted, “There is relatively little research about school reentry for juvenile justice-involved youth, and yet these students are at risk of low academic achievement, dropping out of school, and recidivism” (Rangel et al., 2020). Due to their findings, the researchers recommended a research agenda that includes the role of student voice, attitudes of school-based staff, interaction with peers, cultural relevance of education settings, systems policies, interagency collaboration, and the role of community partnerships in supporting success (Rangel et al, 2020, p. 214).

In a 2017 Dissertation by Belkin, school re-entry is termed a “Persistent Dilemma “and yet there are bright spots that government agencies can learn from including the Youth Transition Opportunity Program in Oregon which serves students with disabilities who are also justice connected with intensive education, employment and personal coaching services during their last two years of high school. This program has a 10-year 91% high school graduation rate though it is important to note the majority of participants are Caucasian due to Oregon demographics and an undisclosed number of the youth are justice engaged though the program began in response to needs of juvenile offenders with disabilities (Twenty Years of the Youth Transition, 2010, p. 9).

The Family Court and the Department of Human Services in Philadelphia committed to improve their system through a 2005 reintegration initiative. The effort included streamlining educational records so each student leaves with a portfolio of transcripts and accomplishments. They also expanded transition options offering dual credit programs, accelerated high schools for older youth, and evening programs. Prior to this effort, only 10% of justice engaged youth earned a post-secondary credential which increased to 31% over a 3-year period (Pace, 2018, p. 134).

The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice Office of Education (GA-DJJ), serving 3,000 students a day, largely African-American males took a different approach; doubling down on education in-facility by creating individualized education plans supported through offering 330 minutes of instruction a day, with 40% of students receiving special education services. “The majority of the youth in the sample (N-100) received a GED (N-60) while (N-31) youth received a Special Education Diploma and the remaining (N- 9) youth earned a High School Diploma” (Risler & O’Rourke, 2009, p. 234). The guiding program philosophy is “Think Exit at Entry”, an approach resulting in only N-18 youth re-offending within a year (Risler & O’Rourke, 2009, p. 237).

In each case, a system-wide commitment was made to eliminate education barriers and provide needed support which could be a next policy step in Colorado based on the youth interview feedback. The best-case scenario remains incarcerating juveniles for only the most serious offenses which requires intentionally addressing the school to prison pipeline.

### 2.3 The School to Prison Pipeline Framework

According to Muniz (2021), the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) moniker rose to popularity in community organizing circles in the 1990's. "It is believed that the metaphor grew from the once popular 'schoolhouse to jailhouse track' comparison often used to describe the educational tracking system that systematically funneled disadvantaged students of color into the lower-performing educational tracks in schools" (Muniz, 2021). Pedro Noguera's article *Preventing and Producing Violence: A Critical Analysis of Responses to School Violence* a seminal work during this period, recognizes the role of school discipline philosophies and practices in demonstrating that a high level of control results in negative impacts for the entire school community (Noguera, 1995). Other terms used to describe this connection include school-to-prison nexus and school-to-prison link. Mallett describes it as a collision of events: "The criminalization of education and school settings, along with fewer rehabilitative alternatives with the juvenile courts has created the pipeline" (Mallett, 2016, p. ix). A broad definition includes: "an amalgamation of a number of different trends—from the overrepresentation of students of color in special education to the rise of zero-tolerance school discipline policies; from an increased fear related to school safety to perverse incentives from test-based accountability systems to push out low-performing students" (Blokhuys & Williams, 2013).

In considering the long researched negative impacts of the STPP, the interviews conducted in the small-scale qualitative study considered barriers around school re-entry. A multiplicity of commonly identified challenges among the youth interviewed lend to further consideration of both disproportionality and intersectionality in future legislation related to re-entry.

### 2.4 Confluence of SPP and Intersectionality

Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw drafted the theory of intersectionality in 1989 in her paper, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Crenshaw's work originally focused around Black feminist theory, lends insight to the complexity of solving social issues.

Collins and Bilge in their book *Intersectionality (2016)* affirm the use of intersectionality as an analytical tool that takes into account elements such as power, inequality, relationality and social context. They state: "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences". Their rationale is that rarely are people's lives shaped by one factor nor can they be understood without taking into account the mutually influencing ways in which individuals are positioned related to power. They postulate that society is "better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other." (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Intersectionality may then be utilized to explain the well documented personal or situational characteristics that come into play most frequently related to juvenile justice populations including adolescent brain development, sex, poverty, race, academic difficulties, family structures, substance abuse, school suspension/expulsion, and mental health needs.

Regarding brain development and the age of juvenile offenders, nationally, 51% of juveniles in custody are between the ages of 15-17 with the peak being at age 17 (Juveniles in Corrections: Demographics, 2017). A study published by the National Research Council *Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* affirmed the link between adolescent decision making, brain development and incarceration. They concluded, "if the goals, design, and operation of the juvenile justice system are not

informed by this growing body of knowledge, the outcome is likely to be negative interactions between youth and justice system officials, increased disrespect for the law and legal authority, and the reinforcement of a deviant identity and social disaffection” (Bonnie et. al, 2013, p. viii). The scientists presented recommendations that adolescence be understood as a time of transitional brain development that includes risk-taking behaviors. These behaviors can often be categorized as low-level offenses across schools and community institutions resulting in contact with the justice system. Choosing methodologies for punishment outside incarceration constitutes the main recommendation of the findings as development of self-regulation, relational boundaries and future orientation are cut off when a youth is incarcerated and needs to be practicing these skills on the outside to prepare for adulthood.

Of youth in residential placement, 85% are male. “The custody rate for females is less than one-fifth the rate for males (70 females versus 370 males per 100,000)” (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2010). In Colorado, 81% of the juvenile offender population is male (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2021, p. 6). The near constant presence of poverty in the juvenile justice equation contributes to the compounding needs of justice engaged youth. For youth in the justice system, various state and national reports cite ranges between 20% and 86% of the youth also having involvement with the child welfare system, termed “Crossover Youth” (Baglivio et al., 2016, p. 627).

Education exists as both an on-going expectation and a challenge for justice engaged youth. A significant majority are known to have learning disabilities. Across U.S. schools, of students with disabilities, one in five is suspended each year, a rate significantly greater than their peers without learning difficulties. They are also known to be suspended earlier in their K-12 experience (Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). Similar data is found among youth who have been incarcerated with 28-48% having identified need for special education services (Mallet, 2011).

As reported by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) in 2020, during the 2015–16 school year, 11,392,474 days of instruction were lost due to out-of-school suspension: the equivalent of 62,596 years of lost instruction. The report also acknowledged that 53% of youth in custody admitted to skipping classes in the year before they entered custody, and 57% had been suspended (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2010, p. 7).

Regarding family background at the time they were taken into custody, more youth were living with one parent (45 percent) than with two parents (30 percent), and one-fourth of youth (25 percent) were not living with any parent. Altogether, more than 75% had parents who were either divorced or never married (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 2010).

Substance abuse and addiction presents itself as a growing intersectionality for the youth justice population nationally (NIDA, 2020). In the 2020 Annual Report from the Department of Youth Services, Colorado officials acknowledged that for the first time, 93% of youth inmates required treatment for substance abuse addiction. This reflected a 9% increase over the previous year (2018-2019).

Colorado’s implementation of the Family First Act legislation being referenced in this paper takes into account the prevalence of mental health issues among juveniles. Between 65-70% of youth committed to juvenile justice are identified as having diagnosable mental health problems (Shufelt & Coccozza, 2013, p. 3 ). Mallett (2016) identified that of youth who enter the court system, 25-30% are past victims of maltreatment which grows to 50-60% for those held in long-term lock-up.

Prevalence of these intersectional realities among youth pre-disposes them to the STPP and has led to creation of assessments that quantify the multitude of factors impacting youth who have been charged with a crime. Colorado, as part of Senate Bill 19-108 demonstrating law makers understanding of intersectionality dictated adoption of risk assessments: “Adopting a validated risk and needs assessment tool to be used by juvenile courts, the division of youth services (DYS), juvenile probation,

and the parole department; Selecting a mental health screening tool for juvenile offenders; Selecting a validated risk screening tool to be used by district attorneys in determining a juvenile's eligibility for diversion; legislation, Juvenile Justice Reform Committee" (<https://dcj.colorado.gov/juvenile-justice-reform-committee>). Minutes from August 2019 indicate selection of The Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument (YASI) for use in "assessing risk, needs and protective factors in at-risk youth and justice involved youth". The YASI brochure lists multiple assessment categories including legal history, family, school, community/peers, alcohol/drugs, mental health, violence, aggression, attitudes, adaptive skills and use of free time/employment.

Intersectionality and STPP are represented well in the 2008 case of Michael "Stix" Addison in Manchester, New Hampshire. Michael during his early 20's came across the state border from Massachusetts potentially motivated by drug sales or gang activity. In his attempted arrest, he shot and killed Manchester police officer, Michael Briggs. Born to a mother with peri-natal complications resulted in Michael having impaired brain function. He became involved in the child welfare system as a toddler when he was adopted at age 2 growing up in a single parent home after his grandparents who adopted him divorced. He had a juvenile arrest record and failed to graduate high school. Michael is Black and lived in a resource deficient and dangerous neighborhood (Roxbury) with poorly performing schools. He was convicted of capital murder at his trial and is the only inmate on death row in New Hampshire. From birth, he was overwhelmed by a confluence of factors that pre-disposed him to the likelihood of incarceration and lack of educational success. In shooting Officer Briggs, Addison killed an officer who had not only arrested him years earlier as a juvenile, but also saved Addison's life when he suffered a gunshot wound (Wikipedia, n.d., Rutland Herald, Associated Press, 2006).

Another way to describe the compounding of factors in the lives of justice engaged youth is cumulative disadvantage as defined by Sampson and Laub (1997). This theory utilizes life course perspective and labeling theory together to understand and predict the relationship between childhood circumstances and adult crime. Their theory suggests a snowball-like effect occurs for the adolescent as they are arrested increasing negative predictors that pile on and put their future at-risk.

#### *2.4 School Re-entry Challenges*

Common challenges to school re-integration are recognized across the literature which include: the need for coordination among government systems, meeting special education or academic deficiency needs, timely and trusted re-engagement with caring adults and access to wrap-around services. The purpose of the study was to understand which barriers are most prevalent from the student perspective in Colorado in the current climate to draw out potential policy implications. This adds depth to the statistical information available through government reports.

While significant efforts have been made across Colorado and nationally for government agencies to coordinate care, "Often, there is little cross-sector communication, with most limited to information needed at points of client transfer. This largely locally based and siloed system model thus creates a complex enterprise system with no one person (CEO) in charge. Comprehensive change will require rethinking system and component leadership roles, communication, policy-making, distribution of resources, funding priorities, and responsibilities" (*Transforming the U.S. Justice System: Rejecting the Status Quo Speeding the Pace of Reform*, 2019, p. 19).

It's important to recognize that no single adult or entity is fully in charge of a youth's success across systems, the school-to-prison pipeline runs in multiple directions between systems with numerous opportunities for missed handoffs. Ideally, children who find themselves in the juvenile justice system

especially connected to school-related conduct should easily make their way back to neighborhood schools (Roy-Stevens, 2004).

However, schools and school districts often deny or delay enrollment to these students. Reasons cited in discussions with schools and research include the potential of a safety threat, academic deficiencies that will lower state test scores, no financial incentive, not enough skilled staff and spotty or missing transcripts (Mallet, 2016).

In a guidebook for re-entry, the USDOE provides direction for re-enrollment. While helpful, it puts the onus on the student who is often powerless rather than the adults in the system. It begins with "Step #1: Know Your Rights" and refers frequently to contacting a lawyer or civil rights organization when needed.

### **3. Policy Review**

As part of the Title VII--Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), states were required to create their own implementation plans for federal approval. Colorado's corresponding legislation SB19-108 limits incarceration through placement in alternative settings and proactive identification and treatment of mental health issues. Its stated purposes are to see a reduction in the population of juveniles incarcerated, keep families together and address mental health concerns.

Additionally, the bill should be lauded for its acknowledgement that, "Research has shown that court involvement for juveniles not identified as at risk of harm to others is harmful, and most low-risk juveniles grow out of their behavior and stop reoffending without system intervention" (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 17). While acknowledgement is well-deserved related to SB19-108's attention to youth mental health, there are scant references to educational supports and guarantees in comparison. Educational provisions throughout the bill's 59 pages include:

- 1) When referring to "appropriate...placement in the physical or legal custody of the department of human services...the criteria shall specifically take into account the educational needs of the juvenile and ensure the juvenile's access to appropriate educational services" (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 11).
- 2) When referencing adjudication planning, it states that the plan may include "periodic visits to the juvenile's school" (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 16).
- 3) In regard to the handoff or partnership with the receiving school: "Following the detention hearing, if the court orders that the juvenile be released and, as a condition of such release, requires the juvenile to attend school, the court shall notify the school district in which the juvenile is enrolled of such requirement" (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 32).
- 4) As to the obligation to provide educational services to youth in adult lock-up facilities, the officer in charge will contact the related school district "as soon as practicable...to provide educational services" provided it is "practicable" and can be provided in a "safe environment". It goes on to say, "if either the official in charge of the jail or facility or the school district determines that an appropriate and safe environment cannot be provided for a specific juvenile, the official and the school district shall be ARE exempt from the requirement" and that the parent or legal guardian, defense attorney and court of jurisdiction shall be notified (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 37).
- 5) Related to accountability for providing such services, the bill notes: "The official in charge of the jail or facility for the detention of adult offenders, or his or her designee, in conjunction with each school district that provides educational services at the jail or facility, shall annually collect nonidentifying data concerning" the number of days educational services were provided or in which the facility was exempt and the number of youth who required special education services. It goes on to say that this information may be requested by the public (Senate Bill19-108 Juvenile Justice Reform, 2019, p. 37-38).

Currently, SB19-108 assumes the K-12 system welcomes back justice engaged youth, provides support for their success and that the student is not stigmatized or eliminated from opportunity in contradiction to the evidence cited in the literature review. To prevent disproportionality and shut down the STPP, additional specifics could be mandated to minimize the opportunity for disruptions caused by justice system engagement. This could include specific adult directives such as records collection and academic testing, established timelines and services for school re-entry, accountability for re-entry and educational outcomes and capacity building for those who support the youth across state systems.

#### **4. Methodology and Research Design Process**

To gain insight into the realities of students charged with felonies during middle school/early high school attempting school re-entry in the Denver Metro area, an initial qualitative pilot study in Fall 2021 used a series of semi-structured interview questions designed to probe both pre-arrest and post-arrest school experiences.

The three male youth (ages 17, 18 and 20) volunteered to participate from a non-profit juvenile justice program that was part of the Attorney General’s School Partnership Justice Innovation Grant who received support around the school re-entry process after incarceration (two students) and after being assigned to diversion (one student). Each student was interviewed in a 30-40-minute time block during a two-week period in Fall 2020. Context varied due to the global pandemic resulting in one interview being conducted via Zoom, one in person and one by phone. The in-person interview was recorded via Google and the other two were transcribed by the researcher. A trusted adult who knew the youth was present to encourage an environment of safety, trust and transparency in each case.

Each youth was asked a set of questions that could potentially apply to four different contexts (elementary, middle or high school, school during incarceration) related to academic success, relationships with school staff, preparation for the next level of schooling and positive or negative feelings about the school experience. The researcher did not start with a hypothesis other than that due to the low success rate of incarcerated juveniles later completing high school degrees, barriers did exist, and additional supports were needed. This approach was consistent with grounded theory where the researcher begins with research questions but not based on a hypothesis, and prior to a thorough review of the literature (Bell & Waters, 2014, p. 8).

As there is little research on positive programming related to school re-entry, I chose to use the pilot study to collect student data using an approach similar to that in a study by Chan, et. al. in 2021. The study focused on the accuracy of information provided by students in a functional behavior assessment where 7/10 juveniles had previously been arrested, the team found, “the results of this study indicate that high school students can report unique, reliable information” (Chan, et. al., 2021, p. 219).

Semi-structured questions allowed for additional probing needed to make sure I understood what the youth were trying to convey. The Interview notes were analyzed for themes and patterns that were similar across the young men’s experiences and then compared to related research in the field as described in the Findings section below.

#### **5. Findings**

Common themes garnered from the interviews further validated through literature review included academic challenges, a need for adult guidance/navigation skills and support, poor school matches and a desire to take risks. Due to potential policy implications, the following further describes the first three factors.

##### *5.1 Academic challenges and Disengagement*



All the youth recognized that by the time they were leaving elementary school and transitioning to middle school, they were falling behind academically. The gap continued to grow as they transitioned from middle to high school. One of the three was on a plan to receive special education services from 3-8<sup>th</sup> grade while another had an Individualized Education Plan that had expired while he was in lock-up. The third student had never been evaluated but has subsequently been diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. He stated, "If I had the support I have now, getting an IEP, that could have helped awhile back" (Interview 3). The three young men's circumstances suggest learning difficulties may be one of the causes behind their descriptions of lacking academic skills as they advanced. Academic challenges likely have a causal effect based on findings demonstrating that high school graduation is a foundational step for succeeding in life and avoiding re-incarceration as 84% of those in long-term incarceration do not have a high school diploma (Westervelt, 2015). The 2016 US Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) report states "reconnection to school is essential because education is an important protective factor in reentry success; poor academic performance is a risk factor linked to recidivism" (Improving Outcomes for Youth With Disabilities in Juvenile Justice Corrections, 2016, p. 1). Interviewee 2 described his re-entry experience as, "[I] Felt thrown in and they expected all of these things and you could sink or swim. No teacher engaged me or sat me down and said, 'You need to do this'. I was one face out of a thousand. Whether I failed or not, it didn't seem to matter".

## *5.2 A need for adult guidance/ navigation support and skills*

When the students first began to engage in illegal activity, they were in middle school and feeling at a loss for adult guidance amidst experiencing new freedoms in the transition from elementary to middle school. All mentioned feeling like they attended "great" elementary schools where class sizes were small, teachers knew them, and it felt safe and "like a family" (Interview 1). Numerous studies indicate that students who attend K-8 schools versus transitioning to a middle school model fare better academically and psychologically due to the continuity of adult and student relationships (Capella et. al., 2019).

Scientific literature acknowledges three conditions critically important to healthy adolescent development, the first being a parent or parent type figure or mentor who is committed to the adolescents successful development. The other two conditions include a peer group with pro-social values, behavior and academic success as well as the opportunity to practice independent decision making and critical thinking (Mallot, 2016).

In a study (1999) by Nigro and Zabel, they sought to identify the characteristics of juvenile offenders who had learning disabilities and behavioral disorders by self-report in regard to personal, family and school characteristics, and found the most frequently cited role model for their total sample of 266 juvenile offenders was "nobody" (Zabel & Nigro, 1999, p. 8). This affirms the critical role of adults in providing student guidance during the adolescent years.

Participants noted feeling at a loss without adult guidance as to how to transition back into a regular school environment and be successful after being engaged with the justice system. This was further pronounced for the two young men who had spent time incarcerated though was also a significant theme for the student who received diversion.

Theorists argue that labeling theory plays a role in a student's lack of ability to function similarly to the way they did prior to justice system engagement. Internalization of labels related to incarceration or arrest may be seen by the student as their new identity making it likely they find their social networks have changed forcing more contact with youth who have similar experiences. Additionally, opportunities in the school environment and in society may be limited (Gilman, et. al, 2015). "Labeling places the actor

in circumstances which make it harder for him to continue the normal routines of everyday life” (Becker, 1963, p. 179).

Additional factors in what students characterized as “not knowing the rules of the game” may include attending a school not structured to meet student’s needs and being off schedule with the academic calendar. “When schools find out you have been locked up, they expect you to mess up again. Different processes, different rules, schools don’t acknowledge that. Assuming you won’t be successful or they don’t know what to do” (Interview 3).

### *5.3 Poor school matches, belonging and stigma*

All interviewees mentioned that their initial high school experience was not positive. The schools they attended in their first high school attempts were assigned community high schools with populations of 1,000-2,000 students. The students used words such as “chaos”, “not connected”, “trying to find a place to belong” when describing their schools and one noted he felt invisible until probation officers showed up at his school. It was the first time he had ever spoken to the principal and then acknowledged that was the only way he was known to school leadership, “as a troublemaker” (Interview 2). Another cited out of control classrooms and teachers who “didn’t know what to do” (Interview 1).

In a study of 60 adolescents by LeBlanc applying his Social and Personal Control Theory of Deviant Behavior, he deduced that students who are strongly bonded to their educational institutions are motivated to both study and avoid problematic behavior. In contrast, students who drop-out demonstrate a minimal bond. He further explains the relationship of bonding and adjustment upon student re-entry. Strong peer and teacher bonds paired with good performance typically results in a student staying in school whereas weak bonds and weak performance tend to lead to disruptive behavior that eventually leads to incarceration or dropping out or both (LeBlanc, 2016, p. 92). This codification of likely student trajectory is affirmed by Kubek et. al. (2020) in their literature review of school re-entry practices recognizing that youth who feel connected to school frequently experience relative academic success undergirded by positive relationships with both teachers and peers. This positioning contributes to reduced delinquent behavior at school limiting the likelihood of recidivism.

For additional understanding of disproportionality and intersectionality related to the study participants, two of the three subjects in the study were minority students, one Black and one Latino. In Karcher and Sass’ factor analysis of school connectedness scores amongst middle school students, they found African American students had the lowest score on teacher connectedness while Hispanic students scored lowest on connectedness to reading, a variable highly correlated to academic achievement (Karcher & Sass, 2010). Janosz & Le Blanc, (1999) characterized the emergence of deviant behavior as a way to respond to difficulty and failure in the school environment and Georgetown Law’s Human Rights Institute (2012) refers to lack of bonding as “being shut out of the school ecology”.

## **6. Discussion & Legislative Review**

Evidence from the literature review and the interviews acknowledge that students who engage with the justice system have diminished chances at short-term educational success. The system in Colorado is moving toward acknowledging brain science behind adolescent offenses as well as providing synchronized supports.

The federal Juvenile Justice Transition Toolkit 3.0 reminds us the transition process for youth connected to the juvenile justice system is complex. “Transition does not occur only once for these youth; rather, it is an ongoing process that usually involves multiple transitions. Youth move from the community into detention, incarceration, or both—then back to the community. Youth also frequently move to different housing units or pods within a facility or from one facility to another. A youth takes no

uniform route; rather, his or her path depends on many decisions, choices, and rulings made by law enforcement agencies and the courts (Griller et. al., 2016, p. 5).

In a January 2021 community meeting, Minna Castillo Cohen, Colorado Director of Health & Human Services in address this challenge set forth the following aspiration “We want to help our families realize that we are working with them and want them to move forward from working with us. We want to make sure we are holding the children/youth and families in the center of these initiatives. Today, we will be looking at how we truly match a child’s gifts and needs with the resources they need”.

This posture lends itself to closing not only mental health gaps in the system through SB19-108, but takes significant steps toward keeping children and youth connected to their family. Though the Child Welfare Monitor calls out downsides of the Family First Act especially related to funding, Colorado has used it as a catalyst for important changes. This includes the new role of Kinship Navigator as well as eliminating the income test for providing prevention services to family, kin and child versus where previously only the child qualified (Colorado Department of Human Services Family First Prevention Act PowerPoint, n.d. p. 6). These shifts present an important opportunity to build family, kin, youth, school and community capacity around school re-entry and success.

Education Week notes “While much attention has been focused on increases over the last decade in school referrals to the juvenile justice system, less attention has been paid to the obstacles children face when they exit the juvenile justice system and seek to return to their neighborhood public schools. Impediments to re-entry magnify the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline; they heighten the likelihood that children will find themselves returning to the justice system they just exited” (Zubrycki, 2012). Solving re-entry challenges as a state from a lens of intersectionality means that rather than students finding themselves back in the School to Prison Pipeline, they can pursue higher education options as two-thirds of youth in custody report aspirations toward. Positive youth aspirations also apply to employment with 88% saying they expect to have a steady job in the future (OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin: Youth Characteristics and Backgrounds, 2010, p. 7)

Colorado can grasp this unique point in time driven by legislation to provide another death blow to the School-to-Prison Pipeline by addressing the need for intentional school re-entry services and supports. Among them should be expanding relevant training for school leaders, staff, and officers on issues regarding school re-entry. For youth, external navigation support and training in life skills is needed (Transforming the U.S. Justice System: Rejecting the Status Quo Speeding the Pace of Reform, 2019, p. 9)

As there are numerous regulations and pieces of legislation that may further impact investigation and dialogue, a gap analysis could likely benefit further conversations and research on the topic of school re-entry support and regulation. Regardless, we know from the recent lived experiences of the young men interviewed more can be done to ease transition and support educational success of juvenile offenders in Colorado.

## **7. Conclusion**

The most recent report from the Colorado Division of Youth Services (2019-2020) highlights some definite successes including a 30% reduction in the number of juveniles incarcerated during the first year of the pandemic and a 10% increase in the number of students who earned a diploma or GED. However, the need for additional supports and system collaboration persists. “Between FY19 and FY20, we experienced the largest spike in the percentage of youth committed to DYS on violent offenses in the past decade, moving from 31% to 41% of newly committed youth. These increases also include 92% of

our youth requiring treatment level services for substance abuse” (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2021, p. 4)

The report goes on to say, “these challenges do not diminish the strong passion and commitment to help young people become all they can be” (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2021, p. 4). It is with that commitment state departments and committees can more intentionally utilize the Family First Act and the committee work called for by SB19-108 to support school reintegration for the 22 justice engaged youth who transition in and out of incarceration each day across Colorado (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2021, p. 5). With the average juvenile justice stay being 19 days, significant educational disruption has taken place paired with a high likelihood that education was a challenge prior to incarceration (Annual Report Division of Youth Services, 2021, p. 6).

Recognizing and preparing for this opportunity to help a youth receive needed education and life supports is critical to their long-term success. The state has made significant progress on what could be a two-pronged approach; preventing incarceration in the first place and making it easier for juvenile offenders to find success in school. The January 15, 2021 Minutes of the Colorado Juvenile Justice Reform Committee posed the question: “How can we meet the needs of youth that have historically been placed in congregate settings that now need to be placed in homes or family-like settings?” It was then acknowledged that “at the beginning is [we thought] everyone would have the same concrete goals and utilize the same language; however, different systems have different language and objectives”.

Despite disconnects, leveraging of supports to address the factors mentioned by the students in the study could provide a common shared AIM for justice engaged youth: 1) A strong school match that intentionally addresses academic challenges with a way to make up for lost academic time accompanied by intentional efforts to create a sense of belonging and positive community without stigma. 2) The opportunity to have adult mentorship or personal navigator who assists navigation across all systems, helps to find answers to barriers and gives the student and their family or caregivers needed knowledge and courage to find their voice around education. 3) Community agreement on the rules to the game that both students and the adults in the system are taking responsibility for toward the mutually agreed upon outcome of the student earning a post-secondary credential and moving on to college or career.

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