



The Prison-to-School Pipeline

Two out of three students released from incarceration never return to school. Meet five people fighting to change that.

BY TIM KENNEDY

In the generation since tough juvenile sentencing laws peaked in the 1990s, educators and advocates have fought to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. They've developed alternatives to zero-tolerance disciplinary practices. They've lobbied for and won changes to

local policy. They've rallied the support of the federal Justice Department and even President Obama himself.

Yet dismantling the pipeline is not enough to help the nearly 100,000 youth already in the juvenile justice system's custody, or the hundreds of thousands more who have served time and been released. Roughly two-thirds of students released from the system never return to school. What chance do they have?

Doing the Work

These five alumni—lawyers, educators, analysts—are working to improve the part of the pipeline that receives less attention: the one leading from incarceration back to the classroom. And from there—with some work—to a brighter future.

CHRISTINA GRANT is assistant superintendent of Philadelphia's alternative schools and has placed a big bet on the power of career and technical education to improve life prospects for incarcerated youth. Will it pay off?

EMILY FOX is drafting an updated Juvenile Justice Local Action Plan for the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families.

GEDÁ JONES HERBERT teaches students about the law and how to navigate it, even in a system that often seems set up against them.

RACHEL BRADY is working to ensure incarcerated students with disabilities are receiving the same accommodations they would receive at school if they weren't in custody.

RAHEIM SMITH is a special education teacher in Brooklyn serving adolescents awaiting trial and those already sentenced to detention.

GETTING INVOLVED is easier when you know where to start. Find resources and tips for working in the juvenile justice field.



KRISTIN LITTLE

GeDá Jones Herbert

(Greater Nashville '09)

One way to help students stay out of detention is to teach them about the law and how to navigate it, even in a system that often seems set up against them.

GeDá Jones Herbert, a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School, is site manager of the Law Program at the Bay Area nonprofit [Fresh Lifelines for Youth](#) (FLY), a 12-week legal education course for at-risk and system-involved adolescents. She recruits, trains, and supports volunteers, including Teach For America alumni, who lead Law Program classes at schools and community sites across Santa Clara County. She also teaches two classes per week. (Her favorite lesson is a

mock trial, where students are able to imagine themselves as lawyers, judges, and jurors—as opposed to defendants.)

FLY's Law Program is not a "scared straight" approach, says Jones Herbert, whose first legal education came from her mother, a criminal defense attorney. The program equips students with coping skills and de-escalation strategies, delivered by positive adult role models in a safe and supportive environment. It develops their empathy for the justice system's many actors. Students don't just gain an understanding of how, for example, gun and gang laws dramatically affect sentencing in California; they consider, through role plays and discussions, why different people might support or condemn those laws. After participating in the program, more than 80 percent of students report they are less likely to break the law and have more confidence to deal with negative peer pressure.

"We see ourselves as guides," Jones Herbert says. "We're here to provide knowledge, to educate our youth on what the laws are, what their rights are, what choices they have in a situation."



SALLY RYAN

Rachel Brady

(Chi-NWI '07)

Incarcerated students with disabilities are legally entitled to the same accommodations they would receive at school if they weren't in custody. But Rachel Brady knows that "legally entitled" doesn't always mean "actually happening."

Brady is an attorney at Equip for Equality, which advocates for disability rights in Illinois. And she's a perpetual thorn in the side of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). Through the public defender's office, the Juvenile Probation Department, and other sources, she learns about students who are in custody (or transitioning out) and also have individualized education programs (IEPs). Brady knows how often those IEPs are overlooked or never received by detention centers, so she

represents these students to ensure their IEPs are up to date and implemented. When they aren't, she sues the IDJJ School District to comply. When it's too late for services to be provided while students are in detention, she sues the district to provide compensatory services: six months of tutoring, say, paid for by the IDJJ district.

Brady stresses that the IDJJ is in the middle of profound, positive structural reform, thanks to a 2012 settlement with the ACLU that mandated change. But structural reform moves too slowly for her clients, many of whom have moved from school to school and could benefit hugely from a consistent, high-quality educational program while they're in detention. "I struggle, because these kids have so many factors working against them that a good IEP isn't going to fix everything," Brady says. "But part of my hope is that I'm at least inching the department toward change."

Recently, one of Brady's clients cut off his electronic monitoring bracelet and fled, the day after Brady got him set up with a new IEP. "When he's back, I'm going to represent him," she says. "And they're going to implement his IEP."



TAMARA PORRAS

Raheim Smith

(N.Y. '13)

Raheim Smith is a special education teacher at Passages Academy – Belmont, a Brooklyn school serving adolescents awaiting trial and those already sentenced to detention. He has a pretty straightforward message: Developmentally, kids need unconditional love and support. “They need someone to let them know that they care about them,” he says. “Not care about them because you want to see them succeed, but care about them *because you care about them.*”

*Ultimately, **66 percent** of youth released from custody do not return to school, according to the Federal Interagency Reentry Council.*

Our juvenile justice system, and much of traditional education, offers the opposite, he says. Study and you'll get good grades. Behave and you'll get parole. Instead of unconditional support, kids face conditions at every turn. "We quit on them too quickly," Smith says, which "floods the system" with kids who need significant but, on the whole, moderate interventions and makes it harder for exceptionally troubled students to get the support they need.

Change a few variables in his own life and he could have ended up like his students, he says. Smith spent much of his Long Island adolescence homeless or on the brink of it. He enlisted in the army almost immediately after graduation. Eighteen years later, he brings a mixture of military stoicism and outsized compassion to his classroom, where he's taught just about every subject but art at least once since 2013. Of course students need consistent, high-quality instruction, he says. But they also need someone to love them when they fail and fail again. "If that's what we're providing in the system—consistency and care, real care—these students will start to turn around."

Getting Involved

- Some state juvenile justice departments, including [Illinois](#) and [Texas](#), offer volunteering opportunities for community members who wish to get involved. Search online for your state's juvenile justice department to learn more.
- Even in states without centralized volunteering services, individual detention centers often work with their own networks of volunteers. The best way to find out if your local facility has any need for volunteers is to call and ask.

- The [Center for Juvenile Justice Reform](#) at Georgetown University offers a variety of certificate programs for organization and system leaders interested in studying “policies, programs and practices that improve outcomes for youth at risk.”
- To learn more about the Bay Area’s Fresh Lifelines for Youth program, or to become a volunteer, visit its website: flyprogram.org.

About the Author

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