

The Power of Community Partnerships in Juvenile Justice Education: A Teacher's Perspective in Bridging Gaps and Transforming Facility Climate

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As this paper is grounded in my professional observations and reflective practice, it adopts a qualitative lens informed by nearly a decade of teaching within a juvenile justice facility. As such, I have had the opportunity to witness firsthand how community partnerships reshape educational experiences and impact facility climate.

Over the years, I have sought out community partnerships that offer students real, relevant, and reflective learning experiences—programs that allow them to express themselves, see themselves in the content, and feel connected to a world beyond facility walls. Many of our students arrive with a deep sense of disconnect from traditional education, often shaped by trauma, exclusion, and mistrust. But when they engage with authentic artistic, cultural, and performance-based programming, something shifts. These experiences don't just support academic engagement, they reshape our facility's climate by building trust, empathy, and mutual respect between students and staff. I recall one student at his graduation saying, "I would never trade the education I received here for any that could have been offered in a public or private school." It was a humbling reminder that when education is rooted in relevance and relationships, it becomes transformational—even behind locked doors.

Education in juvenile justice settings presents distinct challenges. Many students arrive with gaps in their schooling, histories of disengagement, and negative perceptions of academic environments. A lack of trust in traditional instruction, combined with trauma, disciplinary concerns, and institutional constraints, often leads to low motivation and limited participation. Meaningful education in this context requires more than standard curricula—it requires engagement that connects learning to students' identities, interests, and personal growth. Community partnerships, particularly those that integrate performance-based education, cultural storytelling, and creative expression, play a vital role

in bridging these gaps and reshaping how students experience education.

Community engagement has proven most effective in our facility when it creates learning experiences that are real, relevant, and interactive. Initiatives such as Shakespeare in the Schools, Indian Education for All (IEFA) guest speakers, and the Free Verse Project have shown how diverse approaches to education can transform students' mindsets, build confidence, and encourage sustained engagement. By bringing literature, culture, and personal expression into the classroom, these programs serve as bridges between restrictive settings and the outside world, exposing students to possibilities they may not have otherwise encountered.

Performance-based initiatives have emerged as effective engagement tools within our facility, often reaching students who are otherwise disengaged from traditional instruction. Shakespeare in the Schools, for example, has brought professional theater performances and workshops into our facility for over eight years, creating immersive literary experiences that make complex texts accessible and meaningful. Students, often hesitant at first, respond with enthusiasm and gratitude, recognizing the discipline and vulnerability required for live performance. Experiencing Shakespeare through performance allows students to connect with themes like ambition, justice, betrayal, and redemption in ways that resonate with their own lives. These immersive experiences have helped students develop critical thinking, confidence, and social-emotional awareness, while also improving literacy and comprehension in ways that traditional instruction often struggles to match.

Cultural education has also offered students opportunities to connect learning with identity and lived experience. For students from Indigenous communities within our program, these experiences have often validated cultural identity and fostered a sense of belonging within an educational space that has too frequently excluded or misrepresented them. Guest speakers

through IEFA, including artists like Supaman, a Native hip-hop artist and storyteller, have provided students with narratives that challenge stereotypes, honor history, and inspire personal growth. The presence of role models who share students' cultural backgrounds reinforces that education is not just about memorizing information—it's about understanding one's place in the world and the potential that comes with self-knowledge.

Perhaps most transformative has been giving students the tools to express themselves through writing and art. The Free Verse Project enables students in juvenile detention to write, publish, and share their creative work, fostering a sense of agency, pride, and authorship. For many, this marks the first time they have written for themselves, rather than for a required academic task. Seeing their work in print, participating in competitions, and receiving recognition has been a turning point for numerous students—some of whom have gone on to win state and national awards in writing and visual arts. Others have discovered the personal value of creative expression as a tool for healing, reflection, and reimagining their future.

We've seen that incorporating performance, cultural engagement, and creative expression into our education model not only supports students individually but also fosters a more respectful and supportive facility culture. These programs create space for authentic dialogue, encourage student voice, and promote mutual investment among staff and students. As students become more engaged in their education, interactions with staff shift—from compliance and correction to collaboration and growth.

Exposure to professional actors, cultural leaders, and published writers has expanded many of our students' awareness of career paths, creative outlets, and post-secondary opportunities. More importantly, these interactions normalize intellectual and artistic exploration, helping students recognize that taking creative risks is not only essential for growth but also deeply rewarding in its own right. Within our facility, this exposure has helped students reframe education from a punishment to a possibility.

Sustaining these partnerships has required more than one-off visits or special events—it has taken ongoing advocacy, collaboration with facility leadership, and a shared belief among staff that education can be more than compliance. Over time, we've worked to embed these programs into the rhythm of our school year, coordinating with community organizations, scheduling around

custody constraints, and building trust with external partners. Support from administrators, counselors, and security staff has been essential, not only in logistics but in creating an environment where students feel safe enough to participate fully. As these programs became regular fixtures rather than occasional exceptions, we saw a noticeable shift in student behavior, staff-student relationships, and the overall tone of the facility. The classroom transformed from a place of quiet resistance into one of cautious hope and active engagement.

What we've witnessed through these programs reinforces that education in juvenile facilities must go beyond standards; it must cultivate curiosity, resilience, and belonging for students who need it most. By integrating performance-based learning, cultural representation, and creative voice, community partnerships have the power to change not only how students learn—but how they see themselves and the future ahead of them.

About the Author

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