

Creating Safe, Supportive, and Engaging Learning Spaces in Restrictive Education Settings Through Purposeful Partnerships

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Staff and personnel who work in restrictive education settings must contend with multiple, simultaneous challenges. They must meet the needs of school-age youth served in these settings while also creating safe, supportive, and engaging learning spaces as well as a positive facility culture and climate for rehabilitation and habilitation. Restrictive education settings are those outside the purview of traditional K–12 settings and the community, ranging from alternative schools to residential treatment centers to residential hospital settings. One of the most restrictive education settings for school-age youth includes secure long-term and detention juvenile justice facilities in which youth reside and receive all services—education, mental health, medical, recreation, and more—that span all life domains. Such services are to be provided within a safe and supportive facility culture and climate conducive to learning. The focus of these facilities is to rehabilitate and habilitate youth through myriad education, treatment, and programming services that aim to prepare them for successful reentry into their neighborhood communities and postsecondary and workforce futures.

Most youth served in these facilities present with educational deficits, past trauma experiences, mental health issues, substance abuse histories, and relational issues. To meet their needs, juvenile correctional personnel must leverage discipline-specific expertise and resources across the facility and from supporting juvenile agencies. The complex needs of youth residents also make it challenging to create and maintain safe, supportive, and engaging learning spaces throughout the facility wherever specific programming occurs. “Safe and supportive learning spaces” references the overall functioning of the facility in terms of its culture and climate. Facility personnel address youth needs by maximizing educational programming, integrating treatment and programming across disciplines, and implementing evidence-based

practices. However, restrictive education settings alone often cannot fully meet youth needs.

To mitigate challenges and address programming needs, restrictive education setting personnel (e.g., agency-/facility-level staff, teachers, counselors) often seek out and form partnerships with external community entities whose expertise and resources complement, enhance, and/or extend current practices and efforts or meet a need identified via youth intake data, agency/facility priorities, and/or new science. Community-based programs and partnerships—that is, purposeful short- or long-term relationships between an agency/facility and external entity/person(s) to meet a specific need—can be a powerful approach to better meet the education, treatment, and programming needs of the youth served. Such an approach often brings additional expertise and resources to address targeted needs.

This special issue was created to highlight a variety of community-based programs and partnerships with and between juvenile agencies/facilities, with a focus on how such partnerships work to promote and strengthen positive, nurturing, and therapeutic facility cultures and climate. These collaborations help to create not only safe, supportive learning spaces with evidence-based practices/programming and opportunities for youth to thrive but also safer working conditions for facility staff. The special issue articles highlight various successes related to these goals, including partnerships and configurations, ways that programs influence facility culture and climate, and a model example for collaboratively partnering with a juvenile justice agency. These articles are summarized below, moving from the micro level—that is, “boots on the ground” perspectives from individuals who work in or have provided direct volunteer or research services in secure juvenile facilities—to macro-level examples of agency-level partnerships.

Harris describes how, as a teacher in a

secure juvenile facility, he has leveraged various education-focused community partnerships to enhance youth learning spaces, experiences, and opportunities. These partnerships resulted in long-term relationships with community partners, allowing for programming to be built into the school calendar across semesters and school years and affording incarcerated youth relevant, applicable, and real-world experiences like those facilitated for their nonincarcerated peers. Harris describes how these community partnerships helped to build more positive and growth-minded relationships between facility staff and youth, thus contributing to reshaping facility culture and climate.

In another article, Gunder, a former volunteer mentor in a juvenile facility, reflects on how shifting the roles of juvenile detention officers toward participation in community partner programming may facilitate a more positive facility climate. As volunteer community partners delivering programming, she and her peers initiated and encouraged officer involvement in the activities—something that the officers did and the youth supported. This reconceptualization and institution of new involvement expectations for officers improved facility culture and climate through stronger staff–youth relations, and youth began to “humanize” the officers as people there to support them and help them succeed.

As another community partner delivering programming, Bennett and colleagues focused on a specific sport-leadership program within a multiyear partnership between several secure juvenile justice facilities and university researchers. They sought to understand facility administrator and staff perceptions of the program’s impact on youth and its effects on facility culture. Bennett and colleagues found that facility administrators and staff attributed the implementation of the single sport-leadership program as a driving factor in improving their facility culture both directly, through improved youth engagement in the program’s skill-building approach and improved cohesive relations and interactions among youth, and indirectly, with administrators and staff transferring the relational skills they learned to their other interactions with youth.

Through the lens of building effective and meaningful community partnerships, Shelton and colleagues describe a partnership between facility leaders and a university researcher. In this example, they collectively share ideas on how community partnerships can be leveraged as a

tool to address facility educational programming needs while simultaneously strengthening facility culture and climate to improve youth outcomes. This partnership formed as the product of a larger partnership aimed at implementing activities to improve facility climate, and it served as a touchstone for sharing ideas across facilities and regions. Shelton and colleagues share how effective and sustained community partnerships have positively affected facility climate by (a) opening doors to other partnerships and increasing youth programming options, (b) facilitating the networks/people to meet the real-time needs of their youth, (c) bringing in resources and people that were once unaffordable or out of reach, and (d) changing societally negative perceptions of the youth being served—with community partners now viewing the future potential in these youth.

Moving to a more macro-level perspective on facility climate, Jolivet and colleagues describe a multiyear partnership between a juvenile justice state agency, the agency’s local secure juvenile facilities, and university researchers that spanned the time before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This partnership stemmed from the agency’s interest in better understanding youth perspectives on overall facility climate and learning spaces, with findings derived from youth survey data looking at the climate tenets of expectations, acknowledgment, discipline, safety, respect, and connection. The agency also wanted to know how it, per the youth perspective data and real-time facility contextual variables, could further support local facility climate efforts to increase safety for youth and staff, improve youth behaviors, and promote youth engagement in programming. This contribution details the youth facility climate perspective findings, describes how the partnership evolved amid COVID-19 disruptions and changing needs at the facility level, and explains how the partnership expanded to include agency-level perspectives on challenges to maintaining and supporting staff at the facility level in their provision of a supportive and engaging culture and climate for youth after COVID-19.

On a macro level, Lee and colleagues describe a multiyear, multicomunity partnership that is resulting in macro- and micro-level culture and climate benefits within juvenile corrections. They describe a partnership between a state juvenile agency, a court system, and a university in the same state with the aim of using data to make organizational change from policy to practice implementation. An interactional model of culture

and climate is provided, with youth recidivism highlighted as an area of focus. This example details how the partnership was designed and functions, how it has evolved due to successes and challenges, what each partner contributes to the overall collaborative efforts, and how the partnership is sustaining, while also considering future directions.

In another article, Prewitt and colleagues describe how a partnership between multiple juvenile facilities and university researchers resulted in the conceptualization and actualization of an approach to spotlighting successful partnerships that contributed to improved facility culture and climate. The resulting “podcast-style” conversations provided a platform for juvenile facility leadership and teachers/staff to join with their selected community partners to detail how they built and maintained the partnerships, how both facility personnel and youth benefited from these partnerships, and what facilities and community partners learned and gained from the partnerships. Prewitt and colleagues detail how others may employ the same approach within their partnerships and use it as a research tool.

Jones concludes the special issue with a book review focused on social justice within higher education and teacher preparation programs. The review draws connections between aspects of the book content and potential community partnerships with juvenile corrections. Given that (a) youth in juvenile corrections, who are all school-age, spend the majority of their time in educational programming; (b) such educational programming is provided by licensed educational professionals (e.g., those with degrees in general and/or special education); and (c) most youth in these facilities are from minoritized groups, Jones describes how using a social justice lens through partnerships may benefit youth and staff. Juvenile facilities may purposefully partner with university teacher preparation programs to provide a pipeline of educators who can strengthen facility climate through (a) pedagogy of positive youth development and strength-based approaches, (b) the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy and practices, and (c) contextually appropriate instruction within restrictive education setting parameters. She posits that such an approach may improve facility climate by developing and engaging teachers who are well-equipped, via pedagogy and experiences, to deliver educational services within the unique settings of juvenile corrections.

This special issue brings to the forefront different means, perspectives, and experiences in which restrictive education settings such as juvenile corrections are forging community partnerships. These partnerships not only enhance the education, treatment, and programming offered to youth served in these settings but also work as leverage to further strengthen facility culture and climate. The eight articles, spanning all five article types offered in the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, highlight how juvenile corrections can better meet youth's complex rehabilitative and habilitative needs while strengthening facility culture and climate when purposefully partnered with community entities/person(s). Hopefully, these articles will spur thought and action for your future community partnerships so the youth whom you serve may thrive within your setting and beyond.

About the Guest Editors

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