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Many Steps Taken to Improve Education at Florida's Juvenile Justice Facilities

at a glance

The Legislature and the Department of Education have improved many aspects of education at juvenile justice facilities, including

- providing juvenile programs better access to student records kept by school districts;
- improved monitoring of special education requirements;
- increased days of instruction;
- greater access to general education diplomas (GEDs);
- more guidance about vocational education; and
- remedies for correcting substandard education programs.

Purpose

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken in response to our 1998 review of

education services in juvenile justice residential facilities.^{1,2}

Background

School districts are responsible for providing educational services to youth in juvenile justice residential facilities. Education is an important component of juvenile rehabilitation, and statutes require juvenile justice education programs to provide services comparable to those that students in regular school receive, as well as increased access to vocational education and GED (general equivalency diploma) preparation.

Prior Findings

Juvenile justice education programs reported frequent problems in obtaining student records from out-of-county school districts. Student records are essential for placing youth in appropriate classes and for assuring that special education students are served as directed by state and federal law.

¹ Section 11.45(7)(f), F.S.

² *Review of Education Services in Juvenile Justice Residential Facilities*, [OPPAGA Report No. 98-28](#), December 1998.

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School districts were not giving sufficient attention to legally required educational services for special education youth, such as developing individual education plans. This was problematic because many youth in juvenile justice residential facilities have special education needs -- in our sample, 35% of the youth had special exceptionalities.

At more than a quarter of facilities, student instruction was not provided over the summer or was disrupted by other breaks. These gaps were particularly problematic for short-term programs.

Few residential facilities provided youth the opportunity to earn a GED, and access to meaningful vocational education was limited. The opportunity to earn a GED and receive vocational training while in a residential program is especially crucial for older juvenile justice youth who are unlikely to complete high school after they are released, and instead attempt to enter the workforce.

Finally, school districts were not held accountable for the quality or performance of the educational programs they provided to juvenile justice youth.

Current Status

The Legislature and the Department of Education have taken many steps to improve education in juvenile justice facilities. It is now up to the 67 school districts to implement these improvements.

- The department revised Rule 6A-6.05281 to specify that schools must provide student records to juvenile justice education programs within five days of

receiving requests. The Legislature also directed school districts to allow education programs of juvenile justice facilities with 50 or more beds to access to their district school system databases in order to access student records.

- Through rule and review standards, the department has provided more guidance to school districts on monitoring compliance with legal requirements for special education students.
- The Legislature extended the days of instruction for juvenile justice education programs by authorizing school throughout the summer.
- The Legislature directed that 16-year-old youth in juvenile justice facilities be informed of the opportunity to take the GED test, required school districts to waive the testing fee for these youth, and authorized juvenile justice education programs to apply to become GED testing sites.
- The department is providing further guidance on vocational programs. However, in 1999, vocational classes were offered for credit at only 37 of 140 juvenile justice education programs.
- The department revised Rule 6A-6.05281 to specify remedies for school districts that provide, directly or by contract, substandard education for juvenile justice students. The State Board of Education may require corrective action including requiring the school district to revoke a contract or transfer the responsibility and funding to another school district.

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