

Innovation Brief

Learn to Earn: PACTT Helps Delinquent Youths Gain Academic and Job Skills

In a time of high unemployment, the lack of attention to education and career training for delinquent youths has aggravated the considerable barriers to employment they face upon release from custody. In 2008, Pennsylvania's juvenile justice leadership launched an ambitious program to address these issues, coordinated by the Pennsylvania Academic and Career/Technical Training Alliance. PACTT-affiliated juvenile justice facilities have made significant changes in their education programs, aimed at helping delinquent youths succeed in further education and employment after their release.

The Issue

Over the past 15 years, 80 to 90 percent of new job growth has required not only a high school diploma but some post-secondary education as well. Study after study documents the reduced earnings of high school graduates, compared with those who have some additional education or training. In this world, delinquent youths re-entering the community face a difficult future.

On any given day, there are some 90,000 youths in residential confinement in juvenile justice systems across the U.S. In Pennsylvania in 2010, more than 6,000 delinquent youths were placed outside the home. Most of these youths are significantly off track for high school graduation. Although about half are 16 to 17—and more than 40 percent are even older—they often test at fourth-grade level in reading and third-grade level in math. When they are discharged, these young people have great difficulty catching up with their peers, and many simply don't return to school. For those who do, national data show a 15 percent graduation rate.

The academic and skill deficits of delinquent youths also place them at risk of re-offending. Nationally, an estimated

National data show a 15 percent graduation rate for incarcerated students who return to school after placement.

50 to 70 percent of youths are re-arrested within a year of discharge; in Philadelphia in 2007 about 18 percent of youths released from juvenile facilities were back in placement within six months. Youths 17 or older are at particular risk, since they are not legally required to re-enroll in school.

Research shows that youths who complete programs that focus on structured learning, school achievement, and job skills are less likely to reoffend. Linking academic programs to career training—making subjects concrete and relevant to work and everyday life—has been shown to increase academic success for youths with academic deficits.

In addition to public safety, society also sees substantial monetary benefits when high-risk and delinquent youths become educated, work-ready adults. When the direct costs of criminal processing and incarceration are added to “opportunity costs” such as lost wages and government

supports, the value to the public of saving each child reaches easily into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The benefits of educating delinquent youths and re-engaging them with school are clear—but the path to doing so is challenging. In Pennsylvania, it is complicated by a structure of local control in 500 school districts, and by the limited monitoring of private delinquent facilities by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This has left delinquent youths at the mercy of a disorganized and uneven academic system.

Innovations

PACTT is a project of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Probation Officers, working with key systems involved with delinquent youths. Its mission is to improve the education and job training that youths receive in delinquent programs in order to facilitate their rehabilitation and success in the community.

In Pennsylvania's decentralized juvenile justice system, PACTT offers a unique opportunity for counties to speak with one voice regarding education and career preparation for youths in residential placement. Its central messages are these:

- In order to bring delinquent youths up to speed in academic skills such as reading and math, and to allow them to obtain a high school diploma or GED as efficiently as possible, we need to know precisely what learning they have achieved and what they still need to master.
- We must make academic training relevant by linking it with career preparation.
- We must provide young people with skills valued and recognized by employers.
- We must give delinquent youths the opportunity to practice their new skills in the protected setting of the facility.
- The re-entry process must give youths specific opportunities to build on the academic and career/technical training gains they make in placement.

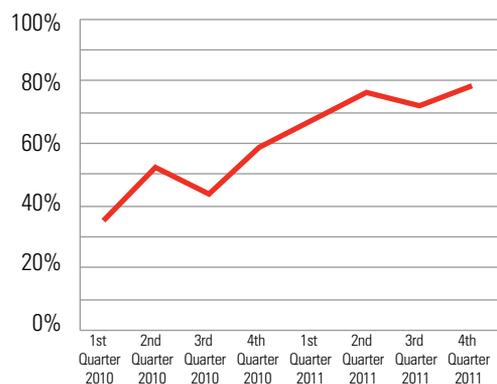
Academic Reform. As a result of PACTT's work, the affiliated facilities have aligned their academic programs with state educational standards, making their courses comparable

in rigor and scope to those in public schools. PACTT has also helped the schools integrate their academic and career technical education (CTE) tracks, in order to re-engage youths and help them develop educational plans that meet industry standards and can lead to good jobs. PACTT has worked with the state's Department of Education to include facility administrators and teachers in the state's training conferences and workshops, leading to rich dialogue and the spread of best practices.

PACTT's work in improving academics for delinquent youths includes:

- **Literacy and learning-strategy training for educators.** Low literacy is a pervasive problem in this population. PACTT provides training in learning and literacy strategies to facility teachers, who are often young and inexperienced, with the goal of infusing literacy instruction throughout all curricula.
- **Credit retrieval and acceleration.** Many youths in facilities have been in and out of school, sometimes mastering part of a course without completing it. Rather than starting from scratch, it is possible to test youths to determine their level of competence, and then provide instruction to fill in the gaps. On-line programs, offered with teacher oversight, are especially useful, allowing students to work at their own pace.
- **Transfer of records.** A common difficulty faced by facility schools is the transfer of academic records at the time of commitment and release. PACTT has worked with school districts and facility schools to standardize the process,

Credit Retrieval



Academic records received within 14 days by PACTT-affiliated facilities

figure 1

leading to a 100 percent increase in the number of school records received from the Philadelphia School District, where the problem had been the most severe.

Career/Technical Training. PACTT’s work in improving CTE for delinquent youths includes:

- **Technical skills training.** As a result of PACTT’s work, CTE in residential facilities grew from about 25 programs in 8 facilities to 73 programs in 26 facilities—all built on industry-based competencies. Programs are approved by PACTT if they provide opportunities for entry-level jobs, offer a ladder to careers with family-sustaining wages, and can be taught with relatively small investments.

- **Training for entry-level certifications.** All PACTT-aligned facilities now provide training and testing for one or more entry-level certifications such as ServSafe in culinary arts, OSHA-10 for construction trades, and the International Computer Driving License or Microsoft Office Specialist for administrative assistants. These certifications are widely recognized (and often required) in their respective industries and are portable across local and national lines.

- **Soft Skills.** Delinquent youths need to develop skills that allow them to be presentable, reliable, and productive employees. PACTT has developed the Employability and Soft Skills Manual, which standardizes the expectations for 27 key competencies, including resume-writing, job searches, and life skills such as appropriate dress, budgeting, and conflict resolution. Every youth now leaves placement with a checklist of the competencies he or she has mastered—

Employability Checklist



Number of youths who completed all 27 competencies in the employability checklist

figure 2

part of an employability portfolio they take with them at discharge.

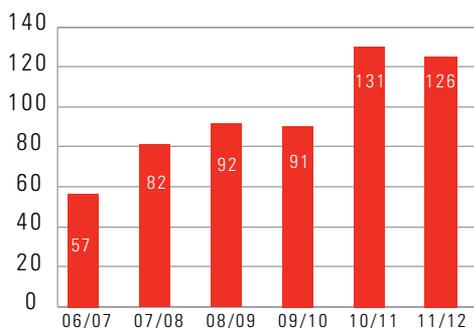
- **Subsidized job experience.** PACTT has developed a model for subsidized employment inside youth facilities, to allow residents to practice their soft and technical skills in a protected environment. Youths interview for jobs and work alongside regular workers in the facilities’ kitchens, offices, and on maintenance crews. In 2011, more than 200 youths held such jobs, many earning wages for the first time and developing the confidence to apply for work upon re-entry. The demand for these jobs has challenged the system’s ability to fund them in sufficient numbers.

Results and Lessons

Before PACTT, CTE programs were often out of line with industry requirements, there were no standards for the number of hours of training, and no consistent data were being collected. By March 2012, the 73 CTE programs were all using industry-based competency lists to ground instruction, and 57 of these programs met the PACTT minimum of 90 hours of instruction.

PACTT has made major inroads not only in programming but in data collection, tracking the number of youths who receive training, complete the employability checklist, earn industry certifications, and complete a work experience.

Increase in High School Graduates



Graph shows increase in the number of youths who graduated high school, based on credits or GED, from three PACTT-affiliated residential or community programs in the Saint Gabriel’s System: St. Gabriel’s Hall, De La Salle Vocational, and De La Salle in Towne, based on their data.

figure 3

The data show that the number of youths enrolled in a CTE track for at least two months increased by more than 50 percent since PACTT began. By the end of 2011, about one in three youths earned either ServSafe, OSHA-10, or Microsoft Office certification, and approximately 50 percent were completing at least two-thirds of the soft skills checklist. In the second quarter of 2011:

- 21 percent of the 423 youths who were discharged from an affiliated facility earned either a high school diploma or a GED.
- 60 percent left with an employability portfolio.
- 142 youths studied culinary arts for at least 8 weeks; another 102 studied indoor/outdoor building maintenance, carpentry, landscaping, or auto tech.

Looking Forward

PACTT is testing a model that adds a period of subsidized employment when a youth re-enters the community, in the same type of job he or she learned and practiced in the facility. The goal is to transition the youth from subsidized work to full-time unsubsidized work, optimally with the same employer.

Preliminary experience with the model suggests future needs:

- Successful re-entry into jobs requires intensive support around issues such as housing, mental health, drug and alcohol dependence, and child care.
- Despite classroom and in-placement experience, delinquent youths continue to struggle with skills such as getting to work on time and accepting criticism and direction. For many youths, continued on-the-job training is necessary before they are ready for un-subsidized employment. Regrettably, funds for such training have been significantly cut in recent Workforce Investment Board budgets.

Regardless of training and experience, many employers refuse to consider any youth with a delinquent record. There are multiple reasons. State regulations bar youths with records

from holding specific jobs in certain industries, and employers sometimes extend these prohibitions beyond what is required. In other cases employers are reluctant to hire delinquent youths for services that must be performed in clients' homes—for example, cabling or weatherization. And many employers feel that in a time of high unemployment, they simply don't need to take any additional risk. These barriers will have to be overcome by developing relationships with individual employers, and by offering to train youths to the employer's specific needs while the youth is still in placement.

PACTT is also working with community re-entry programs to align their work with PACTT goals so young people can continue their training when they return home. PACTT is beginning to establish connections with community colleges and other post-secondary training centers, so that released youths can continue their technical skills training and earn full certifications. Key to the success of this program will be the capacity to provide wrap-around supports that these young people need to continue their progress.

While the nation recognizes the importance of re-entry programs, little attention has been given to academics and career training in placement, or to maintaining gains in these areas during the transition home. Pennsylvania's juvenile justice leaders are encouraged by the extraordinary progress PACTT is making in these areas and hopeful that expansion of the program will yield even more exciting results.

Resources

www.pacttalliance.org

Pennsylvania Progress: Preparing Youth for Productive Futures, www.modelsforchange.net/publications/202

Employability and Soft Skills Manual, <http://www.pacttalliance.org/documents/Employability%20Manual%20Vol%203%20Final%20Draft.pdf>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from Models for Change, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. Models for Change is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.