

Education Strategies for Reducing Juvenile Crime in the Nation's Capital



By Don Soifer October 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For every five black boys between age 10 and 17 in the District of Columbia last year, three would not graduate high school on time. One was officially truant from school. And one was arrested as a juvenile.

While strong links between juvenile crime and classroom success exist, the District's education, juvenile justice and foster care networks not only don't coordinate strategically to solve them, but instead often function as silos working against each other.

Juvenile crime in the Nation's Capital today bears scant resemblance to the dire warnings made by criminologists including John Dilulio during the latter half of the 1990s. Arrest rates for teenagers in the city have not shown significant increases since those predictions were published. Analysis of 2008 and 2009 juvenile arrest records for the District of Columbia showed that while 85 percent of teenagers arrested were black, an even greater share of those they victimized were as well.

Programs such as the Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings Youth Center are accomplishing an admirable record working with juveniles detained in custody. But as this report illustrates, the addition of new, high-quality educational opportunities for teenagers involved in the criminal justice and foster care systems would have persevering outcomes observable in both social and economic terms across the city. Policy recommendations include replicating successful charter school models such as the Five Keys Charter School operated within San Francisco's prison system, or Philadelphia's Arise Academy, designed to meet the needs of high-school age foster children.

Details follow.

INTRODUCTION

For every five black boys between age 10 and 17 in the District of Columbia in 2009, three would not graduate high school on time. One was officially truant from school. And one was arrested as a juvenile.

What is the connection? The link between juvenile crime and classroom success suggests that innovative educational strategies are the most effective solution to lowering the District's juvenile crime rate.

While these two sets of trends are linked, the education, juvenile justice, foster care, and social welfare networks that serve children, teenagers and young adults in the District often not only do not coordinate a strategic approach to solving them, but even function as silos that work against each other.



The 2010 murder of popular District of Columbia public school principal Brian Betts, for which three young men under the District's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) supervision were charged, combined with news coverage of several mistakes and management blunders by the agency, made juvenile crime in the District front-page news for weeks.¹

Were these young criminals among the "tens of thousands of severely morally impoverished juvenile super-predators... Perfectly capable of committing the most

heinous acts of physical violence for the most trivial reasons,"² predicted in a famous 1995 *Weekly Standard* article by criminologist John Dilulio to emerge over the decade to come?

Further, "Numerous studies show that each succeeding generation of young male criminals commits about three times as much serious crime as the one before it," Dilulio wrote in 1996.³ And many prominent experts joined in: reports by the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1995 added its own dire warnings, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in 1996 predicted that "juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes will more than double by 2010."⁴

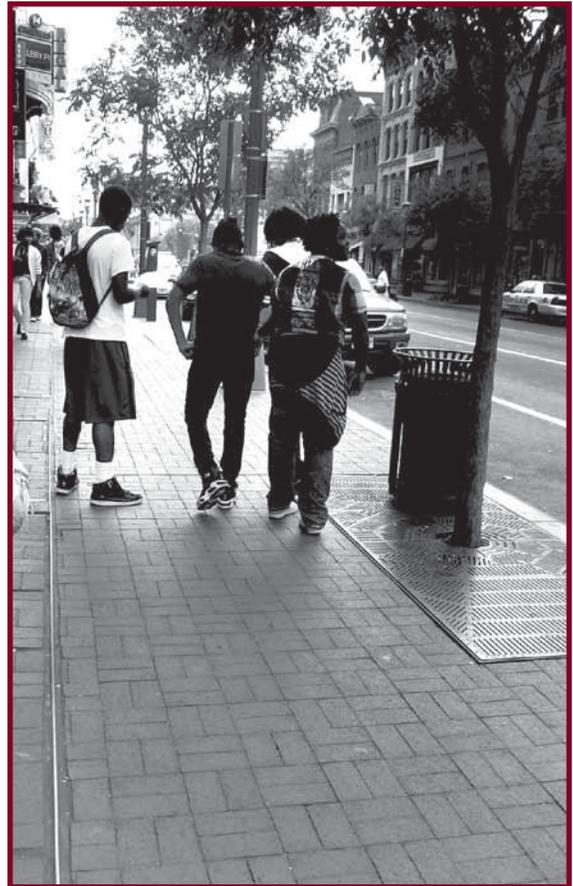
Dilulio, for his part, began to admit as early as 2001 that his own most frightening predictions had been in error. Research shows that teenagers arrested for violent felonies (homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) have gotten slightly older since the 1970s. Fewer juveniles under the age of 15 were arrested for violent felony crimes in 2008 than in nearly half a century.⁵ But events like Chicago's shocking wave of violent youth crime in 2009 are reminders that it remains a far-reaching national problem. The epidemic may have been avoided, but the problems remain.

In the District of Columbia, an examination of juvenile crime reveals patterns with long-term implications for the city, its residents, and their economic future. The reconviction rate for youth within 12 months of release from custody, for instance, was 25 percent in 2007, just one percentage point above Virginia.⁶

Juvenile arrests for violent offenses in the District declined 60 percent between 1996 and 2002, then rose for four years before leveling off at about 25 percent below 1996 levels.⁷ These trends generally mirror the District's adult arrest rate for serious crimes.

The most recent official analysis of juvenile arrests in the District of Columbia covered the decade from 1995-2004. Among its most significant findings:

- 78 percent of juveniles arrested were male, nearly a 4:1 male/female ratio.
- Among juveniles arrested repeated times, the male/female ratio increases to 15:1 for those arrested four times or more.
- Black juveniles accounted for 91.7 percent of arrests over this period, but only 64 percent of the population.
- The average age of juveniles arrested for the first time declined from 15.6 in 2000 to 15.1 in 2004.



WHAT'S UP WITH THE TEENAGERS?

The classroom gains on standardized test scores by District third and fourth graders over the past few years, much-discussed in the local and national media, have generally eluded District teens. Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and math by eighth graders across the city is actually lower, and is on par with the lowest-performing major cities in the country. This is especially true for African-American students.

53 percent of the 160 youth fatalities in the District were known to its juvenile justice system in 2007. 20 percent of the deaths were the result of violent acts by other juveniles.

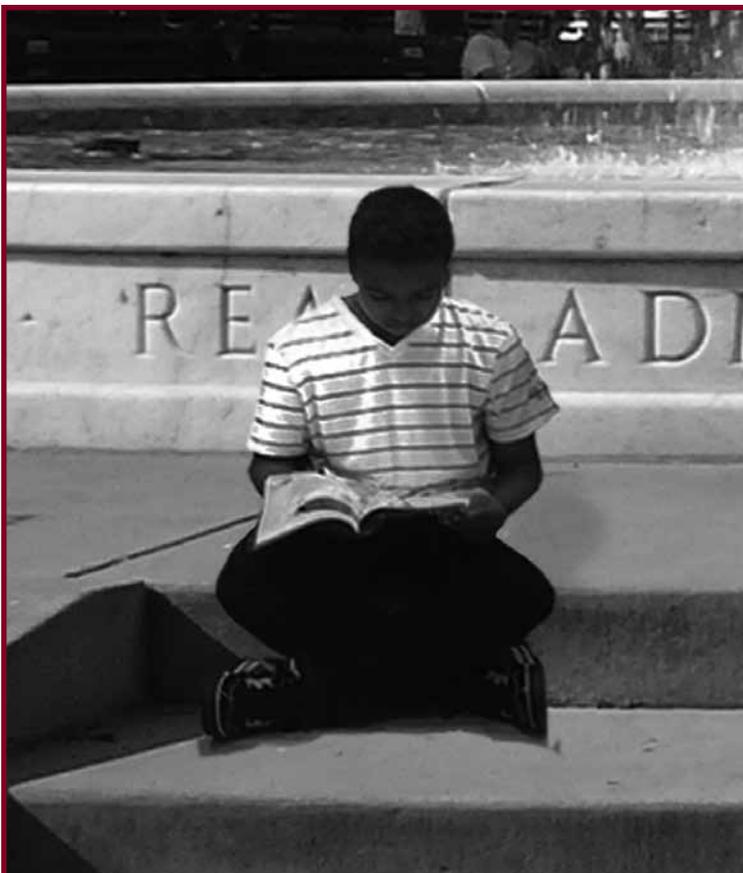
School safety, while not a widely-discussed subject, is a problem in many District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). At four DCPS high schools, police reported three crime-related incidents for every four days of the 2007-08 school year.⁸

DCPS leadership instituted a series of evidence-based programs during the 2008-09

school year, including the Second Step violence prevention curriculum that addresses aggressive behavior with elementary and middle school students. The program promotes empathy, impulse control, problem solving, and anger management. It was instituted at 16 schools across the city.⁹

Other programs implemented were Life Skills, a substance-abuse prevention program for upper elementary, middle school, and high school students, and the District's START multidisciplinary school mental health and intervention program.

More than one in ten District high school students reported having been threatened or injured with a weapon



on school property within the past 12 months. Just under ten percent of high school boys reported having carried a weapon onto school property within the past 30 days.¹⁰

In 2007, 36 child fatalities in the city were ruled homicides, with 32 of the deaths as a result of violence committed by other juveniles. Another 103 were ruled to have died of natural causes.¹¹ More than half of all children who died were known to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and 38 were known to the District's child-welfare system. 84 percent were African-American.¹²

JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN WASHINGTON, DC

Of the 4,792 juveniles arrested in the Nation's Capital in 2009, 85 percent were male, and 97 percent were black. The average age was 16 years 6 months, a few months higher than the average age the previous year.

While the offenses cited in arrest records varied widely, 770 (16 percent) were for assaults of different categories, and 403 (8 percent) involved drugs.

Contrary to the impression one would get reading the local headlines of the *Washington Post*, victims of juvenile crimes were also overwhelmingly black. For arrests where victim information was recorded, 92 percent of victims were black, and 8 percent were white. This represented a significant change from 2008, when 85 percent of victims were black, and 14 percent white.

The 12-month reconviction rate of one in four, lower than the re-arrest rate, was virtually the same as that for Virginia.¹³

There are approximately 875 young adults under the age of 21 currently on probation, parole or supervised release in the District of Columbia. They are supervised by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA). Of these, 66 are young adults under the age of 18. Their supervision is the shared responsibility of CSOSA with the District Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services.¹⁴ In total, DYRS is responsible for approximately 986 young people, half of whom are living in a group home, foster home, independent living program, or at home.¹⁵

An analysis of 2008 and 2009 juvenile arrest records for the District of Columbia showed that while 85 percent of teenagers arrested were black, an even greater share of those they victimized were, too.



The 2010 murder of Shaw Middle School principal Brian Betts has made the agency the subject of front-page news coverage. Its director told a District Council committee that 49 youth, or five percent of those under the agency's supervision were absconders considered missing.¹⁶ Meanwhile, a series of incidents and mistakes receiving press attention in 2009 caused many in the city to express concern that DYRS mismanagement had rendered the agency "broken."

A major challenge for the city happens every summer, when crime by juveniles spikes, especially between the late hours of midnight to 2am. Male juveniles are more likely to be arrested during the summer for miscellaneous offenses (Metropolitan Police Department classification), assaults, auto theft and drug offenses. Females were most likely to be arrested for assaults and miscellaneous offenses.¹⁷

EDUCATION IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Achievement

Fourth-grade students across the District, at both traditional public and public charter schools, have made impressive gains in reading and math since 2005. There is noticeable optimism in the city that children will continue to build on this progress and that the gains will persist as they enter high school.

Also, a citywide emphasis on improving teacher (and principal) quality also provides ample cause for some confidence.

But with some of the nation's lowest test scores, such optimism comes against a backdrop where escape from failure can seem a longshot to many children. According to data released by the federal Department of Education this year, the on-time graduation rate for

the District's public school Class of 2007 was 59.5 percent. An analysis by *Education Week* calculated this to mean that 12 students were lost from the citywide graduation track each school day.¹⁸

High-quality reading intervention programs for high school students were shown to actually increase school attendance.

By the time they are preparing to enter high school, it is not difficult to predict which children are at the greatest risk of dropping out.

On NAEP, scoring at a basic level “denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work.” Research shows conclusively that students who perform below basic in eighth grade reading are at extreme risk of dropping out of high school. Many begin to disappear from the classroom, and ultimately from school attendance rolls.

JUVENILE ARRESTS IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA		
	2008	2009
Total Juvenile Arrests	4456	4792
Total Male Juveniles	3813	4055
Average Age	16 ¼	16 ½
Controlled Substance Arrests	426	403
All Assault Arrests	656	770
Arrests at Schools	186	153
Percent Male	85.5%	84.6%
Percent Black	96.8%	97.3%
Total Black Boys Arrested	3700	3957
Total Population Black Boys (Age 10-17)	18963	18963
Ratio of all Black Boys to Black Boys Arrested	5:1	4.8:1
Race of Victim, percent (where reported):		
Black	85%	92%
White	14%	8%

Black eighth graders in the District perform at woeful below basic levels at alarming rates. Only those in the very lowest-performing cities – Detroit, Milwaukee and Fresno – do worse. Two in three black eighth graders in the Nation’s Capital test below basic in math. Two in five do so in reading.¹⁹ These scores have improved slightly in math over 2005 levels. Reading scores have remained unchanged since 2005, having slipped from 2002.²⁰

8th grade reading scores have remained unchanged since 2005, having slipped from 2002.

Almost half of District of Columbia teenagers live east of the Anacostia River, and virtually all of them, 96 percent, are African-American, based on the 2005-06 American Community Survey. It is an unfortunate reality in the District that most major educational indicators demonstrate the greatest challenges for this population:

- 34 percent of young adults living east of the Anacostia River had less than a high school education.
- Only 11 percent of black residents of the District were college graduates.
- Among high school graduates with no college experience, 54 percent were black.²¹

Attendance and Truancy

Attendance is clearly a major contributing factor to dropouts: a child not in school is a child not being taught. DCPS had a 20 percent truancy rate in 2008-09, then the system raised the definition of truant from 15 unexcused absences to 25. There were widespread indications that the policy had been unevenly followed and data inconsistently reported.²²

Among the 28,000 students attending charter schools on 99 campuses across the city during 2009-10, the truancy rate was 15.11 percent and the attendance rate was 91.96 percent. As this paper went to press, DCPS attendance numbers were not yet available for 2009-10.

The link between school attendance and academic achievement is a strong one. But according to an important 2010 study by the American Institutes for Research and the Institute of Education Sciences, this connection works in both directions.

For students arriving in high school reading below grade level, high-quality intervention programs to advance their reading skills also produced significant improvements in daily attendance records. The longitudinal, random assignment study tracked 6,000 students in enhanced reading opportunities who were, on average, reading four years below grade level entering the ninth grade.²³

LINKING EDUCATION TO JUVENILE CRIME

A 2008 study by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids projected that a ten percent increase in the high school graduation rate in the District of Columbia would result in the prevention of 34 murders and 917 aggravated assaults annually.²⁴ Of course, most of the crimes included in these projections are committed by adults, not juveniles.

While these benefits would be profound on their own, the benefits of improved high school graduation rates extend far beyond crime reduction, especially in economic terms. If the District's high school dropouts from the class of 2007 had graduated with their class, according to a report by the Alliance for Excellent Education, their total lifetime additional income would increase by \$615 million, or \$260,000 per dropout.²⁵ And as the dropouts are concentrated disproportionately within certain neighborhoods, so too would be the economic benefits of dropout avoidance.

An important publication by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2003 declared it imperative that communities take the lead in establishing comprehensive approaches to target youth at risk of delinquency, guided by a framework of general principles: strengthen the family, support social institutions, intervene immediately when delinquent behavior occurs, and target a small group of serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders.²⁶ But it is just as imperative that education be re-inserted as one of these guiding principles.

The fact that the District government's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, charged with identifying, developing and implementing innovative solutions to improve public safety challenges, and to analyze critical issues in the criminal justice systems, includes no representatives from any education agency. The council includes leaders from the executive, legislative and judicial branches, the chief of police and the director of youth rehabilitation services; but not a single educator.²⁷

A 10% increase in high school graduation could prevent 34 murders and 917 aggravated assaults annually.

Preventing dropouts and working to assure on-time graduation should maintain equal status as a top priority.

A 2006 report by Civic Enterprises for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation sought to identify dropout causes through interviews with high school dropouts in 25 communities around the United States. Among the findings:

- 70 percent believed that more after-school tutoring, Saturday school, summer school and extra help from teachers would have improved their chances of staying in school.
- 70 percent favored increasing supervision in school to ensure students attend classes.
- 62 percent felt more classroom discipline was necessary.
- 57 percent believed their high schools did not do enough to help students feel safe from violence.²⁸

EDUCATION, FAMILY AND HOME LIFE



Children's home life is undoubtedly a major factor in both their education and their socialization. A great deal of research demonstrates the fundamental role of teachers in determining school quality, and the overall quality of education schools produce. To be certain, exemplary parents and role models are to be found in neighborhoods throughout the city. But crucial aspects rooted in children's family backgrounds and home life heighten the challenges schools must overcome on a daily basis.

Nationally, children growing up in families headed by single women face steeper educational and economic odds than those

growing up in two-parent households. In the District, more than half of teenagers live in households where there are not two parents present.²⁹

This is especially true east of the Anacostia River, where almost three-quarters of children live in single, female-headed homes. Citywide, 12 percent of children share a home with a grandparent, and most of these live east of the Anacostia.³⁰

As social theorist James Davison Hunter noted, the "moral cultures into which children are socialized plainly predispose them toward different patterns of moral choice and commitment – patterns so strong that they cut across the boundaries of economic circumstance, race and ethnicity...."³¹

These patterns and choices formed at home and in the neighborhoods where children live are realities urban educators must work with in guiding children toward classroom proficiency. As Eric Hanushek and other researchers have shown, the effects of parenting quality are highly important on a child's school success. But superior teachers can offset disadvantages, especially when a child is fortunate enough to have two or three in successive years.³²

As melded with the influences on a child's worldview learned at school, they form the foundation upon which a child makes the decisions that shape their immediate future – including whether or not to commit a crime.

Foster Care

The District has a relatively large share of children in foster care, most in temporary placement due to parental abuse or neglect. In 2009, 2,237 District children were in the foster care system, according to the National Foster Care Month Partnership.³³ One-fourth of these are between 11 and 15 years old, and another fourth are 16-18 years old. The average length of stay for foster children in the District was just under 4 years (45 months), after which just under half of children (44 percent) are reunited with their birth parents or primary caregivers.³⁴ Nine of ten District foster children are black.

When District children are removed from their home, they are placed in either a family setting (72 percent), with relatives or non-related foster families, or in a group home (19 percent). Of the 423 children placed in group living facilities (non-family settings) in 2008, 40 percent were placed in traditional or specialized group homes.³⁵

Of course, economic factors are just as likely to play a prominent role in the interruptions that shape these children's lives. The monthly cost of permanent, supportive housing in the District of Columbia is already at an historic high, \$1,250 according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.³⁶ The scarcity of affordable housing has remained a pivotal issue in citywide politics, and the continued ability of the local economy to produce the sort of small-business jobs that optimize re-entry and community violence prevention continues to be in doubt.

EDUCATION STRATEGIES

So how has public education responded to these challenges? Often in ways inconsistent, even contrary, to the needs of the city's youth. But there are also better examples of models proven to work.

New Beginnings

A report issued by the Special Arbiter to the Superior Court of the District of Columbia in July 2010 offered strong praise for the work of the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, and its school, the Maya Angelou Academy, with District youth in the juvenile justice system. The Arbiter's report also expressed optimism for a new, small group home for committed girls operated by the Howard University's School of Social Work.

The 60-bed New Beginnings facility serves young men age 15-20. Their offenses include robbery, auto theft, burglary, gun crimes and attempted murder.³⁷ This represents about half of the total juvenile population detained in custody – juveniles convicted of sex crimes, those diagnosed with serious mental health conditions and some others are sent to facilities out of state.

The Arbiter's appointed reviewer Carol Cramer Brooks called the Academy "one of the best programs in a confinement facility" she had ever seen. Noted were a well-defined curriculum, effective learning strategies, and "extremely committed" teachers who bring "energy and creativity to their daily lessons."³⁸



The report offered special praise for the school's use of Individualized Education Plans, a central compliance requirement of federal special education law. It observed that these plans were generally reviewed and updated within 45 days of admission to the facility, and noted an observable connection between assessment data, instructional strategies and teaching, which was both relevant to the school's curriculum and differentiated appropriately to different students' achievement levels.³⁹

The school, the Maya Angelou Academy, is run under contract by the See Forever Foundation. The local foundation also runs the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, comprised of two high schools and one middle school located on two campuses in Wards 1 and 7. According to its leadership, half of their students are either involved in the juvenile delinquency system, foster care system, have dropped out of school, or were expelled from their previous school. Seventy percent come to Maya with a history of truancy or frequent suspension.⁴⁰ Yet seniors graduate at a rate consistently near 80 percent, and 70 percent of students pursue postsecondary education.⁴¹

The foundation recently received approval from the Public Charter School Board to expand their activities to add an Adult Learning Center serving young adults 17-24 years old.

The court review was concerned that leadership changes at New Beginnings not derail progress achieved. The New Beginnings Center was established under the leadership of Vincent Schiraldi, appointed by then-Mayor Anthony Williams in 2005 to run the Division of Youth Services. Schiraldi, a reformer who founded the nonprofit Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, left the District in 2009 to serve as Commissioner of New York City's Department of Probation.



The report contrasted current programs with the infamous Oak Hill Youth Center, which stands abandoned a stone's throw from New Beginnings, and housed both detained and committed youth with limited services and programs. Additional contrasts were drawn with the services being received by youth awaiting placement in the program, whom it noted were not attending school regularly and not subject to behavioral expectations, reward systems or monitoring.

The New Beginnings program has measured its success not just by its more nurturing surroundings, but through crucial results: fewer homicides of juveniles committed to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services after release, and lower repeat offender rates.⁴²

What characterized the change was a shift to the distinct, innovative approach to juvenile corrections developed in Missouri to emphasize rehabilitation. The Missouri model, which received Harvard University's Innovations in American Government Award in 2008, is based on individualized treatment plans, ongoing group-based schooling and treatment sessions putting youth offenders in positions of active involvement in their rehabilitation, highly-trained staff, and placing youth close to home.

Less than one in four juveniles released from custody in Missouri were re-incarcerated within three years (nearly half the rate for other states). Of those exiting custody in 2007, 84 percent entered productive engagement in school or employment.⁴³

Other changes are also underway. In Congressional testimony in March 2010, Chief Judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia Lee F. Satterfield described policy changes made by the court system and agencies serving District youth, and particularly foster children. One significant change he noted was the creation of the Family Treatment Court program in 2003. The fifteen-month comprehensive substance abuse program for mothers or female caretakers is intended "to expedite the reunification of parents whose substance abuse led to the neglect of the children."

Better information and coordination has been a primary goal of the Family Court Transition Plan reforms. These include a court-wide integrated justice information system. Another component with important education implications is the development of a truancy program at three District middle schools.⁴⁴

Improved, more timely communication between schools, families, and, where necessary, juvenile justice authorities is an essential strategy to reducing truancy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For the roughly half of District juvenile offenders not assigned to New Beginnings, detention and incarceration out-of-state (and sometimes distant) offers the worst combination of options. Long distances hinder contact and connections with family and community that play an important role in rehabilitation and are integral for re-entry.

As impressive as the work of Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings seems, its positive impact on the city is hindered by the limitations of its 60-seat capacity. The school's long-term benefits are also constrained by the lack of consistent, quality options available to juveniles leaving the program.

2. Another model which could prove valuable for the District is the innovative Five Keys Charter School operated by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department inside that city's adult prisons. The school opened in 2003 to over 200 inmates. In addition to the schools inside correctional facilities, an offsite location provides a valuable bridge to re-entry. The school offers inmates a combination of job skills like reading, computer literacy and customer service fundamentals, a chance to earn a high school diploma, and valuable life-coping skills.⁴⁵

A critical element of the Five Keys approach is an impressive well-trained teaching faculty that school leaders describe as highly competitive with the Bay Area's high-performing charter schools.

3. Make available more high-quality seats in charter school adult education or alternative high schools, and ensure that they maintain the highest levels of rigor in their instruction and performance. Existing charter schools like Maya Angelou Public Charter School, Carlos Rosario, and YouthBuild currently offer valuable opportunities for young adults who have struggled in their previous high schools.

The new adult learning center at Maya Angelou offers promise. The school's current students have much riding on the ability of its leaders to manage the challenge of implementing the new program with fidelity while not becoming distracted from their commitment to continue to strengthen the academic rigor and performance of their middle and high school programs. Other alternatives, perhaps including the school model utilized by Philadelphia's Arise Academy, the nation's only charter high school designed to meet the needs of foster children, could make a powerful difference in the lives of thousands of District children and youth.

4. The District's current education laws and the ways they are enacted continue to work against the best interests of young adults who have had their educations interrupted by the juvenile justice or foster care systems. The frequent mobility and instability that often characterize their living arrangements, combined with the rigid funding rules that block charter schools from receiving any funding for children they accept after the District's official Count Day in early October, prevent many of these young adults from finding seats in the top charter schools.
5. These young people are among the most expensive to serve effectively of any in District public schools. The highly-motivated private philanthropy community that has enabled historic school reform for the District of Columbia Public Schools, while also bolstering the top-performing pre-K to eighth grade charter schools serving at-risk children from all wards of the city, could play a valuable role launching new programs like the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise's Violence Free Zone Initiative, proven effective at preventing violence and reducing school suspensions.
6. For all of the powerful choices that District families have enjoyed to date – including the historic voucher program, the Nation's second-highest market share for charter schools, out-of-boundary-zone acceptance for traditional public schools citywide, all strengthened by a wide-reaching system of public transportation – the emerging online education sector, with its transformative capabilities, has remained elusive. Adding high-quality virtual education offerings would open new doors for nontraditional high school students, especially single teen mothers or young adults in the foster or criminal justice systems unaccustomed to access to exemplary classrooms.

The transformative value of quality online education options is found in the critical efficiencies gained by instruction targeted by "smart" instant feedback compiled from students' responses online. Such differentiated instruction in a traditional classroom setting is typically the mark of only the most talented teachers.

Reading interventions, or catch-up or supplemental lessons, can also be captured more efficiently by quality online offerings. Often students who have had their schooling interrupted by events such as pregnancy or run-ins with the foster or juvenile justice systems have difficulty keeping up with high school transcript requirements, and frequently their schools resort to creative scheduling.

ENDNOTES

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