

# NYSCSS

## New York State Center for School Safety

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### ISSUES BRIEF

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## Literacy As a Violence Prevention Strategy

### INTRODUCTION

#### Literacy, School Completion, and Incarceration Rates

Literacy in America is neither a new problem nor one that affects a single sector of the population. An article on the US Department of Education Report, *Basic Reading Skills and the Literacy of America's Least Literate Adults*, published on the National Conference of Black Mayors website, asserts, "About 30 million people - 14 percent of the US population 16 and older - have trouble with basic reading and writing." Of this group, seven million are so "nonliterate" that they may be unable to read the word 'adult' on the label of an over-the-counter drug or "understand a sentence explaining what to do in the event of an overdose." The problem of poor literacy is widespread and its consequences are far ranging, with results that affect our schools, our neighborhoods, and our workplaces.

The connections between poor literacy, violence, and incarceration have been documented, and the problems begin in the primary grades. Evidence from studies, surveys, and personal accounts of teachers and school administrators clearly shows that students deficient in basic reading skills are less likely to graduate from high school or complete its equivalent, while other studies show high school dropouts to be incarcerated at much higher rates than their graduate peers. One important study shows that stronger reading skills negatively correlate to more aggressive behavior in young boys. (Davis) Statistics and experts also link higher rates of literacy with lower rates of incarceration.

With this connection established, the need for effective literacy education as a violence prevention strategy becomes apparent. In fact, numerous organizations, among them the Fortune Society and Getting Out Staying Out (GOSO), have taken up the cause of advancing literacy in both youth and adults with the explicit goal of reducing violence and recidivism in their communities.

Finally, a survey of the post-incarceration reentry process reveals a variety of problematic issues with regard to improving literacy in order to break the cycle of unemployment, violence, crime, and repeated incarceration: lack of coordination of priorities among programs, policies that misdirect government funding due to shortsighted ideas of success, and a lack of emphasis on the importance of literacy and educational programs in reducing recidivism.

Part One of this paper will examine the interconnected problems of low literacy, violence, dropout rates, and

incarceration rates, and Part Two will examine existing and potential responses.

### PART ONE: THE PROBLEM

#### Literacy, Dropout Rates, and Incarceration Rates

Low literacy rates have been connected to dropout rates, violence, and incarceration rates. These problems affect school aged youths directly. Numerous factors contribute to poor literacy, including poverty, ethnicity, native language background, and disabilities, and the impact of these factors on literacy are explored in a 2009 Department of Education study on literacy (Baer). The bottom line, however, is that basic reading skills are lacking in large numbers of young people, on both a regional and national level. "In New York, poor literacy and other core skills affect about 100,000 youth; nationally, the number is more than two million." (Kleinbard)

According to the *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, more than half of all people with "below basic" literacy skills did not graduate from high school (US Dept. of Education, *NAAL*, 2009). And as poor literacy results in low school completion rates, studies consistently show racial and ethnic disparities in those dropout rates. In reporting on the dropout rate, the National Center of Educational Statistics notes "A relatively low percentage of Hispanic young adults complete high school programs. For example, in 2000, 64.1 percent of all Hispanic 18- through 24-year-olds had completed secondary schooling. This compares with 91.8 percent of White, 83.7 percent of Black, and 94.6 percent of Asian young adults." (US Dept. of Education, *Dropout Rates*)

The racial and ethnic disparities in dropout rates are also reflected in incarceration rates, and poor literacy is tied to high incarceration rates, as well. A study published by the American Youth Policy Forum revealed that "three quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59% of federal inmates." The study notes that "90% of the 11,000 youth in adult detention facilities have no more than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education." (Martin viii)

The costs of poor literacy rates begin to mount when one considers that in 2008 alone, according to the study *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, states spent more than "\$49 billion on corrections, up from \$12 billion spent in 1987. By 2011, continued prison growth is expected to cost states an additional \$25 billion." (Warren 11) Those costs will not subside either, since recidivism rates have not decreased.

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Roughly half of released inmates will return to jail or prison within three years of their release. The Pew-funded study also found that over the past two decades, inflation-adjusted general fund spending on corrections rose 127 percent while higher education spending rose just 21 percent. (Warren 15)

## **ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT: BLACK AND HISPANIC YOUTH**

The connection of poor literacy skills, violence, crime, and incarceration has specific cultural dimensions in Black male and Hispanic male communities.

First, based on *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* demographics, of the 30 million individuals in the United States identified as having “below basic” prose literacy levels—meaning they have no more than the most simple and concrete reading skills—20 percent are Black and 39 percent are Hispanic adults. (US Dept. of Education, *NAAL*) Second, Ruben G. Runmaut has noted in his study on recent immigration the skyrocketing numbers of Hispanic males in state and federal prisons. In addition, he refers to the work of sociologists Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, writing “that a black male high school dropout born in the late 1960s had a nearly 60 percent chance of serving time in prison by the end of the 1990s, and recent birth cohorts of black men are more likely to have prison records than military records or bachelor’s degrees.”

During the years of transition to adulthood from the late teens through the twenties, the lack of post-secondary education derails life course trajectories by blocking or disrupting possibilities for occupational opportunities and gainful employment. Drawing from 2002 US Census data, Nancy Martin notes the positive economic effect of completing school: “The mean earnings of Latino young adults who finish high school are 43% higher than those who drop out.” Martin’s report adds “Between 1997 and 2001, more than one-quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for one year or longer, compared with 11% of those with a high school diploma or GED. In 2003, more than one-half of African American young adult male dropouts in Chicago were unemployed.” (viii)

Baruti K. Kafele, an urban teacher and school principal, refers to the social politics facing the young student, politics that can trigger this ‘derailment’ as choices are made between success in school and success in the streets. In his text, *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*, Kafele writes that the black male faces “the myth that to be smart is to ‘act white’ and therefore not be ‘down,’ ‘cool,’ or ‘black.’ The alternative then is to ‘act black,’ which in the eyes of too many black males is to forgo their natural intelligence at the expense of high academic achievement.” These stereotypical behaviors are perpetuated from year to year and over generations, pressuring teenagers to “comply with the expected code of conduct for young black men as defined by” their peers or be “ostracized or ridiculed by their peers for demonstrating intelligence.”

Exploring the often negative symbiosis between social conditions, education, and violence, Kafele goes on to discuss the many challenges facing the young black male trying to complete high school, citing the pressure to join street gangs that many young black males have to endure: “Some even end up joining gangs simply to remain safe and keep the gangs off of their backs.”

Self-destructive themes of violence and crime in music and visual media certainly play a role in the shaping of a young man’s values. Kafele, as a school principal, asked his teachers to listen to “hardcore, unedited hip hop music” over their summer vacation because he wanted them to be “acutely familiar with its messages—particularly if these messages diminish the appeal of classroom learning.”(17) Young men of color “identify strongly with hip hop music,” he explains, and when they “internalize and take ownership of such lyrics” their attitudes and behaviors can reflect hip hop culture’s condescension towards academics. (18) This negative cultural attitude toward education, while not representative of the majority of the black male population, nonetheless is pervasive enough to affect the motivation and self-respect of many at-risk black students. And as the attitude has become embedded in movies and music, popular acceptance of the stereotype of negativity gains ground, often creating false and low expectations with regard to youth of color and their educational attitudes and performance.

The cumulative result is that these students maintain the highest risk of advancing in grade faster than their reading levels, and of falling even further behind in achievement. In *When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do*, Kylene Beers argues that young men with personal support systems that discourage reading and education will lack the social and emotional confidence to want to be “active participants in a community of readers,” to “read for enjoyment and information,” and to “have a positive attitude toward reading and other readers.” (Beers,18) And in the end, educational underachievement and poor literacy are important factors in a number of mutually sustaining problems facing Black and Hispanic youth: gang violence, unemployment, chronic poverty, and rising incarceration rates.

## **LITERACY AND THE DISRUPTIVE STUDENT**

Teaching basic reading skills effectively in the first few years of elementary school, while always important, is now seen as critical to the potential success of the student, relevant to issues of violence in the schools, and predictive of criminal populations in society.

Jerry Peterson, CEO of United Way of Allen County, Indiana, explains the change. “Young children spend their early grade school years learning to read. By third grade, they are reading to learn.” (Tyndall) His organization’s research shows that because of this shift in education, children who cannot read at their grade-level by third grade struggle their entire lives and, “without intervention, 74% never catch up.” (Tyndall) That 74 percent represents a significant number of children in a high-risk category.

Kylene Beers, a former middle-school teacher and current researcher at Yale University’s Child Study Center, distinguishes “independent readers” from “dependent readers” explaining that while independent readers “figure out what’s confusing them, set goals for getting through the reading, use many strategies for getting through the text” and “know how to make the mostly invisible process of comprehension visible” dependent readers just “stop, appeal to the teacher, read on through” and “keep the mostly invisible process of comprehension at the invisible level.” (Beers 16) She instructs teachers to help their struggling readers build three kinds of

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confidence: cognitive confidence, text confidence, and social and emotional confidence. (Beers 18)

Cognitive confidence helps students “comprehend texts, monitor their understanding, determine the meaning of words, and read with fluency.” Text confidence helps students “to develop the stamina to continue reading difficult texts” and “find authors and genres that interest them.” Finally, social and emotional confidence “allows students to be willing and active participants in a community of readers, read for enjoyment and information,” and to “have a positive attitude toward reading and other readers.” (18)

This “social and emotional confidence” proves to be the hardest to develop in the group of students who resist working hard for core skills. Beers compares the excitement of first graders when they raise their hands and plead to answer a question to the bored slumps and stares of middle and high school students, posing the question, “When does apathy replace activity and a reluctance to learn replace an insistence for always knowing more?” (Beers 259) The answer is in the social and emotional struggles of adolescence, when any perceived embarrassment leaves vulnerable the young men and women who increasingly need approval from their peers. “If that need for peer approval begins to escalate (as early as third grade for some students) at the same time that reading problems become more evident, then students find themselves more and more reluctant to take risks in reading in front of their peers.” (259) Beers explains that the students who struggle with reading are well-aware of the fact and know already that their weakness not only puts them in danger of failing in school, but also leaves them “open to ridicule from peers and teachers.” (6) They protect themselves by pretending that reading is not important, by not trying, by giving up, and by acting out to distract from their lack of ability to read. Beers realizes that “these students would prefer to get in trouble with us for not doing their work rather than be embarrassed in front of their peers for doing it wrong.” They stop trying and may soon stop attending school, doing “anything they can to distance themselves from the place and the people who will remind them once again that they can’t read.” (Beers 6)

This third grade reading gap identified by Peterson in Fort Wayne, which leads to the middle school “reluctance” and distancing identified by Beers in New Haven, has come to be seen as a categorical division for high rates of dropping out, unemployment, and incarceration. Failure to learn basic reading skills in the first three years leads to low self-confidence and often to disruptive behaviors, which in turn lead to greater problems that adversely affect both the individual and the community.

## LITERACY AND DROPOUTS

In spite of the recent recognition in elementary education on the importance of getting students to read by third grade, studies show a dramatic widening of the gap by middle school, and the problems only intensify at the secondary level. Readers struggling with basic core skills like studying, writing, and mathematics regularly move into high school far behind their independently reading classmates. These students are much more likely than the average student to drop out before graduating from high school.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that “more than two-thirds of all eighth-graders read

below grade level and half of those students [one-third of all eighth graders in the country] score below the most basic level” and about twenty-five percent of all “high school students read well below grade level. In total, the middle and high schools of America hold six million struggling readers.” (Great Schools) These young men and women, without basic literacy, are at the highest risk of becoming part of the more than thirty percent of secondary school students who do not graduate from high school on time. Additionally, as Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, assesses the risk, “the lowest-achieving 25 percent of students are twenty times more likely to drop out of high school than students in the highest achievement quartile.” (Alliance, “The High Cost” 3)

Almost seventy percent of young school dropouts are poorly literate or are missing other skills, but primarily leave school for literacy issues. (Kleinbard) The deficiencies and results are apparent. According to a survey by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 55 percent of all people with “below basic” literacy did not graduate high school, compared to 15 percent of the general population, demonstrating that poor reading skills dramatically impair the student’s chances of graduating.

## DROPOUTS AND INCARCERATION

Poor literacy skills from third grade to twelfth grade continue to set back struggling students and cause many to drop out before graduating high school, while statistics show populations without a high school degree or a GED are incarcerated at much higher rates than their secondary-school educated peers. Poor literacy in adults, however, may also have a direct causal relationship with the incarceration of the uneducated. While separate statistics have not been compiled to measure the literacy rate among those convicted of specifically violent crimes, the 2002 *National Adult Literacy Survey* estimates that 70% of all incarcerated adults in the United States cannot yet read at a 4<sup>th</sup>-grade level, lacking “the reading skills to navigate many everyday tasks or hold down anything but a menial job.” (Phillips)

Correctional and judicial professionals have recognized the connection between poor literacy, dropout rates, and crime. Raul Romero, Assistant Superintendent of Correctional Education in California, notes that with “legal means of succeeding in society narrowed, illiteracy is heavily implicated in the crimes landing many behind bars in the first place.” (Phillips) Judge Karen Cole of Jacksonville, Florida, upon taking a position in the felony court, learned that many of the young defendants could hardly read. Realizing that “85 percent of all young defendants nationwide have reading difficulties, and at least 40 percent of those defendants who should be in high school read below a fourth-grade level,” she made the connection that released juvenile offenders would not be able to earn a GED or complete high school until they could read grade-level material, an important explanation for why so many of the young men are “repeat offenders and ultimately end up in adult prison.” (“Using Literacy”) In fact, Nancy Martin notes that 90 percent of the 11,000 youth in adult detention facilities nationwide have no more than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education. (Phillips,viii)

The succession of data-based reports speaks of the ongoing problem. In 1992, according to the *National Adult Literacy*

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*Survey*, 49 percent of the 1.5 million incarcerated adult inmates had not received a high school diploma or its equivalent. (Haigler xx) The U.S. Department of Justice estimated, in 2002, that “approximately 30 percent of federal inmates, 40 percent of state prison inmates, and 50 percent of persons on death row are high school dropouts.” (Laird) The *2003 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report* indicated that three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59% of federal inmates. In fact, dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be incarcerated in their lifetime (Harlow). And among African American male dropouts in their early 30s, 52% have been imprisoned. (Martin viii)

Responsible formulation of public policy on this topic requires calculations of comparative positive or negative productivity, made by averaging and extrapolating the costs and profits incurred by either graduates or dropouts in order to show how an investment in promoting secondary school completion results in revenue for the society as a whole. One pamphlet on public policy states, “If the male graduation rate were increased by only 5 percent, the nation would see an annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs.” (Alliance “High Cost” 4) Another calculation estimates that the average high school dropout will cost the criminal justice system \$26,200 more than the average high school graduate.

A high school degree or its equivalent prepares the recipient, in theory, for gainful employment, a truism supported by the fact that “54 percent of high school dropouts ages 16 to 24 were jobless, compared with 32 percent for high school graduates of the same age, and 13 percent for those with a college degree.” (Dillon) The cost of the loss of that employment on a national scale is staggering. Andrew Sum, a researcher at Northeastern University, “has calculated that the combined income and tax losses from all dropouts in a single year is about \$192 billion — or 1.6 percent of the country's gross domestic product.” (Kleinbard)

Whether lack of employment is perceived as the cause of poverty or the effect of poverty, it is logical that the group without sufficient income earned by work would be the most prone to crime, and the data supports the logic, as “one in every ten young male high school dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention, compared with one in thirty-five young male high school graduates.” (Dillon) As the Fortune Society notes about the post-inmate population it serves, “Half of the clients do not have a high-school diploma, few have some college experience (only 14 percent) and only 3 percent had earned a college or graduate degree.” The Society recognizes that “opportunities for legitimate employment by those who have already served time are limited by the fact that, in addition to having a criminal record, they have low educational attainment.” (McDonald 17)

The self-perpetuating cycle of poor literacy, violence, dropping out, incarceration, and recidivism must be broken at the earliest stages of the educational process.

## **PART 2: RESPONSE**

### **Approaches, Programs, and Results**

With the causes of so many societal ills, including violence, crime, and incarceration clearly pointing back to high school completion and successful literacy skills education in the primary grades, a number of organizations have formed to combat illiteracy. Their stated aim is to improve the quality of

life for the clients and to lower violent crime and incarceration rates for society. David Harvey, president and CEO of ProLiteracy, an advocacy group based in Syracuse, NY, sees adult literacy as a way to solve other social problems, connecting it not only with higher rates of crime, but with problems “navigating the healthcare system, problems with financial literacy.” (“Why Do Millions”) Programs focusing on children and adults have mostly seen expected success, with results that have been sometimes measurable in quantitative terms, sometimes in qualitative terms.

## **PRISON EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND RECIDIVISM**

Teaching reading skills more effectively to children has proven to lower incarceration rates among the group as they get older, but even for those who slip through the system, drop out of high school, give up on reading, and go into juvenile detention or prison, studies show that it is never too late for literacy education to reduce recidivism rates. Programs teaching literacy can have a noticeable effect on the size of the overall incarcerated population. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice compared the recidivism rates of regular prisoners to the rates of prisoners who had received an education during their prison term. The Center on Crime, Community, and Culture reported that while the recidivism rate for convicts leaving prison without degrees was 60 percent, the rate for those leaving with associate's degrees went down to 13.7 percent, the rate for those with bachelor's degrees was 5.6 percent, and the recidivism rate for those receiving master's degrees was 0 percent. (Bumgardner 5) Arizona's Department of Adult Probation did a similar test, finding that probationers who received literacy training were re-arrested at a rate of 35 percent, compared to the rate of those who had received no training, 46 percent. Even more remarkable was the lowest recidivism rate—24 percent for those who received a GED. (Siegel qtd. in Bumgardner 6)

The U.S. Department of Education calculates that “prison education programs reduced recidivism by 29%” (Phillips). California, however, which continues to have the largest state penal system in the country, spends only two percent of its annual budget on education, pointing to a disconnect between acknowledgment of the benefits of prison education and the actual application of prison reform that improves lives, reduces crime, and saves tax dollars. (Phillips) The American Council on Education looks to federal and state policies to expand prisoners' access to a range of classes, including postsecondary schooling: “Institutions across the nation must grapple with state legislation and public views that can be less than supportive of inmates' [free] participation in higher learning.” (Dawkins) Advocacy organizations need to increase the dissemination of positive results of educational programs that save tax dollars, both short-term and long-term.

## **TEACHING LITERACY SKILLS AS VIOLENCE PREVENTION**

Several organizations combating violence have set goals in child literacy based on the idea that illiteracy is not only a cause of crime in adults, but a cause of violent behavior, in general, even at a young age. The Melissa Institute for Violence

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Prevention and Treatment, for example, started their Literacy Initiative, which “evolved out of research that demonstrates the clear linkage that exists between literacy and violence prevention. Students who do not learn to read by third grade are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior. This is a major contributing factor to violent behavior throughout their lives.” (“New Initiatives”) The national organization Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) is a non-profit group created to “decrease the potential for violence in schools and communities by promoting meaningful student involvement, education and service opportunities in an effort to provide safer environments for youth,” with chapters in cities around the country. Sheila R. Campbell is CEO and president of the chapter in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She says that the organization aims to “empower children by closing the achievement gap between at-risk students and others,” building self-esteem and guiding them to non-violent conflict resolution. To accomplish this goal, she has enlisted high school and adult male volunteers to go into barbershops, “a traditional gathering place for males in the African American community, and read to boys in grades kindergarten through fifth.” They then give the boys the books to read at home and invite them back to read to others, creating a positive environment for children among the black male community where literacy can be nurtured and supported. (“Organization Promotes Literacy”)

Evidence in support of these organizations’ operating assumption—that poor literacy is correlated to violent behavior—can be found in an study involving 386 Louisiana teenagers, aged 11 to 18 years, who were participating in a summer program focusing on improving both literacy skills and athletic skills. (Davis) The subjects were male and female, black, white, and “other.” Of the participants, 43 percent were adolescents reading at levels more than two grades below standard. Surveys and observation showed that the adolescents reading below grade level were more likely to:

- Carry weapons (odds ratio = 1.9)
- Carry guns (odds ratio = 2.6)
- “Have been in a physical fight at school” (odds ratio = 1.7)
- “Have been in a physical fight resulting in injuries requiring treatment” (odds ratio = 3.1)
- “Be threatened at school with a weapon” (odds ratio = 2.1)
- “Report missing days of school in the previous 30 days because they felt unsafe at school” (odds ratio = 2.3)
- “Be both aggressor/perpetrator and victim” (44% vs. 32% of grade-level reading adolescents engaging in violent behavior) and “less likely to be only a victim” (6% vs. 12%)

The researchers concluded that “below-grade-level reading was significantly related to violence behaviors.” (Davis)

Paul J. Gutkowski, Director of Social Services for the organization Getting Out Staying Out (GOSO), a re-entry program based in New York City for men leaving prison, agrees with the research data linking poor literacy to incarceration rates and to violence. Beyond the obvious fact that people who know how to read are more likely to complete their education and more able to find employment, Gutkowski suggested in a personal interview that “people who are confident in their

intellect and have a positive experience in the workplace might be less likely to lash out violently.”

## CONCLUSION

Economists Richard Levy and Frank Murnane, writing about the effects of the changes in the U.S. economy on an unemployed population who increasingly lack vital skills, refer to the “‘hard skills,’ including the ability to do basic mathematics and to understand written instructions. There are the soft skills, including the ability to communicate clearly and to work productively in groups to solve problems. And there are the elementary computer skills.” (qtd. in Kleinbard) In agreement with Levy and Murnane, Peter Kleinbard, executive director of the Youth Development Institute, laments “the cost of our failure to provide generations of disconnected youth with these ‘new basics,’” both for the quality of life of the individuals involved and for the loss of productivity in populous communities across the country, and he goes on to cite Andrew Sum’s research calculating “the combined income and tax losses from all dropouts” at nearly \$200 billion each year.

With the constantly increasing research data that points to the importance of improving literacy skills as a strategy for combating unemployment, violence, high dropout rates, crime, incarceration, and recidivism, it is critical that we acknowledge the success of existing programs for the purpose of developing even more programs. In fact, Kleinbard notes several that are acting on this premise, achieving successes in the improvement of literacy skills and, not coincidentally, graduation rates. The Department of Education in New York City runs transfer high schools, designed specifically to “serve a low-skills population.” These schools “boast graduation rates three times that of the regular large high schools.” In addition, he points to Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), a program serving high school dropouts aged 16-24 who read below an eighth-grade level. CEPS participants have averaged “literacy gains of 1.5 years and math gains of nearly one year in less than one semester of study,” and the program has placed over “one hundred formerly disconnected youth in college with promising retention and credit attainment.”

More and more, we seem to understand that helping young high school graduate with adequate literacy skills will also help head off problems that will develop in that portion of the population if they are left without assistance. Supporters of funding of literacy education programs seem to understand that gainful employment and positive lifestyles can better help people avoid street crime and its associated violence.

Organizations such as the Fortune Society know that inmates need more education and, at the very least, the basic skills of reading and writing, to be hired and to stay on the straight path. The resulting decreases in recidivism rates due to education—from literacy skills training and GED classes to college and postgraduate education—prove how effective a strategy education can be against crime. Lanny Kutakoff, director of College Behind Bars, a non-profit organization closely tied to Boston University’s Prison Education Program, recommends that advocates argue the financial benefits of such educational programs, talking about “recidivism rates of 0 to 10 percent for college-educated ex-offenders, relieving the cost burden to taxpayers when they do not return to prison, and improving public safety when they do not return to

crime.” (Dawkins) Even though popular opinion often aligns itself against giving college education to convicts for free, research data and the interpretation of that data showing the benefits to society as a whole must be expounded upon so that, despite our instincts to be tough on crime, taxpayers are more willing to provide educational services to the community’s incarcerated population.

Unfortunately, even though many professionals who are involved in youth work and labor recognize the problems and understand better solutions, “they are handcuffed by federal guidelines for the use of the funds and the way that success is measured.” (Kleinbard) Advocacy of programs for educating disconnected youth must focus on legislators, as well as their constituents, in “a coordinated and aggressive campaign building on efforts that have demonstrated success and that incorporate policy, program, and long-term investment.” (Kleinbard)

Poor reading and other core skills plague more than 100,000 youth in New York City and two million nation-wide, according to Kleinbard. These youth have been failed, and without intervention, without a strategy of “intensive and sustained education,” the resultant and interconnected problems of violence, poverty, crime, and recidivism are unavoidable. Children from the primary grades on must be equipped with the literacy skills they need to learn and to succeed, and to become financially independent in an economy that can always find cheaper labor. Some scholars, like Kleinbard, blame the disastrous achievement gap in our population on “historical inequities and institutional failures.” But by acting effectively upon the data-based knowledge we have about struggling readers and the problems they face, and by implementing the strategies that we know can be successful, we will not fail this generation of America’s youth.

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