

Pathways of Possibility

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION'S ROLE IN REENTRY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report presenting key insights and strategies from the
PATHWAYS OF POSSIBILITY conference

Sponsored by
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Introduction

Pathways of Possibility: Transforming Education's Role in Reentry was a pathbreaking conference focused on elevating education's pivotal role in reducing recidivism, fostering personal transformation, building leadership, and promoting community revitalization. The conference grew out of an ongoing collaboration among people in community-based organizations, government agencies, and higher education institutions who formed the [New York Reentry Education Network \(NYREN\)](#) as a vehicle for pursuing a shared commitment to making education central for people with criminal justice involvement. NYREN organized and hosted the conference to enhance their effectiveness and visibility, to forge new partnerships, and to expand their reach. This Executive Summary presents the main points and concrete ideas that emerged during the conference in order to collectively move forward a robust reentry education agenda.

Call to Action: Education as a Strategy for Lowering Recidivism, Increasing Public Safety, and Reinvesting in Communities

With one in 100 out of the adult population, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Additionally, people of color are incarcerated and placed under criminal justice supervision at a disproportionate rate, and a large number of justice-involved people come from communities with high concentrations of poverty and low-performing schools. Quality education paired with holistic support services has a track record of reducing recidivism, increasing access to decent-paying career paths, and enabling people with criminal records to become contributors to and leaders of their communities. As such, access to education is a community reinvestment strategy that dramatically increases public safety.



Participants listen to an opening keynote speech about the critical importance of education in reentry.

Seizing the Moment: Education as an Achievable Collective Impact Goal

Recently, efforts to make education a central strategy in reentry have received a heightened level of attention and energy, creating a sense of momentum and urgency for change in the field of criminal justice. This sense of possibility stems from a shared perception that we are at a turning point. In New York City, individuals and organizations struggling for years to get education on the reentry agenda report that they have experienced a new openness and interest among policymakers, higher education leaders, and funders. At the national and state level,

task forces on reentry are making education a pillar of their work. The US Department of Education (USDOE), with the support of President Obama and USDOE Secretary Arne Duncan, has made education for people with criminal histories part of its policy agenda.

Defining Education in Reentry Settings

Education in reentry settings must be defined broadly in order to encompass a diverse array of both programs and skills. It is a pathway with many entry points, including high school equivalency,

degree granting-programs, vocational and workforce training, and job readiness. It is critical to build support at every level of educational achievement and to craft programs that prepare people to progress along the educational continuum. Additionally, reentry education must involve not only academic knowledge and skills, but also the full range of capacities necessary to enable educational success, including parenting skills, cognitive skills, vocational training, and substance abuse treatment. Successful reentry education results not only in recidivism reduction, but also in sustainable employment, empowerment, and a personal sense of fulfillment.

Areas of High Need and Shared Interest

To make education central to reentry, stakeholders must come together around concrete areas of high need and shared interest that are ripe for action. These themes provide a focus for collective efforts to realize education's transformative role in reentry moving forward:

- (1) Higher Education Access and Success
- (2) The Power of Peer Mentoring
- (3) Integrating Employment, Workforce Development and Reentry Education
- (4) Criminal Justice Agencies as Levers for Education
- (5) Creating Educational Pathways for People in the Criminal Justice System

Cutting across each of these areas is identifying the particular needs of youth populations and how to develop programming and wraparound services designed to support their social, emotional, economic, and educational well-being.

An Integrated Agenda for Education and Reentry

Six overarching goals have emerged out of our shared commitment to realizing education's potential in reentry:

(1) Integrate education as a core mission of and shared agenda for corrections and reentry

We seek to create a local and national culture focused on education rather than incarceration. This vision includes administrators and policymakers making commitments to support and expand educational opportunities in communities and in the correctional system, closing prisons where possible, re-conceptualizing the role of corrections to go beyond enforcing punishment and maintaining security, and continuing to transform the focus of probation and parole away from supervision and surveillance and toward support, individual transformation, and community renewal.



Workshop participants engage ideas from a previous panel.

(2) Make education institutions and work environments inclusive and welcoming for people with criminal justice involvement

The culture of education institutions and workplaces should be strengths-based, rather than deficits-focused. This requires a change in attitudes among educational institutions and employers, who must grow to value the experiences, knowledge, and assets of students and employees with

criminal justice histories. Additionally, reentry education will change perceptions among criminal justice system-involved people about their personal capabilities and opportunities for educational success. Reintegration into the community must be emphasized from the beginning of criminal justice system involvement.

(3) Provide multi-faceted supports to students through activities and programs that mutually reinforce educational access and success, a supportive community, and leadership roles

The culture of both correctional and educational institutions needs to be transformed to take a “whole person” approach to students with criminal justice involvement. By addressing students’ needs both in and outside of the classroom, we can increase their educational access and success. It is important to create strong and long-lasting social, emotional, and economic supports for formerly incarcerated students.

(4) Reframe success and encourage innovation through the creation of cross-sector partnerships, programming, funding, information-sharing, and measurement systems

Service providers need more freedom to experiment with programming, even as they come together around a set of shared metrics. This can be achieved through transforming the relationships between community-based organizations and funders. Also, creating a less competitive and more flexible funding environment would encourage and facilitate collaboration among community-based organizations and other sectors. Cross-sectoral partnerships, transparency, collaboration, and information sharing should be standard within the criminal justice system.

(5) Expand collaborations and bring more stakeholders to the table, with NYREN acting as a hub of communication and to facilitate collective impact and systems change

The challenges to achieving educational goals for individuals in the criminal justice system are immense and can only be met if people and organizations link their efforts in a sustained and intentional way. These challenges require continuing and strengthening NYREN’s role in building cross-sector relationships, coordinating disparate efforts, aligning services, and facilitating communications between stakeholders, particularly those that historically have had challenging relationships.

(6) Change public discourse on, the public’s understanding of, and education’s role in the criminal justice system

In order to mobilize public and political support for reentry education, a strong public relations and communications strategy is essential. A communications campaign can dispel myths and stereotypes about people with criminal justice experience and highlight their strengths and contributions to society; explain how mass incarceration is the civil rights issue of the current era and is an “epicenter of injustice;” cultivate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding about the positive impact that education has on public safety and productivity in society; and help alleviate concerns about government spending and budget problems by showing the cost effectiveness of education as compared to incarceration.