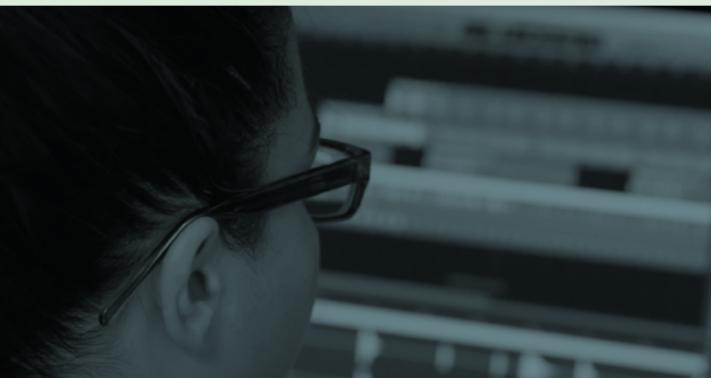
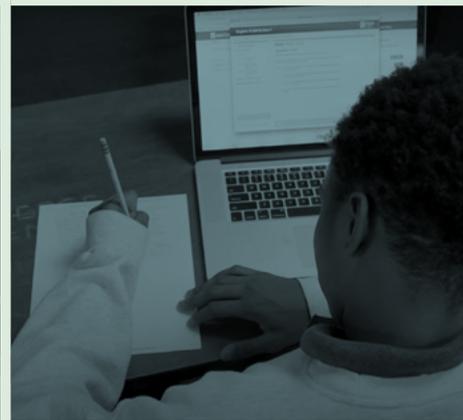


# CENTERING CARE & ENGAGEMENT

**Understanding Implementation  
of the Road to Success Academies  
(RTSA) in Los Angeles County  
Juvenile Court Schools**

**Angela James, Ph.D.  
Joseph Bishop, Ph.D.**



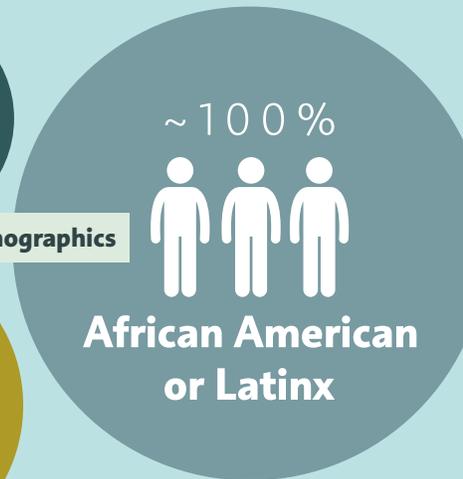
# INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles is one among many local educational agencies across the country that have adopted evidence-based strategies in an effort to change the academic trajectories of youth in the juvenile justice system. This study examines the implementation of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA), a comprehensive educational model for juvenile justice schools, at two sites in partnership with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE).

The primary goal of the RTSA model framework is to ignite student excitement and interest in learning using interdisciplinary, project-based learning strategies. Trauma-informed practices are combined with California standards-based curriculum to create thematic modules designed to advance social-emotional-learning alongside academic skill acquisition. By centering on student engagement, the RTSA model has great promise for both advancing the educational delivery within the juvenile justice context, and supporting LA County's holistic goal of re-envisioning juvenile justice to move away from punishment to care.

The current study builds upon research focused on educational experiences in juvenile corrections facilities (Allen & Grassell, 2017; Leone & Weinberg, 2012) and focuses on the following research questions:

1. *How does the RTSA model impact student learning outcomes and student engagement among students in carceral settings, and how does the carceral setting itself impact implementation of educational services broadly, and RTSA specifically?*
2. *What are key challenges to full implementation of RTSA for youth in carceral settings?*



"You legally have to provide them with education, but they're traumatized, they're terrified, they're fighting their cases, they're waiting [for] placement... It's tough."

Comprehensive Education Reform Committee (CERC)  
Committee Member



# KEY FINDINGS & IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES



**The RTSA model of instruction and intervention is associated with modest gains in reading but not in math.**



**Student performance on standardized measures of skill mastery is often well below grade level upon entry into camps** and there is often tremendous variation in skill levels among students at each camp at any given time.



**Classroom observations and student interviews suggest high levels of student engagement and excitement** about themes and topics explored in project-based learning projects.



**The timing of educational assessments are not uniformly administered** at entry and thereafter every 90 days in accordance with policy, making assessment of model impact on direct learning outcomes difficult. The lack of consistency alignment and data-sharing between agencies stymies implementation fidelity.



**Educational delivery services must be coordinated with multiple agencies** (Probation and DMH) that have programs and practices that may be in conflict, or that would be better supported with more meaningful coordination.



**High levels of turnover among both administrators, and teaching staff, must be considered** in ongoing implementation plans and is critical to achieve successful implementation of RTSA.



**Other educational services offered alongside RTSA (i.e. for credit recovery, and ELL) have not yet been fully aligned to the RTSA model** and may depress the overall levels of student engagement.

"We did a whole unit on protest music of the 60s, and the kids' final project was to create their own song of protest based on the things in their lives... whatever abuse they might have experienced, the way they were treated in the camps."

RTSA Teacher



# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

**The designers of RTSA took some of the most innovative, research-based, educational practices centered on student engagement, and created a model that shows great promise for elevating educational delivery in the juvenile justice context.** At its best, this model of instruction is clearly aligned with current Los Angeles County directives to “re-envision juvenile justice” away from punitive systems of control that has resulted in the further marginalization of disadvantaged youth and towards a system of care and educational engagement. By providing justice-involved young people with the opportunities to relate academic learning to their own lived experiences and curiosities about the world, we create a

springboard for ongoing academic success and create clear pathways for them to continue to contribute to positive social change in their own lives and in their communities after their incarceration. The county and state must carefully consider that carceral settings are not the optimal setting for care-centered educational delivery, however, insomuch as children are in such settings, we are obligated to provide the very best evidence-based educational services, and to ensure that they are faithfully delivered as intended. Our students in juvenile justice contexts deserve the chance to reach their full academic potential, just like all school-age youth in the state of California.

## Local (LA County) Recommendations



**Develop strong systems of administrative and system accountability** and capacity across agencies in an integrated fashion around student academic, social and emotional development, physical and psychological health. One cohesive, care-centered system is needed, not separate systems and efforts.



**Establish ongoing, all-inclusive professional development** to support implementation fidelity and alignment across all staff working directly with students. This should include other shared expectations and staffing needed to implement quality instructional models successfully.



**Prioritize joint agency planning, capacity building and accountability** related to the frequency and use of assessments to advance student learning, health and well-being.



**Establish data sharing agreements** between LACOE, the Department of Mental Health and Probation.



**The appropriate and meaningful use of technology** to enhance learning across all aspects of educational delivery must be considered, especially for RTSA.

## State Recommendations



**Strengthen and incentivize the pipeline for diverse and talented educators** committed to the educational success of justice-involved youth. The court schools are too often off the radar of policymakers and stakeholders as a high need area for well prepared, diverse teachers.



**Create appropriate monitoring and data accountability systems** to inform educational progress & re-entry. This monitoring and data use should work across the LAOCOE, Probation and the Department of Mental Health and other relevant agencies serving young people.



**Focus on interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline through juvenile incarceration prevention** by providing targeted funding & supports for Black & Latinx youth & communities across all 80 districts, especially in districts of origin for most court school students.

"A lot of these teachers had only been teaching in this (the juvenile justice system), so they really, really needed to open their minds up to new learning approaches that are much more current real-world connected, more student-centered."

Comprehensive Education Reform  
Committee (CERC) Committee Member



**Appropriate citation:** James, A., Bishop, J.P. (2022). "Centering Care & Engagement: Understanding Implementation of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA) in Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Schools," Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

### Special thanks to our funders



The John Randolph Haynes and Dora  
**HAYNES**  
**FOUNDATION**  
*Promoting the Well-Being of Mankind*