

Georgia's Department of JJ educational programs are now accredited

Written by Ed Risler

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All too often we read stories of Georgia's young citizens committing crimes that leave many of us perplexed about how to address the problem of delinquency. Unfortunately, many of these youth are ultimately remanded to the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice with the hope that they will be rehabilitated.

While some youth receive community supervision, others who are considered more serious offenders are confined in a secure facility. Protecting the community and at the same time helping a youth lead a more productive life present daunting challenges that the employees of the Department of Juvenile Justice meet each day. While at times an easy target for criticism, warranted or not, the department's successes are too often overlooked.

Recently, the department received a distinction that is unprecedented and should be appropriately lauded. The educational programs operated within the department's correctional facilities recently were reaccredited by two national bodies, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Correctional Educational Association. This recognition is the result of the department's hard work and continuing commitment to providing a quality education for the youth in their care, and is something we should all celebrate. How significant?

I know of no other state in the country that has had its correctional educational programs for youth accredited not by one, but two national organizations.

Recognized as the 181st and largest school district in Georgia, the department is responsible for the education of as many as 3,000 youth held each day in one of the 28 correctional facilities throughout the state year round. The department's school system complies with all state and federal IDEA standards and meets all of the No Child Left Behind standards for highly qualified teachers.

What makes this achievement in accreditation even more remarkable is the fact that the overwhelming majority of youth who come under the supervision of the department have severe academic deficits and learning needs that often are compounded by significant social and

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psychological issues.

Despite these instructional challenges, in the past five years 143 youth have been awarded high school diplomas, more than 400 youth have received General Equivalency Diplomas, and a significant number of youth also have earned college credits as well as vocational certificates.

Whether these youth will become productive members of society is yet to be determined, but the research does suggest that a youth who leaves a correctional facility with a diploma or vocational certificate is six times more likely to be employed six months after his or her release, compared to those youth that had not completed an educational program.

Those in the department who are responsible for the success of the achievement in reaccreditation are many. Certainly, the more than 300 educators who facilitate the academic programs for the youth in the facilities are deserving of our greatest thanks. In addition to Commissioner Garland Hunt and former Commissioner Albert Murray, those individuals instrumental in the success of the department's academic programs include the director of education, Dr. Jack Catrett, and former director of education Dr. Tom O'Rourke.

We should all stand together and applaud those in the Department of Juvenile Justice, who each day shine a light for Georgia's troubled youth.

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