



Boarding school behind bars

The Department of Youth Services is charged with educating our incarcerated youth, but the hurdles it faces are enormous

BY JACK SULLIVAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK OSTOW

School is a prison

for more than 1,800 Massachusetts young people each day. They get up, have breakfast, and go to class from 8:15 in the morning until 2:30 in the afternoon. It's a familiar routine to any student, but what's different for these youths is that it all takes place within the confines of

what the state Department of Youth Services calls a secure treatment facility. It's basically a boarding school behind bars.

The children range in age from 12 to 18. Many have committed serious crimes, including robbery, assault, and rape. They can't be sent to prison because they are juveniles,

Wallace "Wally" Jones, one of the teen residents of the DYS Goss Secure Treatment Facility, is frisked as he leaves a classroom to be sure he has nothing that could be used as a weapon.



Wally Jones gets some help from a teacher on an algebra problem during math class.

so they are sentenced to DYS treatment facilities where the state is required to educate them as well as incarcerate them.

On the outside, educators talk about the achievement gap between students in poorer, urban districts and their counterparts in wealthier, suburban areas. But inside these DYS facilities the achievement gap is off the charts. Many of the kids have had little formal schooling. More than two of every five require special education assistance. Many have big-time attitudes. One morning last month at a secure treatment facility in Taunton a boy was playing solitaire on a computer when he was supposed to be studying. He tells me he's not worried about being caught. "What are they going to do? Put me in prison?" he asks.

The \$148 million DYS budget reflects the agency's priorities. More than 90 percent goes toward incarceration, treatment, and administration; only about 8 percent goes for educational services. It works out to about \$8,000 per student per year, or half as much as what the state's 10 largest urban school districts spend on their students.

DYS officials fully acknowledge that public safety is their first priority. But they say their educational function

is also important. If young criminal offenders can get an education and develop a plan for the future, they might be able to turn their lives around and avoid committing another crime and ending up in adult prison.

"An employed, educated youth is, hopefully, someone who's not going to reoffend," says Christine Kenney, the DYS director of education. DYS Deputy Commissioner

One boy played solitaire on a computer instead of doing schoolwork. 'What are they going to do?' he asked. 'Put me in prison?'

Edward Dolan adds, "We don't see ourselves as being in the punishment business. When a kid gets committed, the clock's ticking and we're running out of time."

But a look inside one of the 60 DYS treatment facilities shows just how difficult it is to reconcile the roles of



DYS students must turn their pockets inside out and are patted down by a group worker as they leave each class.

jailer and teacher. Kids are not grouped by age or grade-level ability but instead by their crimes, their trial status, and how long they are expected to stay. As they move from one class to the next, they have to turn their pockets inside out, spread their arms and legs out, and get patted down by a guard who makes sure no one is taking anything out of a classroom that can be used as a weapon. Homework, an integral part of the learning process at any school, is not part of the program because pencils and books are banned in cells. It's a very different type of school.

"I give [DYS] credit for trying," says Barbara Kaban, deputy director of the Children's Law Center, a Lynn-based nonprofit juvenile legal services agency. "These kids are sort of the bottom of the barrel. Nobody wants to spend money on these kids. DYS has been a dumping ground for a lot of the society's unwanted kids for a long time."

A DIFFERENT ATTITUDE

Put Wallace "Wally" Jones back in the halls and classrooms of Lynn High School and he's another poor black teenager struggling to overcome his background and his learning

disabilities while taming his rebellious, aggressive ways.

But in the Goss Secure Treatment Facility at the Department of Youth Services in Taunton, Jones is a success story. He came to DYS two years ago at 16 with a second-grade reading level. He says he still doesn't like to read and he struggles with simple fractions in his special education class. But officials say he has passed his English, math, and history MCAS exams, qualifying him for his diploma. Most important, his attitude is different today than it was back in Lynn.

"I was just a crazy kid, running around, messing with the other kids, picking on them," says the 6-foot-2-inch 18-year-old. "That's not me [now], dude. I know what's right from wrong.... My mom says it's good to be right."

DYS asked Jones to talk to me to show how far its educational program has come since 2001, when a report to the Legislature said the agency was failing miserably in educating children committed to its care. Teacher turnover at that time was 70 percent. Most teachers weren't licensed. Instruction was haphazard from facility to facility because each one was run by a different private vendor. There was "little evidence of consistency across programs for curriculum content, teaching methodology, or student learning expectations," according to the report.

Changes began two years later. DYS hired two private nonprofit corporations—the Commonwealth Corporation and the Hampshire Education Collaborative (HEC)—to coordinate and unify the educational curricula at DYS facilities across the state. DYS Commissioner Jane Tewksbury says the agency committed to embracing the state’s education reform requirements and its curriculum frameworks, and it also set about hiring and developing a professional staff.

The pay for teachers was increased by 69 percent in 2003. They now earn \$42,000 a year on average, which is about \$10,000 less than the statewide average. Still, it’s well above the \$20,740 base salary and the \$33,865 top salary that existed in 2001. DYS teachers used to work year-round for lower pay. Now they work a 180-day school year, similar to their public school peers, and are part of the state’s teacher retirement fund.

DYS officials say mandated professional development has boosted the quality of teachers and there is a near-100 percent rate of licensure, compared to less than half that just 10 years ago. The annual turnover rate among teachers has dropped from 70 percent to between 8 percent and 12 percent, although layoffs have been occurring because of a reduction in the incarcerated youth population and budget cutbacks.

After DYS launched its education reforms, per-pupil funding increased steadily for six years, including a direct annual expenditure of \$3.3 million to increase teachers’ salaries. But last year the budget was cut to \$148 million, a reduction of more than 9.3 percent, and Gov. Deval Patrick is proposing another \$5 million reduction in the coming fiscal year, with the set-aside for teacher salaries reduced to \$2.5 million.

Academically, it’s hard to evaluate the DYS program. The agency touts a 91 percent passing rate on the 10th-grade English MCAS and 80 percent on the math, but only 54 regular education children took the test in 2009, and more than half of those barely passed it. The passing rate for the 74 special education students who took the exams was 70 percent in English and 50 percent in math, again with the bulk of those students scoring in the “needs improvement” category.

Agency officials say 163 teens got their high school diplomas or GEDs while in DYS last year but without knowing how many were eligible or failed, that number reveals little. A check on juveniles transitioning back to their communities in 2008 found 45 percent in high school or some transitional school program, 20 percent preparing for a general equivalency degree (GED) assessment, and nearly one-third not in school.

DYS tries to provide college-level instruction for those

few who qualify, either in class or online through pilot partnerships with schools such as Bunker Hill Community College. But those who are given the chance often have to be self-motivated, a trait not often found behind the walls.

Lael Chester, executive director of Citizens for Juvenile Justice, says a lot of progress has been made since 2001, when the system was in shambles. “They were inadequately resourced. They still are,” she says. “The question is, what can we do to make it better and what resources do we need to make that happen?”

NO PENCILS, NO BOOKS

At the desk next to Wally Jones in the special education classroom, 16-year-old Kendrick is talking smack to Dana Buckner, who is filling in for the normal special education teacher who has been called for jury duty. Kendrick, whose last name is being withheld because he’s a juvenile, talks nonstop. His tone borders on edgy and hurtful, and it would likely get him removed from class in many public schools.

When Buckner asks him to repeat a question, Kendrick makes light of a vision problem Buckner has. “I thought you were blind, not deaf,” says Kendrick.

Buckner, who normally teaches science and English courses, takes the jibe in stride. He says he loves his job and finds it rewarding, but, as the disrespectful comment illustrates, he and his colleagues face hurdles that teachers

Each day, teachers are required to pass through several levels of locked steel doors. And then the real challenges begin.

in public schools can’t even imagine. It starts with their arrival and having to pass through several levels of locked steel doors until they enter the unit, where the loud clang of the gate shutting and locking can be felt in your bones more than heard with your ears. And then the real challenges begin.

Students at DYS facilities are not easy to teach. They’ve either committed a crime or are awaiting trial for one. They often come from broken homes and have little formal schooling. Two-thirds of them are minorities. Forty-four percent have some type of special education need, far above the statewide average of 17 percent. Boys represent 84 percent of the DYS population, but girls tend to

be more vulnerable. One DYS official says nearly 98 percent of the girls have some sort of traumatic issue, like abuse.

“Our kids come to us pretty fragile and are pretty damaged,” says Tewksbury.

Unlike public schools, class makeup is determined not by grade level or age groupings, but rather by commitment status. “We’re teaching kids with 6th-grade reading levels and college-level reading levels all in one place,” says Tewksbury. “We run one-room classrooms across the state.”

Tewksbury’s view is not a wistful one recalling the quaint days of little red schoolhouses. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that standard approaches to classroom instruction are not easily adaptable in settings where security and treatment compete with academics.

While the average stay for a teen committed to DYS is 2 ½ years, the assessment and detainee programs average 18 days, with some staying overnight and others up to a year. Trying to integrate newcomers on a daily basis and teach to their respective levels isn’t easy. “Every day is like the first day of school,” says Sue Murphy, education director for the Metro DYS region, which covers Boston.

In regular public schools, the goal is to integrate students with special needs into regular classrooms. At DYS facilities, that happens as a matter of course. But security issues and lack of facilities mean services are restricted.

“It’s really, really a challenge,” says Marcia Mittnacht, the state’s special education director. “We have been unable to maintain the therapeutic services in those settings, like speech and language services. It’s not a natural fit to the environment.”

Textbooks are scarce because no hard-cover books are allowed for security reasons; the stiff bindings could conceivably be converted into a weapon. Most reading is done with dog-eared and torn paperback books or dated software on three personal computers and two laptops. There’s only one hard-wired internet line but, for security purposes, no computer is plugged into the line without a teacher or group worker monitoring it.

Teachers can’t assign homework because



The Goss Secure Treatment Facility is on the grounds of the former Taunton State Hospital.



A locked steel grate is one layer of security separating Goss II from the outside world.



DYS students get individual attention because of small class sizes, but books and other resources are scarce because of low funding.



In the basketball court outside the Goss building, Wally Jones is surrounded by a 20-foot-high chain-link fence topped by barbed wire and reinforced by a 15-foot-high brick wall.



Jones sits in the 8-by-12-foot cell he shares with two others. The windows are covered with a steel screen and the blinds are pulled so no one can see in—or out.

the students return to being inmates at the end of the six-hour school day and are prohibited from bringing pencils or pens that could be used as weapons into their locked cells.

“Academics sometimes have to come second,” says Patty Timmins, the special education teacher for the lock-up referred to as Goss II. “You have to realize they have been taken out of their [outside] educational studies for reasons that have to come first.”

‘IT’S NOT MY THING’

John is a 16-year-old from the Cape. He says he’s been in and out of DYS custody since he was 12 and has been in lockup the last two years. Like nearly all the other DYS charges, he doesn’t volunteer what he’s in Goss for, and

DYS officials prohibit a reporter from asking because he is a juvenile.

The last time he was in a public classroom? “Fourth grade,” he says matter-of-factly as he slurps an orange Jell-O at lunch. All utensils have been collected and counted to make sure they’re all back in place before classes resume.

John concedes he goes to class because he has to. “I don’t really like school,” he says. “It’s not my thing.”

He says he’ll continue to go to school after he is released but only because “it will probably be a requirement of DYS.” After that, he’s done with school.

John is wearing the uniform all DYS students wear: khaki pants or shorts, a polo shirt, white socks, and open-toed rubber flip-flops.

Classes are single-sex groups of five to 10 kids,

depending on the subject. At the door of each class sits a burly group worker—DYS discourages the term “guard”—whose job is to keep a watchful eye on the group and allow the teacher to do his or her job. One staffer calls

Teachers can't assign homework because students are prohibited from bringing pencils into their locked cells.

them “the first level of defense.” The workers are in the same uniform as the students, except with regular shoes and a walkie-talkie attached at the belt. Their eyes constantly scan the room.

The half-dozen or so teens in each class sit at old-fashioned chair-desks, scattered in no particular order or form around the room. There's no bookrack under the seats because no one carries anything from class to class.

Programs from the Discovery and Learning cable channels are projected from computers onto the white walls in science classes. Few students appear to be paying close attention.

In Buckner's science class, there are two cages with several animals in them, including two ferrets and a bearded dragon lizard. At the end of the class, if Buckner feels it's been productive, the students are allowed to take the ferrets out to hold and pet them. Some of the teens, who say they fear nothing on the streets, are hesitant about handling the wiry creatures. It's one of the few times of the day they look and act like children.

“It's an incentive at the end of the class,” says Buckner. “It's therapeutic for them to be able to handle small animals.”

The classrooms are barren of the types of laminated maps and printed graphics that dot regular classrooms, but handwritten signs and drawings in the inelegant form of a child learning to express themselves are taped on walls for inspiration. One reads:

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And what I have is lost
Then who am I?*

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Students line up after their physical education period to go to their next class in silence and in single file.

SURROUNDED BY CINDERBLOCK

Lumping different types of kids together based on their security status is difficult to pull off academically. In one English class, the students are each reading a part in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. One student reads haltingly and in a monotone as his index finger runs across the page,

**The windows are sealed,
and a steel screen covers
the air conditioner so
the unit can't be pushed
out to allow an escape.**

stumbling on words that are familiar to most high school students. Another student with clearly more advanced abilities runs through his lines quickly and with ease. The disparity of skill levels is stark. The discussion on the play's themes of racism, bigotry, and old social mores triggers little input from the students.

Kaban, of the Children's Law Center, has advocated for juveniles in the justice system since 1998. She says that no one is getting the most out of the education programs because of the lack of homework and because the classes attempt to be all things to all students. "They're trying to pitch to some middle ground, and no one's benefitting," she says.

Footsteps and conversation echo off the linoleum floors and concrete walls with no windows in the corridors for light or air. The windows are all sealed, and in those few rooms where there are air conditioners, steel screens cover the window and air conditioner from the inside so the unit cannot be pushed out to allow an escape.

There's not a lot of smiling or laughing in Goss II, despite the age of the students. Much of it has to do with the stark reality that their classrooms are generally just yards from their three-bunk cells and that steel cage doors surround them at all exits. Their entire universe consists of three cinderblock corridors six feet wide, one about 200 feet long running lengthwise, and their cellblock and class corridors, each about 40 feet in length. All activities—learning, eating,



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sleeping, physical education—take place under constant supervision.

It has been two months since most of these kids have been outside for any type of recreation. HEC and DYS recently received \$470,000 from the US Department of Education's Healthy Opportunities, Positive Effects (HOPE) initiative to increase physical fitness during school. Officials spread the money around eight of their facilities, including Goss, but the effort is hampered by the lack of room. At Goss, the two 45-minute phys-ed periods, with 10 students in each class, are spent in a room about eight feet wide and 15 feet long, cluttered with couches, chairs, bookcases, and tables.

The exercise on the day I was there consisted of the 10-member class standing in a circle in a cleared-out half of the room and batting a Nerf ball to one another. If someone missed a ball hit to him or hit one astray, that person had to do a predetermined number of push-ups. Attitude and image prevented most from doing the push-ups and no one pushed the issue. There was some genuine laughter in the circle but mainly because it was the first break in the day's monotony.

"We try to get them to create games," says Brooks Gaffam, the instructor just hired with the HOPE grant, in trying to explain his goals with the limited time and

space. "We want them to work as a team and develop rules."

Paul Charette, a clinical therapist at the Goss facility, says the education program is still evolving and few people outside the walls understand the enormity of the daily classroom challenges for either staffers or students. He

The question is whether DYS has prepared Alex for a more stable future or whether he'll end up back on the streets.

says having kids with behavioral and discipline issues in the same classroom "is adding fuel to the fire."

"If there's five kids in a room and one of the kids is having a bad day, it affects the other four kids," says Charette, who has been at Goss for three years. "It's like being in an alternative classroom constantly, except they're not going home."

Alex, who is approaching his 18th birthday, is the type of person DYS is trying to reach with its educational programs. He has spent 30 of the last 36 months in DYS under lock and key. He doesn't say what his offense was, other than that he was pulled in after a close friend was shot and killed in his Lawrence neighborhood. He's been in four fights with other DYS youth, which has extended his stay in custody to his 18th birthday in June.

Alex says he wants to go to college for computer science, maybe get into video game development. The big question is whether his time in DYS has prepared him for college and a more stable future or whether he'll end up back with his old friends on the streets. He mentions another good friend is serving life in prison after being convicted of murder in the death of a deliveryman. Alex doesn't want to end up there.

"I don't want to go back to custody," he says as he proudly reads to a visitor the goals he developed with a counselor. "It's not DYS anymore if I get caught. I'm not 17. It's prison."

Asked what would happen if he does end up in prison, he shrugs his shoulders and says: "I'd survive." **CW**



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