

# HOMEROOM

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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### Secretary Duncan and Attorney General Holder Announce New Efforts to Address the Needs of Confined Youth



Secretary Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder meet with the members of the Federal Reentry Council in Washington, D.C. to discuss efforts to improve education and employment outcomes among persons reentering communities following incarceration. (Photo credit: Department of Justice)

This past March, staff from our respective Departments met at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights to hear from a group of seven formerly incarcerated youth. This amazing group – most of them now over the age of 18 – shared their experiences with the juvenile justice system.

No two stories were the same. Some youth shared that they received no educational services at all, not even books to read, during their time in the facility. While several youth had been identified for disabilities before they were incarcerated, many did not receive services aligned with their individualized education programs. Among the students who did receive instruction, the courses available did not provide credits toward a high school diploma.

We are grateful to these youth for their resilience, leadership, and bravery as they speak out about their experiences. It is time that we match our gratitude with a new commitment to reform, to ensure that every child placed in a facility has access to high-quality education services and the supports they need to successfully reenter their schools and communities.

Today, leaders from 22 agencies joined us for a [Federal Interagency Reentry Council](#) meeting to discuss actions to reduce reentry barriers to employment, health, housing, and education for individuals who are transitioning from incarceration to community. The meeting comes on the heels of the [My Brother's Keeper Task Force Report](#), submitted to President Obama last week, which recommends new action to address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by too many youth, particularly boys and young men of color, and ensure that all young people who are willing to do the hard work to get ahead can reach their full potential, including new efforts to enforce the rights of incarcerated youth to a quality education.

In keeping with that recommendation, we announced to our federal partners that we sent a [letter](#) to each state school superintendent, and each state attorney general. The letter highlights the importance of supporting youth in facilities, describes how federal dollars can fund improved services, and signals our coming work to clarify the components of high-quality correctional education services.

This step continues recent work by federal agencies to support incarcerated youth in juvenile justice facilities. We've funded [model demonstration projects](#) for students with disabilities returning from juvenile facilities and commissioned [a report from the National Academy of Sciences](#) to better understand the developmental needs of incarcerated youth. Moving forward, our departments will invest in a joint initiative to design an evidence-based education model for returning youth and to support demonstration projects in selected jurisdictions.

Our work builds upon the recent groundswell of state and local efforts, as well as private initiatives and investments in research, dedicated to strengthening services for incarcerated youth. Last year, we were amazed by the efforts at Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings Youth Development Center to provide all youth with access to English, Math, Social Studies, and Science classes aligned with the standards of the District of Columbia's Public Schools. During our visit to the facility, students were reading *Night*, by Elie Wiesel.

Maya Angelou Academy has set the bar higher for our youth in juvenile justice, and others are doing the same.

States such as Oregon, Indiana, and Pennsylvania are increasing access to technology as one strategy for connecting youth in juvenile facilities with academic content comparable to their peers in traditional schools.

Thanks to the Council of State Governments Justice Center, we now have [consensus](#) among researchers, practitioners, and advocates – from the fields of education, health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement – regarding the necessary steps to keep youth in school, prevent their entry into the justice system, and ensure that youth in facilities get the supports and services they need.

Plenty of work remains. Too many places still exist where youth in facilities do not have access to quality education services, or worse, receive no services at all. We know that there is often confusion among education and justice officials about who is responsible for students' education once they are placed in a juvenile detention setting. But we are heartened by the work of the Council of State Governments, the National Academy of Sciences, and others – an effort that represents growing national agreement that we have a collective responsibility to support, nurture, and prepare juvenile justice-involved youth.

That's why we spoke up in a [recent federal lawsuit](#) in support of incarcerated youth with disabilities who alleged that they were placed in solitary confinement for 22 hours or more per day, discriminated against on the basis of their disability, and denied their right to a free and appropriate public education.

As noted in the My Brother's Keeper Task Force report – when young people come into contact with the juvenile or criminal justice systems, these interactions should not put them off track for life. The President has set a goal that, by 2020, our nation will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world and that all Americans complete at least one year or more of college or career training. We must ensure that our youth in correctional facilities can play their part in achieving that vision.

*Arne Duncan is U.S. Secretary of Education and Eric Holder is U.S. Attorney General.*

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Posted by  
**Arne Duncan**