

The Arkansas Intervention

One state shows how cloud-based learning can provide continuity of instruction to help juvenile offenders stay on track for their high school graduation.

HERE'S A MATH LESSON for lawmakers and policymakers:

The United States spends an average of \$9,644 a year per preK-12 student compared with \$22,600 per prison inmate. Increasing the high school completion rate by just 1 percent for all men ages 20 to 60 would save the country up to \$1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime. Sixty-five percent of convicts are dropouts, and lack of education is one of the strongest predictors of criminal activity. A dropout has an eight times higher likelihood of being in jail or prison during his or her lifetime than a high school graduate.

Numbers like these give us a compelling economic argument for investing in programs that will help increase the graduation rate. They also give us urgency to look at how we can intervene with the population at greatest risk for dropping out—juvenile offenders.

These incarcerated youth are on a fast track for an incarcerated adulthood, in part because they are being exposed to a prison-culture mindset while they are in detention, but also because detention separates them from their school culture and—perhaps more important—their school work. When these students return to their schools, they are even further off track for graduation than when they left school.

It doesn't have to be this way. With cloud-based learning programs, instruction can reach these students in their detention diasporas, keep them engaged in learning, and improve their chances for graduation. The state of Arkansas has shown how this can happen.

Stuck in Limbo

In 2001, Marcia Harding was a relatively new state director of special education for the Arkansas Department of Education, responsible for all juvenile detention educational programs in the state. At that time, teachers in the facilities had to make a best guess as to where each student fell on the spectrum of basic skills. Occasionally, they might use an assessment battery, but given the typically short duration of the detention, these assessments were rarely useful.

In general, at-risk students in Arkansas who end up in juvenile detention for 30 days find themselves in a classroom with 30 other kids aged 9 to 21, all learning at different rates, with different styles and knowledge bases, and little if any motivation to invest in the process. Their peers back at school may be mastering fractions and moving on to decimals, but the incarcerated group is stuck in limbo.

Harding wanted to provide some continuity of instruction in these students' lives, and so for a pilot program, installed my company's (SkillsTutor) networked version of diagnostic and prescriptive basic skills software at the Sebastian County Juvenile Detention Facility in Fort Smith. The idea was to help teachers better gauge individual students' skill levels and assign them work that would have relevance to their learning needs. Unfortunately, because there was no access to the internet at the center, the activity and the data was confined to the facility. Young offenders would stay for a month, work on the programs, make progress, and then be discharged with no option for follow-up in their next learning environment.

When the Sebastian County facility installed broadband, the picture began to change. Students worked online during their detention. When they were discharged and moved on to their next learning environment (for example, school or residential

treatment facility), their access to the program and their data went with them. Teachers in the students' home schools began requesting access to the program from teachers in the juvenile detention facility so that they could get progress reports and pick up instruction where the students left off. In short, continuity of learning became a real possibility for one of the most itinerant groups that exists within the student population.

Harding immediately recognized the impact of the internet access. She saw that the model could scale and that multiple stakeholders in various environments could be engaged in students' instructional activities, thanks



Harding

Marcia Harding saw that cloud computing could help incarcerated students keep up with their studies.

to the cloud. So she made the decision to expand the program into all 15 juvenile detention facilities around the state.

I was curious to see if we could help this group stay in school and out of jail. So we decided to adopt a “why wait?” philosophy,

Since the program began, more than 300,000 at-risk students in Arkansas have been able to stay on track and graduate high school. Not only has the program changed the lives of many young people for the better, but the benefits to society as a whole have also been substantial.

Education and Crime

THE STATISTICAL RELATIONSHIP between a person’s education level and likelihood to commit crime has been well established in various studies. Below are statistics cited in the Alliance for Excellent Education report, “Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings.”

- A 10-percent increase in the male graduation rate would reduce murder and assault arrest rates by about 20 percent, motor vehicle theft by 13 percent, and arson by 8 percent.
- Of black males who graduated from high school and went on to attend some college, only 5 percent were incarcerated in 2000.
- Of white males who graduated from high school and went on to attend some college, only 1 percent were incarcerated in 2000.
- State prison inmates without a high school diploma and those with a GED were more likely to be repeat offenders than those with a diploma.



Helping at-risk youth stay on track makes sense for many reasons. Cloud-based instruction, because of its ubiquitous nature, is perfectly suited to meet the needs of transient at-risk students.

So, back to our lawmakers and policymakers,

here’s a pop quiz: Will we as a society continue to accept the costs accompanying each dropout—both the financial costs of incarceration and rehabilitation, and the less obvious opportunity costs? Will we continue to accept the current status quo—where at-risk students “take from” rather than “contribute to” society? Isn’t our responsibility in this highly competitive global economy to produce wage-earning, tax-paying, GDP-boosting citizens? The cloud and the e-learning solutions are there. The choice is ours. [the](#)

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We began to see that incarcerated students who had the benefit of individualized e-learning were able to better keep pace with their peers back at school. When these students returned to school, they were more caught up, more confident, and more likely to continue their engagement in the learning process, in contrast to the typical scenario in which troubled kids from the juvenile justice system return to school with little motivation, are labeled out-of-sequence learners, and often end up back in jail.

Teachers and counselors were surprised to see some of their most challenged students working voluntarily on a basic skills program that they said they got at “juvie.” Test scores began to steadily increase each year. Since the program started in 2001, more than 75,000 juvenile detention students have participated in the program, and on average their math scores have increased by 13 percent, their reading scores by 16 percent, and their language arts scores by 15 percent.

We were helping incarcerated youth, but what about the kids who were on the brink?

to bring out-of-sequence learners back into sequence and address the instructional continuity factor *before* these at-risk students hit the juvenile detention environment.

Why Wait for Detention?

We offered “feeder districts” (those districts that accounted for most of the offenders) the opportunity to put their most at-risk kids into the program at no cost as an extension of the detention facility license.

The feeder districts jumped on board. It was exciting to see the districts and the detention facilities begin to work together. This was only possible because of the cloud. The program provided comprehensive professional development for teachers and administrators, focusing not just on how to implement the e-learning program but also on how to use data to make informed decisions. The goal was to reduce dropout and recidivism rates, while at the same time building solid communities of practice that could weave cloud-based learning and data analytics into their instructional model.

REFERENCES

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