



Project YEA: Creating an Escape Route from the School to Prison Pipeline

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In an effort to make a difference at the intersection of the school system and the juvenile justice system, Morrissey-Compton Educational Center partners with the **Santa Clara County Juvenile Probation Department** through **Project YEA (Youth Educational Advocates)**. Project YEA was developed in order to provide educational advocacy to youth on probation and their families. This distinctive program can provide a



corrective experience to youth who have had negative interactions with the special education system at school and assure them that their families, teachers, probation officers, mentors, and counselors all support their academic success.

Juvenile Justice Statistics

The **National Center for Education Statistics** reports that about 14% of all public school students receive special education for a variety of disabilities including learning disabilities, attention difficulties, and mental health disorders.

However, the **U.S. Department of Education** has estimated the rates of disabilities among youth in the juvenile justice system to be as high as 80%. A study published in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* of nearly 1,400 ninth graders entering the juvenile justice system found that their academic performance ranged on average 3-6 years behind on measures of reading and math. Further, the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* included an article that found that the vast majority of these children and adolescents also have a diagnosable mental health condition.

The Role of Our Schools

Schools can contribute to the path towards the juvenile justice system in what has been termed the **school-to-prison pipeline**. School suspension is a strong predictor of future contact with the juvenile justice system and decreases the likelihood that children will graduate high school. In turn, achieving high school graduation is a crucial event in the lives of children. The **2003 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report** said that high school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested in their lifetime, and nearly 70% of the incarcerated population did not graduate high school. The data is even more stark for minority youth. In 2008, Columbia University Professor of Sociology **Bruce Western** and colleagues found that 37% of Black men between the ages of 20-34 without a high school diploma were behind bars. These racial disparities often start in the school system as well. Studies published by the **National Council on Crime and Delinquency** and *Psychology in the Schools* found that Black and LatinX youth are three times as likely to be suspended as Caucasian students.

Schools are also in a unique position to provide support and opportunities to at-risk youth. In particular, youth who qualify for special education are entitled to receive extra services such as 1:1 or small group support, smaller classes, accommodations in the classroom, and school-based counseling. Sadly, for many families, accessing these services and navigating the special education process is a significant challenge, which can be exacerbated by school districts that are reluctant to identify students with disabilities and provide services due to limited resources. Unfortunately, it is often the children and families most in need of support that fall through the cracks.

How Project YEA Helps

After being referred to Project YEA, a youth's educational records are reviewed, and both the youth and their parents or guardians are interviewed. This process allows Morrissey-Compton's staff psychologists (myself and **Laura Chyou, Ph.D.**) enough information to determine whether a student is receiving adequate support in school. Often, students with clear signs of learning disabilities or mental health disorders are not receiving any support in school, and we work with the youth's family and school district to request an assessment for special education eligibility. In other situations, we attend IEP meetings for youth already identified as special education students to advocate for their needs or help them transfer to a school program that is a better fit.

Project YEA is proud to have served over **85 students** and their families this year, with several achieving high school diplomas and many more receiving support for previously unidentified disabilities.

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