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Centering Care & Engagement: Understanding Implementation of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA) in Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Schools

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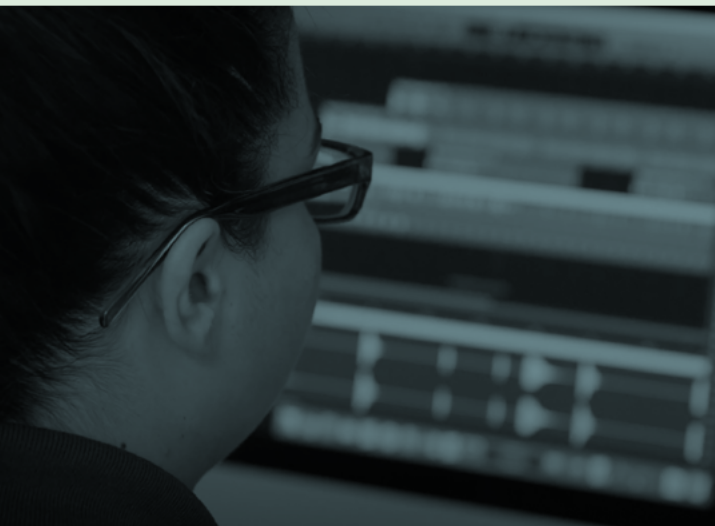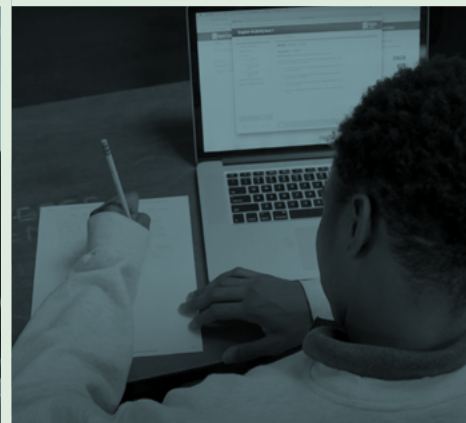
CENTERING CARE & ENGAGEMENT

Understanding Implementation of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA) in Los Angeles County Juvenile Court Schools

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

From 1891, when the first state youth correctional facility was opened in California, to more recently in 2020 when COVID-19 prompted widespread global concerns about the safety of congregate circumstances, the state's system of care for justice-involved youth has been a subject of enormous public concern.
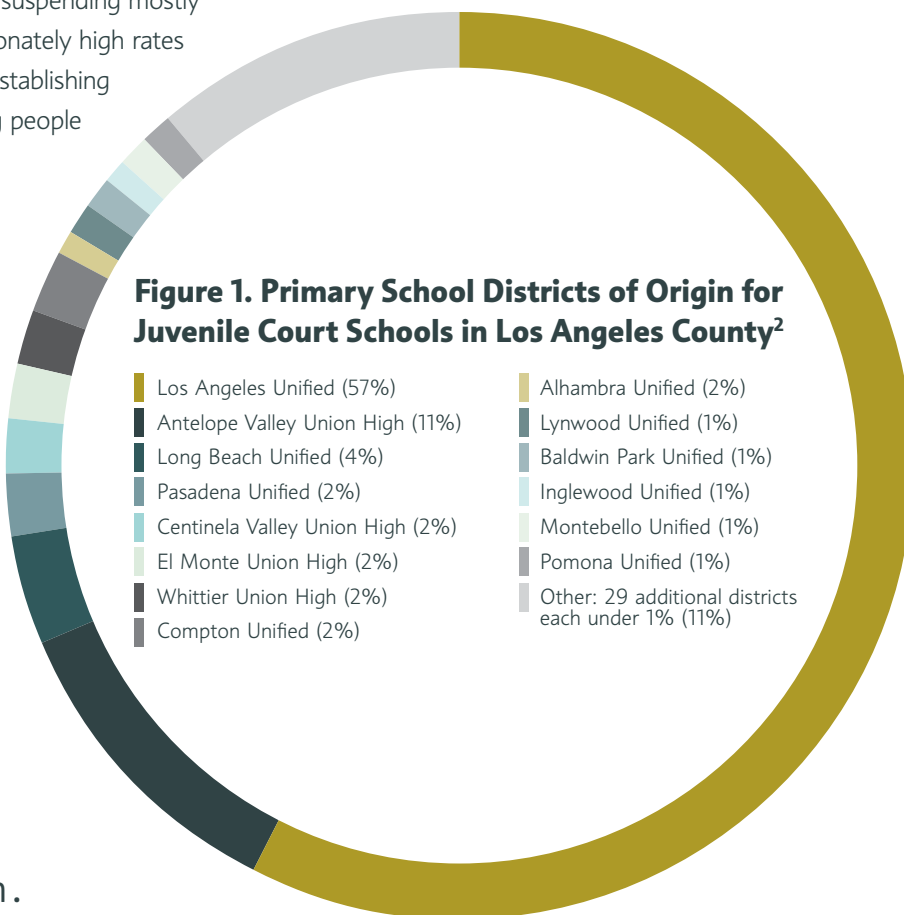
From the late 1990's until fairly recently, the state of California and the County of Los Angeles led the nation in youth incarceration *(Nelson, Leung & Cobb, 2016)*. During most of that time, Los Angeles County had more than half of the county-level probation camps operated in the state. **Figure 1** lists the primary school districts of origin for the county where young people have started their education before ending up in the juvenile court schools. Districts of origin may help us think concretely about where to target prevention and early support strategies so young people can reach their full potential before they end up in the juvenile justice system. This includes patterns of suspending mostly Latinx and Black students at disproportionately high rates that reinforce a school-prison-pipeline, establishing a harmful trajectory for too many young people in the county *(Hirschfield, 2018)*.

However, the policy and political landscape for the education and care of system-involved young people is radically shifting. Juvenile justice policy in Los Angeles and in California is shifting to emphasize more rehabilitative models of support for youth with much lower levels of involuntary detainment in carceral settings. At the state level, California's

SB 823 requires state youth prisons to shut down by June 30, 2023. The law designates local facilities in all 58 counties to be used for the incarceration of the (currently) 700 young people in secured facilities *(Rosales, 2021)*. In Los Angeles County, the successful passage of Measure J mandates that significant resources be redirected from carceral systems and instead be targeted for community investments *(Measure J Re-imagine LA Advisory Committee, 2021)[1]*.

As regional and statewide efforts are being re-prioritized, the number of young people housed in juvenile justice facilities has declined substantially. The last several decades of concerted legal and social advocacy efforts has resulted in dramatic declines in the numbers of youth and has prompted dramatic shifts in policy relating to their well-being and education *(The Burns Institute, 2020; Burdick, Feierman & McInerney, 2011)*.

Until recently, California & Los Angeles County **led the nation** in youth incarceration.

Figure 1. Primary School Districts of Origin for Juvenile Court Schools in Los Angeles County[2]

- Los Angeles Unified (57%)
- Antelope Valley Union High (11%)
- Long Beach Unified (4%)
- Pasadena Unified (2%)
- Centinela Valley Union High (2%)
- El Monte Union High (2%)
- Whittier Union High (2%)
- Compton Unified (2%)
- Alhambra Unified (2%)
- Lynwood Unified (1%)
- Baldwin Park Unified (1%)
- Inglewood Unified (1%)
- Montebello Unified (1%)
- Pomona Unified (1%)
- Other: 29 additional districts each under 1% (11%)

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Figure 2: California Juvenile Justice Facilities: Race/Ethnicity Rates per 100,000[3]

The rate of youth in juvenile justice facilities has decreased by **79%.**
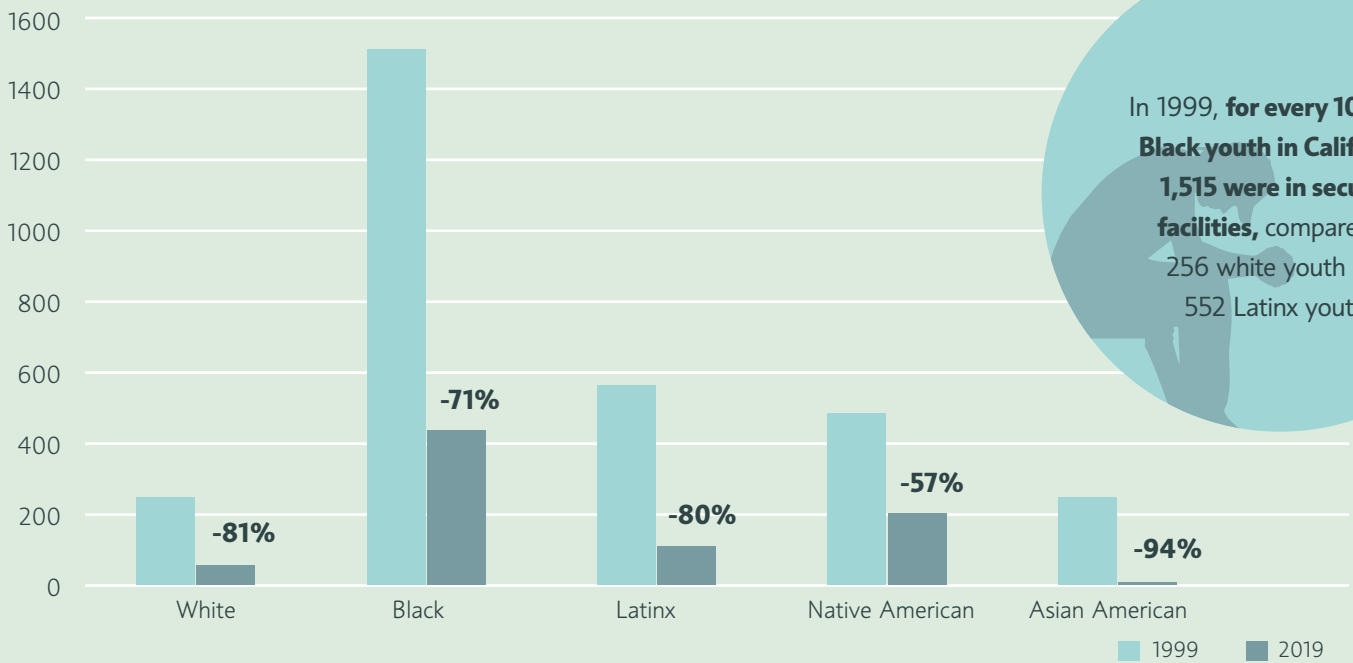
In 1999, **for every 100,000 Black youth in California, 1,515 were in secured facilities,** compared to 256 white youth and 552 Latinx youth.

Figure 2 illustrates the magnitude of these changes. It shows both dramatic changes over time in the numbers of detained youth, as well as uncomfortable continuities in the racial composition of youth housed in juvenile justice facilities in California. In 1999, there were over 19,000 young people detained in facilities. In 2019, that number dropped to 4,131. Whereas in 1999, for every 100,000 Black youth in California, 1,515 were in secured facilities, compared to 256 white youth and 552 Latinx youth.

As Figure 2 suggests, although the overall numbers of youth in secured facilities has declined among all race/ethnic groups, extreme racial disproportionality continues to be characteristic of these systems. In fact, in 2019 the rates of Black youth in secured facilities became even more disparate from that of other racial groups in the state, at 9 times the rate of whites and 4 times that of Latinx youth.[4]

In California, as is the case in many states, the juvenile justice system is a multifaceted network of county and state agencies relating to the dual charges of public safety and the rehabilitation of youth charged with threatening public safety. In Los Angeles, the lead agency is law enforcement. The Los Angeles County Probation Department is charged with overall program administration for detained youth, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) is responsible for educational program delivery, the Department of Mental Health (DMH) is charged with attending to therapeutic and clinical needs, and The Los Angeles Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) provides a range of other services. Each agency works within the overall scope of their respective offices to deliver services and programming to youth detained in the various types of juvenile correctional facilities.

3 Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Puzzanchera, C., & Klang, W. (2021). Easy Access to the Census of Juvenile in Residential Placement.
4 The raw numbers of Latinx youth in secure facilities exceeds that of Black youth (2,379 & 1,071). By and large facilities in California almost exclusively contain Black and Brown youth (Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Puzzanchera, C. & Kang, W., 2021). https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/

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Efforts to Reform the Justice System in Los Angeles County for Young People

Data collection for this study began during major changes in the political and social current in Los Angeles County as it relates to system-involved youth. In 2019, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a motion to address the County's performance of its responsibilities to youth in the care of its Probation Department. In this motion it was acknowledged that juvenile halls and camps, following a model of law enforcement prioritization, was an inappropriate system to "address the rehabilitative needs of youth" *(Burns Institute, 2020).* That year the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors established a working group of stakeholders seeking major reforms to the existing justice system in Los Angeles called the "Youth Justice Work Group". [5] In October 2020 the group produced a report entitled Youth Justice Reimagined, which expressed the hope that the document would serve as a guiding framework in county efforts to build a more effective rehabilitative system centering the unique needs of youth. The county's aspirational vision, as stated in the report, is to phase out reliance on the Probation Department, and to establish a new agency for juvenile-justice-involved youth that prioritizes their health, education, and well-being. It is within this context of changing priorities and circumstances that the Road to Success Academies (RTSA) were created.

Origins of the Road to Success Academies (RTSA)

Los Angeles is among an increasing number of local educational agencies across the nation that have adopted evidence-based education strategies to support efforts to change the educational trajectories of juveniles in our nation's corrections system *(The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).* Over the last 12 years, the Los Angeles County Office of Education implemented a new comprehensive educational model for juvenile justice schools called Road to Success Academies. This systemic model of educational delivery flows from the burgeoning "LA Model" for juvenile justice, which envisions a holistic strategy of care to better prepare incarcerated youth for successful re-entry into their communities.

> *The RTSA model works with research supported strategies, including positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, and culturally relevant pedagogy to holistically address students' social and emotional needs as a component of promoting their academic success* (Deegan, 2011; Anderson, 2015; Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Alim et al., 2020).

The design of RTSA was a result of work done between January and September of 2010 by the "Comprehensive Education Reform Committee". [6] The CERC studied extant research on exemplary schools and observed a range of school systems operating inside and outside of juvenile justice facilities across the country with the goal of implementing best practices to better meet the educational needs of students in the juvenile court schools *(Deegan, 2011).*

The CERC report states:

We took them to some other schools, we watched lots of videos of teams of teachers collaborating around curriculum and around central questions, and around assessments that used different skills, different classes, [and] weren't doing the same projects in class.

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5 More information about the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors' motion to reimagine the justice system for system involved youth can be found at https://lacyouthjustice.org/youth-justice-work-group-documents/

6 This group has also been known as the "Pilot Design Committee."

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A central consideration of CERC was to create a program that specifically considered the "educational debt" impacting students' engagement and access to learning students experienced prior to their incarceration. *(Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2006).* Additionally, RTSA designers explicitly considered that the ongoing trauma of incarceration, family separation, and the juvenile justice system itself, may impact the ability of students in juvenile justice facilities to focus and to learn. The following emerged as core concerns to be considered by the committee in the adaptation of curricular best practices for use in juvenile justice settings:

• That the youth in juvenile justice facilities have a very large range of learning levels and needs.
• That the composition of students in each facility was constantly shifting.
• That most youth in camps have experienced high levels of trauma, both prior to their detainment, as well as relating to experiences within the facility itself.
• The ongoing need to coordinate educational delivery with multiple agencies, each with differing goals and aspirations for service provision beyond what is traditional for educational contexts.

Drawing from what they had learned from exemplary schools, the RTSA model shifted away from educational delivery that cycled students between classes focused on single, core content areas over the course of the day, to one that contained just two interdisciplinary courses that were co-planned among teachers: one class offering instruction of English/language arts and social studies, and another offering mathematics and science. Whereas the earlier system relied on worksheet packets in each subject area, the new system was designed to more effectively engage youth by utilizing project-based learning *(Bell, 2010; Velasquez & Johnson, 2015).* A key component of the RTSA model was the idea that each school-site should be directly engaged to undertake a process of curricular design that should include collective decisions about the creation of 'big questions' connected to state educational standards. The RTSA model hinged on school site teacher engagement in

curriculum creation featuring 'big thematic questions' as the vehicle for educational delivery of core subject areas. The model recognized the pivotal importance of student engagement. The RTSA model challenged academic staff at each juvenile justice facility to create culturally relevant curriculum, rooted in a deep appreciation for their student's specific academic and "socio-emotional needs".[7] Social and emotional learning (SEL)-informed themes were created for the curriculum to serve as an "entry point" for engaging incarcerated students *(Anderson, 2015; Alim et al., 2020; Aronson & Laughter, 2015).* In the words of one of the CERC committee members:

```
You legally have to provide them with
education, but they're traumatized,
they're terrified, they're fighting their
cases, they're waiting [for] placement,
they're . . . It's tough . . . That's where
sort of the thematic piece was like, "Okay
well if the content is hard to access, then
maybe there's some point of entry for this kid
through the theme.
```

As a result of community advocacy and research centered on school discipline, general education policy has shifted to encourage the use of non-punitive classroom discipline strategies.[8] These strategies are thought to be critically important for use in juvenile justice settings. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a behavior management system that is used to encourage positive behaviors in students by explicitly stating and modeling expectations, and then consistently rewarding students who show desired behaviors *(OSEP, 2021).* PBIS was specifically identified by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors as an educational practice that is particularly aligned with the small group cognitive behavioral treatment program at the center of the 'L.A. model' of comprehensive juvenile justice reforms. The RTSA model incorporated PBIS as a strategy for improving the academic climate in facilities, and for improving student outcomes by ensuring that valuable instructional time is not lost to punitive and exclusionary discipline of students. After the successful implementation of the program at a single pilot site, the RTSA model was subsequently introduced to youth camps throughout the region.

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7 Teachers and educators on the design committee, pointing to research connecting social and emotional well-being with learning, developed themes that would facilitate SEL.
8 Ca Educ Code § 48900.5 encourages, among several strategies, "positive behavioral support approach, with tiered interventions" to occur on the campus and during the school day.

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"You legally have to provide them with education, but they're traumatized, they're terrified, they're fighting their cases, they're waiting [for] placement… It's tough."

Comprehensive Education Reform Committee (CERC) Committee Member

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STUDY OVERVIEW

The current study builds upon research focused on educational experiences in juvenile corrections facilities *(Allen & Grassell, 2017; Leone & Weinberg, 2012)* **and focuses on the following research questions:**

1. *How does the RTSA model impact student learning outcomes and student engagement among students in carceral settings, and how does the carceral setting itself impact implementation of educational services broadly, and RTSA specifically?*

2. *What are key challenges to full implementation of RTSA for youth in carceral settings?*

The study examines the implementation of RTSA at two sites, utilizing a mixed-methods research design. Our findings reveal both key challenges and successes of the model. The analyses contained in this report centers a range of voices not commonly heard, including system-involved youth, teachers, curriculum designers, as well as administrators at the LACOE and probation officers. The report presents a nuanced examination of student outcome data provided by LACOE, followed by recommendations derived from both sets of analyses.

Data and Methods

The two research sites that form the basis of this study were each selected in partnership with LACOE and will be referred to in this report as 'Camp A' and 'Camp B'. Qualitative data collection at each site utilized the following strategies: ethnographic observation, interviews, and focus groups with students, staff, and administrators. In total, this aspect of the study includes over 350 hours of fieldwork conducted over the course of seven months between April and November of 2019. **Figure 3** is a summative table of the qualitative data collected.

In addition to qualitative analysis of stakeholder data, we analyzed student assessment data to understand system characteristics shaping circumstances more deeply and to examine the context within which the RTSA model operates to affect student learning outcomes.[9] Utilizing de-identified, student-level data provided by LACOE, we examined entry and exit dates and the timing and outcomes of grade-level assessments of reading and math of students entering the selected camps during the period of this study. While our analyses focus on students at each camp who were present for at least two assessments, we also explore what the data suggests about data collection and reporting practices, the pattern of entries, exits, and implications for the implementation of current assessment policy. In this manner, our use of assessment data builds upon and contextualizes interview and focus group data to develop a more holistic understanding of RTSA's impact on academic outcomes for youth in juvenile justice facilities and to make recommendations for improvement.

9 Data for this component of the analysis includes de-identified reading and math assessment scores of students entering between 2017-2020, along with their entry and exit dates.

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Figure 3: Methods Overview

Summary of Participants (n =49)	Students Interviewed: 19 Teachers Interviewed: 6 Staff/Administration/Probation/CBOs Interviewed: 8 Educational System Leaders Interviewed: 2 Alternative Model Interviewed: 10 Designer Focus Group Participants: 4
Observations	Ethnographic Observations were carried out by the team of researchers across two consecutive school years. These observations took place during classroom instruction, student support meetings, and staff meetings. During observations, the research team also collected sample curricula, student work, and other school documents.
Interviews	The research team conducted a total of 26 interviews with 19 different students. These interviews focused on the learning experiences of the students. The research team conducted a total of 11 interviews with 6 different teachers. These interviews focused on the teachers' experiences delivering the RTSA model, as well as recommendations for improvement. The research team conducted interviews with a range of other stakeholders to discern the extent to which RTSA impacted student attainment and engagement.
Focus Groups	The research team conducted 10 focus groups with four designers. These focus groups allowed for a deep dive into the history and design of RTSA.
Data Analysis Process	The research team utilized the qualitative software, Dedoose, to organize and analyze all data collected for the report. Using Dedoose, the research team engaged in interactive coding and memo writing to derive the reports key findings and recommendations.

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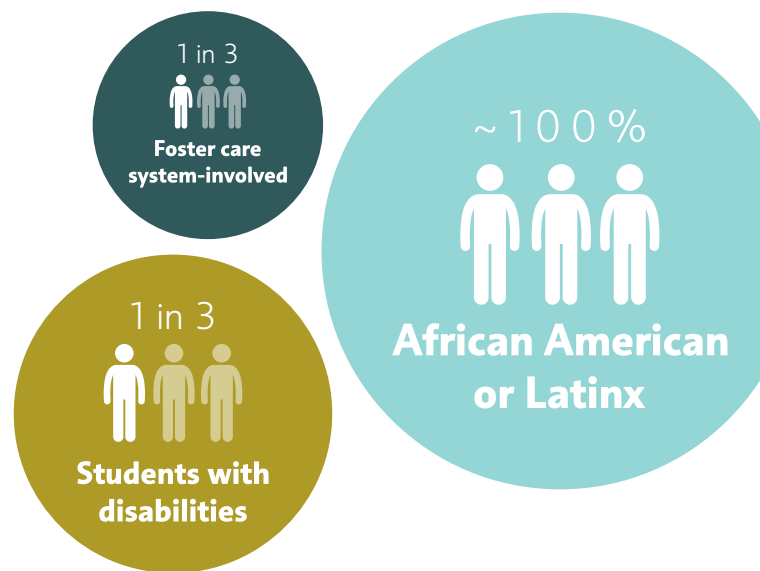
SITE DESCRIPTIONS

Youth who have been adjudicated and assigned to a "camp" for secured detention receive education as well as most rehabilitative treatment at that location. Generally, students at the camp arrive directly from one of the juvenile halls in the system. The student population residing at the camps we visited reflect the most vulnerable categories of youth in our community.

Close to 100% of youth in each facility at the time of this study were African American or Latinx youth. As is the case statewide, African American youth were particularly overrepresented at 3-5 times their demographic share of the youth population in the County. Approximately a third of students at each camp had been identified as having disabilities. Children with dual system involvement in foster care were similarly over-represented, with one third or more children in each camp meeting this description.

Camp A was the pilot site for the development and refinement of the RTSA model. Camp A is a girls' facility and Camp B is a boys' facility. Both camps are located about 40 miles from the city of Los Angeles and are an hour drive or more from the home communities of most of the youth detained in the camps. Camps are all generally located in remote areas beset by wildfires and other natural disasters, in fact, just prior to the end of this study, students and staff at Camp A had to be evacuated from the site due to a major wildfire in the area.

Utilizing the RTSA model, teachers and administrators at each camp worked together to build out the curriculum for their sites with the mandate of being culturally relevant and engaging to students. At Camp A, teachers and administrators described the initial curriculum development process during the pilot period as involving an intense professional development effort to create the

1 in 3
Foster care system-involved

~100%
African American or Latinx

1 in 3
Students with disabilities

educational themes and an action model to meet the expected impact. During this initial period, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were formed, which met for two hours each week. Additionally, teachers and administrators participated together in full day coordinating and planning meetings, called "Saturday Summits" one Saturday per month. That level of intense professional development played a crucial role in promoting strong model buy-in by teachers and administrators at the site and promoted both innovation and intentionality in the delivery of educational services.

For example, the initial theme of "beauty/self-esteem" was selected in accordance with a 'theory of change' that if incarcerated girls were supported in the development of "self-esteem," and an understanding of how they are "beautiful", it would create a path toward "new beginnings" and toward more positive opportunities in the student's lives. The highly gendered theme was selected to be culturally relevant and thereby explicitly to prompt more active student engagement among a group that consisted predominantly of marginalized Black and Latinx girls. Similarly, "responsibility" and "perseverance" themes that educators believed would resonate with boys, were developed for use at Camp B.

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Figure 4: Thematic Cycle Developed at Camp A

Guiding our students to develop self-esteem will lead them to **empowerment**.

A sense of empowerment will provide them with the courage to **hope.**

Hope is a critical pillar in the **transformation** process.

A willingness to embrace transformation leads to a journey of **new beginnings.**

Figure 5: Thematic Cycle Developed at Camp B

Guiding our students to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and develop a robust academic **identity** will facilitate multiple pathways to **healing.**

From this foundation, students will develop a personal, local, and global **responsibility** that will **empower** them to respond to challenges with self-awareness, motivation, and confidence as they **persevere** through life's changes.

Anchoring texts were selected to unify the thematic curriculum. The themes were explicitly aligned to California State Standards and used with sets of essential questions and sub-questions that were intended to prompt students to critically assess ideas and make important connections.

Teacher, Camp A: I know self-esteem and beauty are important to girls, so we knew that we wanted to look at Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and use that text as a kind of anchor.

The themes, essential questions and sub-questions informed development of unit plans and daily curricula. **Figures 6 and 7** show examples of essential questions and sub-questions used at each camp. The questions and the sub questions for each theme encourage students to examine complex ideas of racism, gender, and the development of identity.

Culturally relevant instruction fosters student engagement by relating instructional content to student's own lived experience, including the lived experiences of the students while in the camps. Academic lessons and curriculum materials were intentionally crafted and selected to meet this aim. For example, when discussing a unit on protest music of the 1960s, an interviewee described the following:

I don't think they (the students) got a [White] washed-out version of anything... We did a whole unit on protest music of the 60s because we were studying the 1960s, that era. I brought someone up there who was a performative teaching artist. The kids, then, all their final project was to create their own song of protest based on the things in their lives. So, protesting the way whatever abuse they might have experienced, protesting the way they were

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treated in the camps. Things that they wanted to protest and give a voice to their own things... They were never going to have content imposed on them in ways that wouldn't relate somehow to who they were and what their dreams and what their hopes were and what their experiences were.

Student surveys are sometimes used to gauge the impact of the curricula, and to provide the academic staff with a student-centered basis for making ongoing refinements. One teacher shared:

At the end of each theme, I created a survey for the kids... They would say how the theme impacted them, how they connected to it, what they're going to take away, [and] what they'll remember 10 years from now...[It was] interesting to see the way that the cultural relevance really did connect with them...

Student Engagement: Student Voices

In our interviews with students, they often made comments suggesting that "interesting content" was what they most liked about the RTSA model. The following are some of the comments shared with our team:

Cynthia: This has been one of the best schools I've attended [...] Yeah, [the topics]'re interesting.

Villana: To me, I don't know, [the Holocaust unit] was just really interesting to me and I feel like everybody in my class, we were really interested because we all put our effort and everything into this project and when time came to present to the top school people we did really good and I felt like, it was just interesting just the way everything was about the Holocaust and it was a camp, and knowing we're in camp so it was like, I felt like some of us could relate.

Taryn: History was like interesting to me, and it got... As I learned about it more and more every day, it got more interesting, because I found out things that I never knew about, and I was passing tests and stuff, so that became my favorite subject.

Implementation

All academic initiatives, no matter how strong, require equally strong monitoring by leadership to ensure consistent and comprehensive adoption. The RTSA model challenges instructional staff to draw upon their own strengths and passions in order to make their teaching practices more impactful. To make this model successful, teachers at each camp are asked to both "bring their whole selves" and to "educate the whole child". Noting the difficulty in implementing this shift in teaching practices, a CERC member commented:

A lot of these teachers had only been teaching in this (the juvenile justice system), so they really needed to open their minds up to new learning approaches that are much more current real-world connected, more student-centered.

Another noted,

[We aimed to get] teachers to collaborate more, and [have] kids be more the owner of their own learning, rather than being talked at or told what to think and how to think all day.

An administrator at Camp A pointed out that to facilitate successful implementation of the RTSA model by the teaching staff, administrators at the site must build strong, "whole teacher" relationships with staff. For example, although the theme of "healing" (suggesting social-emotional learning) was included in the thematic map as a bridge helping students see connections and build the capacity for individual responsibility, researchers saw scant evidence of curriculum materials relating to 'healing' or activities connecting with the other themes. During several interviews with staff at the camp, teachers seem to downplay the importance of including social-emotional learning activities for boys, a belief that ran counter to the RTSA curriculum's focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of students. For example, a teacher described expanding the social and emotional focus to Camp B as a "big mistake," because the students at Camp B were "not going to sit around and hold hands and sing kumbaya," thus minimizing the need of boys for social and emotional learning. In summary, while the RTSA model framework explicitly includes social and emotional learning in its themes, and sub questions, full implementation for all students hinges upon educator training and buy-in.

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"We did a whole unit on protest music of the 60s, and the kids' final project was to create their own song of protest based on the things in their lives… whatever abuse they might have experienced, the way they were treated in the camps."

RTSA Teacher

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Figure 6: Themes with Essential and Sub-Questions at Camp A

THEME	OVERARCHING ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Beauty

What is beauty?

Who defines beauty and why?
When the search for beauty does it become unhealthy or harmful?

Power & Empowerment

What is power?

Who or what has power and why?
When and how is power distributed?
What does it mean to be disempowered?
What does it mean to be empowered?

Hope

How does hope change over time?

How has my hope changed over time?
What happens to those who give up hope?
How do people keep hope when things go wrong?

Transformation

How is transformation a part of life?

How are people transformed through their relationship with others?
In what ways does conflict lead to change/transformation?

New Beginnings

What does it mean to begin anew?

Who am I?
What are the various factors that shape my identity?
What does it mean to be an American?
What does it mean to be "from" a place?
How does where we are from influence who we are?

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THEME

OVERARCHING ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Identity

How does knowing one's identity affect change?

How does good character contribute to a positive identity?

What are the limits of individual liberty?

How does culture and religion influence a society?

Healing

How does healing lead to positive growth?

In what ways are you actively involved in your own healing?

How do you heal while overcoming obstacles?

What did you learn about yourself when you help others heal?

Responsibility

What does it mean to be responsible?

What is the human cost of war?

How were people irresponsible with rapid technological changes during the 1920s?

Who was responsible for the Great Depression?

Empowerment

How does empowerment enable people to overcome adversity?

Can major conflict lead to empowerment?

To what extent can achievement lead to empowerment?

How can positively facing challenges lead to empowerment?

Perseverance

How do people persevere during challenging situations?

How do people survive and persevere after cataclysmic disasters?

How do global population explosions affect the environment?

How does perseverance allow us to continue being successful?

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"A lot of these teachers had only been teaching in this (the juvenile justice system), so they really, really needed to open their minds up to new learning approaches that are much more current real-world connected, more student-centered."

Comprehensive Education Reform Committee (CERC)
Committee Member

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Frequent Staff Turnover and Reassignment

Extreme levels of staffing turnover and lack of instructional continuity were observed among administrators and teaching staff at both Camps A and B. During the course of our data collection, there were numerous leadership changes, including at the principal level at each camp. Further, we often noted that at any given time, close to half of the instructional staff at each camp were substitute teachers. This level of turnover, while not unique to these juvenile justice educational settings, undoubtedly has a detrimental impact on RTSA implementation *(Houchins et al., 2010; Gonsoulin & Read, 2011).* Current research shows that student learning is often a function of staff continuity and longevity *(Bartanen et al., 2019; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).* In contexts such as we observed where there was considerable turnover among both administrators and teaching staff, implementing a system of ongoing training support, leadership coaching, and incentives for teachers (inclusive of substitute teachers) may be critical for ensuring the successful implementation of RTSA.

Coordinating Educational Services

Implementation of the RTSA model with other educational delivery programs is a challenge at both locations. For example, students at both camps can earn accelerated credits towards high school graduation by taking computer mediated coursework online. Students often sought out the opportunity to accumulate credits quickly, even as they expressed their dissatisfaction and lack of engagement with the actual activities embedded in the software. In interviews and focus groups, students frequently mentioned a lack of interest in the computer-interactive coursework and expressed feelings that while the work was not challenging for them, they nevertheless valued the opportunity to accumulate credits to achieve life goals and move forward quickly. Further, it appeared as though individual work on computers took the place of project-based learning, rather than augmented it.

Students at both sites recognized that their classmates were in different several grade levels and complained that sometimes teachers would "dumb down" the work for them so that everyone would be able to pass.

One student at Camp B remarked,

Most of the time it's just like... Either way all you gotta do is come to class. You could guess on the work and still get an A.

Another student remarked,

It's like we do little kid stuff and then they give us the credits…. but, I do what I got to do because I'm trying to get good grades and get out of here. That's the only reason I'm really doing this work.

Similarly at Camp A, Cynthia remarked,

The only thing I enjoy in here is that I could get my credits faster. Other than that, I don't enjoy being in here. I mean, it's not bad, but it's not a place where I would want to be or wish anybody to be in.

So you go by your pace and if you finish like in a week, you're done. Like you get your credits [...] So it's pretty much at your pace and how you do it. And if you do it right cause you need to pass the quizzes and everything. And so then you do worksheets.

The student reported picking up credits faster with the combination of the online program and completing "packets" and "study guides." The content of the credit recovery programs seems very distant from RTSA's focus on thematic, interdisciplinary, project-based learning, and may obstruct the goals of RTSA. We observed that classroom engagement in RTSA projects was often hampered by individual student's efforts to "get those credits". At both camps researchers regularly noticed that there were some students completely off to the side and not interacting with the rest of the class, completing computer coursework unrelated to the class they were in. So, while computer-based instruction enables students to work at their own pace and offers an opportunity for accelerated progress towards academic degree completion, this form of content delivery appears much less congruent with authentic discourse and academic engagement. Computer mediated courses do not appear to offer culturally relevant material or contain SEL content in alignment with the overarching goals, philosophies, and expectations of RTSA's model of instruction.

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"Most of the time, all you gotta do is come to class. You could guess on the work and still get an A."

Student at RTSA Camp B

Program Integration

While our team of researchers were assured that differentiated instruction was in place at each Camp,[10] it was not often witnessed in practice. For example, our team frequently observed students with widely varying needs completing the same curricular documents in various classes at each camp. While we sometimes observed support staff designated for the IEP (Individualized Education Program) or ELL (English Language Learners) in classes at both camps, this was not a consistent observation. Our interviews with academic staff often made mention of various specialists "pulling students out" who needed additional literacy or math intervention, but none mentioned efforts to integrate special education or ELL service delivery within the project-based curriculum of RTSA.

Departmental Alignment and Coordination: LACOE, DMH and Probation

While the Probation Department is primarily engaged in youth development activities outside of the classroom settings, probation officers were observed exercising a great deal of influence on ostensibly educational decisions. Decisions about placement in classrooms; inclusion in both on- and off-campus activities; and decisions about what community organizations are allowed on each campus, are often largely decided by the Probation Department. The design of the RTSA model places emphasis on project-based and thematic learning. Activities integrating SEL and culturally relevant "real world" activities like field trips off-campus and community-partner participation on campus, are examples of the type of experiences that work to create impactful connections that deeply engage students in the learning process. Through their role as the primary arbitrator of "safety" concerns, the Probation Department, however, plays a very significant role in shaping the field trips and community partner experiences made available to students in each facility. Unilateral decisions by probation could result in the exclusion of some students from these types of learning experiences. Presently there does not appear to be any consideration of alternative activities for students deemed unsuitable for participation in field trips

or other activities. Similarly, our interviews suggested that Probation Department officials controlled decisions about which community organizations were allowed on campus, and what those groups were allowed to do. Probation Department's influence thus impacts the educational experiences at each facility and the degree to which students (collectively and individually) can navigate and/or develop relationships with peers, staff, and teachers.

Although not consistently observed by our research team, LACOE policy is for instructional staff to implement a system of Positive Behavioral Interventions Support (PBIS), used by schools and districts throughout the county to support behavioral improvement among students. Interviews suggest that the Probation Department utilizes its own distinct behavioral modification system, as does the Department of Mental Health. The lack of consistency and alignment between these approaches likely contributes to lack of fidelity of implementation for any of them. Further, although each agency interacts with youth in critical and overlapping ways, coordination and alignment is hampered by the lack of data sharing between agencies. Conflicts in class, traumatic experiences that happen inside the facility, or that may have happened before arrival should be shared in order to better inform services provided by all involved agencies. Further, data sharing might assist in each agency's assessment regarding the efficacy of treatment actions.

Learning Assessment Data

While Learning assessments are generally used to indicate the status of student progress, they can also be used to monitor the quality of educational systems, and to assess individual student academic needs. While the federal government requires annual reporting for all schools, including those housed within juvenile justice facilities, receiving federal dollars to ensure community accountability and ongoing improvement, the educational operations of juvenile justice facilities are so distinct from the operations of traditional public schools that annual indicators are not comparable. Juvenile justice facilities operate year-around, and the timing and duration of student arrivals and exits are idiosyncratic. These factors

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10 Differentiated instruction is an approach to teaching in which lessons and units are tailored to meet the unique needs of all students present in the class. This is especially important when planning to meet the needs of English learners and students with individualized educational programs (IEPs).

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alone make traditional strategies of data utilization for accountability challenging.

Our research team initially sought to utilize simple descriptive indicators of progress based on changes in grade-level assessments for reading and math at each camp. However, initial analysis uncovered several unusual patterns in the data which caused us to suspect substantial input errors or other record keeping problems. However, after months of conversations and detailed data scrutiny with both technical and administrative staff at LACOE, we discovered that the oddities we observed in the data were not merely random outliers that should simply be excluded. Instead, we came to view these peculiar cases as a path towards a deeper understanding of the circumstance of juvenile justice educational delivery, and the inadequacy of

traditional reporting systems in supporting accountability for data-based improvement. In this section we provide the results of that detailed set of analyses.

The table in **Figure 8** displays average grade levels for reading and math. Average reading levels at each camp were at about a 7th grade level, and math mastery at around a 6th grade level. This finding was unsurprising to researchers given our understanding of the "educational debt" *(Ladson-Billings, 2006)* accrued to students in juvenile justice settings. Although most young people in these settings are of high school age, academic indicators suggest serious gaps between their competencies and age/grade-level academic standards. Students at both facilities range from very low to grade level appropriate levels of academic mastery in both reading and math.

Figure 8: Student Assessment Summary Statistics (2017-2019)

	Full Sample	Camp A	Camp B
Mean Reading Score (Grade Level Equivalent)	7.1	7.1	7.1
Std. Dev.	3.2	2.9	3.3
Range	(0-13)	(1.9-12.7)	(0-13)
Total Students to take Reading Test 1	207	72	135
Mean Math Score (Grade Level Equivalent)	6.4	6.2	6.5
Std. Dev.	3.1	2.8	3.2
Range	(0-13)	(2.2-13)	(0-13)
Total Students to take Math Test 1	197	65	132
Mean Length of Stay (Days)	181.3	178.2	183.2
Std. Dev.	98.2	103.5	95.4
Range	(1-675)	(1-540)	(14-675)
Total Students with Entry & Exit Date	217	79	138

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However, we were alarmed by the anomalously low scores present in the data. The presence of scores indicating *no* schooling, or second grade reading, or math mastery levels led us to examine the data more closely to gain a better understanding of the magnitude and source of these outliers, and more deeply consider their implications.

The table in **Figure 9** displays both missing scores and extreme outliers for changes between scores. Extreme outliers appear to be an indicator of disengagement during at least one or more assessments, while missing scores indicate significant deviations from policy. The problem of outliers appears particularly acute at Camp B where upwards of 20% of the students that took at least two tests had grade level changes of six levels or more. Several cases involve students assessing at "high" levels relative to others in the camp, suggesting disengagement may be particularly acute among those students. In many cases, but not all, extremely low scores are from initial assessment of the student. This pattern suggests the potential importance at looking at processes associated with transition into the camps, or perhaps the

circumstances of the assessments. Disengagement from the task of assessment is not limited to those scoring low on initial assessments and extremely high on subsequent tests, which leads us to believe that disengagement from the task of assessment likely has multiple causes, including that of the trauma of incarceration, separation from family and community, or situational events at the facility. CTS research staff noted that the physical space for assessment at Camp B was not ideal and afforded little shield from distractions and interruptions. These issues should all be systematically considered.

LACOE policy is to conduct initial academic assessments within a week of arrival at the camps and every ninety days thereafter.[11] However, data obtained from LACOE indicate a lack of uniform compliance. **Figure 9** also shows that 5% of students at Camp A for more than 14 days had not been assessed for reading, and 10% had not been assessed for math. In Camp B, 8% of such students had not been assessed in reading, and 12% had not been assessed in math. Data indicate even less compliance in subsequent assessment. In Camp A, 31% of the students in the camp for 100 days or more past the initial reading
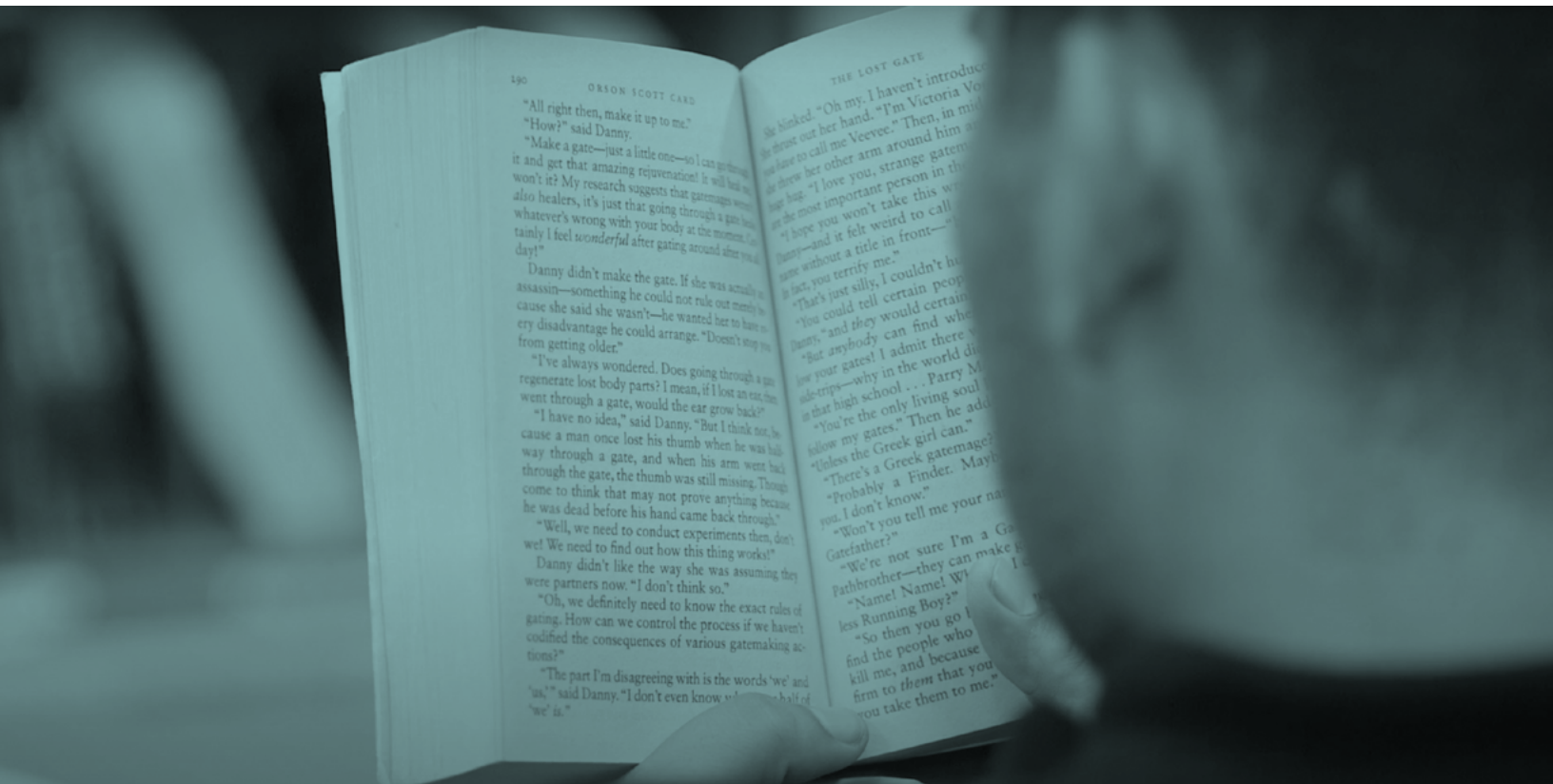
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Figure 9: The Missing and the Disengaged: Understanding the Reasons for Missing Reading and Math Assessment Data & Data Outliers (2017-2019)

	Reading Data		Math Data	
	Camp A	Camp B	Camp A	Camp B
Missing				
Stay was less than 14 days*	4%	0%	3%	0%
Stay was 14+ days No Test**	5%	8%	10%	12%
Student had not taken Test 2 100+ Days after T1***	31%	65%	55%	75%
Disengaged				
Student scores changed by over 6 grade levels****	6%	22%	3%	20%

*Denominator everyone who entered the camp
**Denominator students at the camp for over 14 days
***Denominator students took at least one test and remained at camp for 100 days or more
****Denominator all students taking two or more tests

assessment, had not taken a second test, and that percentage is more than double for those not taking a second math assessment. At Camp B second assessments were even more rare. Sixty-five percent of students in the camp 100 or more days after the initial reading assessment had not taken a second reading assessment, and seventy-five percent had not taken an additional math assessment. Interviews and subsequent discussions with LACOE administration indicate that student refusal may play an important role in failure to adhere to policy in this area. Some students whose stay exceeded 100 days were later assessed. However, given that the average stay at both camps is around 6 months, many students leave the facility without ever being reassessed in accordance with RTSA policy. While it is understandably difficult to assess academic improvement for students with short stays of less than three months, the magnitude of missing data suggests systemic issues beyond episodic student refusal. We recommend a systematic review of both academic assessment policy and an audit of

implementation issues. Despite our reservations about the systemic impact of student refusal on compliance with the timing of assessments, we believe that refusals combined with the presence of a significant number of outliers in the data (representing students who appear to have profoundly underperformed in math or reading assessments), certainly suggest possible problems with student engagement and/or assessment circumstances.

As mentioned, outliers were not rare enough for our research team to feel comfortable simply excluding them or transforming them. Instead, we decided to use a Bayesian outlier accommodation model as a more robust model to use with outliers such as those present in this data *(Paddock, Wynn & Buntin, 2004).* Additionally, variation in time spent inside each facility, inconsistent timing of the assessments (missing data), resulted in very small numbers of students in some categories, rendering the results obtained by parsing the data categories descriptively difficult to interpret, and therefore less useful.

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Figure 10 displays results from the analysis, and indicates small, positive levels improvement in reading scores and slight declines in math scores for all students. The results indicate a positive, but not statistically significant impact of being in Camp A. It is important to note that the length of time spent in camps varied substantially, with some students there just a few months and others there a year or more. Students entering and exiting camps 3-4 months or less were often not given a second educational assessment before their exit from the facility, and most students in both facilities were not assessed at time intervals in accordance with policy.

Figure 10: Regression Model: Reading and Math Assessment Scores (2017-2019)

	Reading	Math
Total Days	0.0062* (0.0032)	-0.0056** (0.0027)
Camp A	0.4662 (0.6640)	0.7070 (0.5741)
Constant	-1.7098** (0.8029)	1.4957** (0.6997)
Observations	138	93

Standard Errors are in Parenthesis

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

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KEY FINDINGS & IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Due to the circumstances of educational delivery in juvenile justice contexts, determining the impact of the RTSA model on learning outcomes is not straightforward. Specifically, data collection and analysis must be sensitive to the fact that juvenile justice contexts have constantly shifting student populations. Students arrive at the camps with a wide range of skill levels, at varying times of the year, and for widely varying lengths of time.[12] Yearly accountability reporting based on the school calendar organized around grade levels and generally shared timing of student's entries and exits, is largely irrelevant in this context. Therefore, using averages gleaned from aggregated yearly summative assessments are not at all informative about student learning and institutional effectiveness. The following is a summary of key findings gleaned from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses.

The RTSA model of instruction and intervention is associated with modest gains in reading but not in math.

Student performance on standardized measures of skill mastery is often well below grade level upon entry into camps and there is often tremendous variation in skill levels among students at each camp at any given time.

Classroom observations and student interviews suggest high levels of student engagement and excitement about themes and topics explored in project-based learning projects.

The timing of educational assessments are not uniformly administered at entry and thereafter every 90 days in accordance with policy, making assessment of model impact on direct learning outcomes difficult. The lack of consistency alignment and data-sharing between agencies stymies implementation fidelity.

Educational delivery services must be coordinated with multiple agencies (Probation and DMH) that have programs and practices that may be in conflict, or that would be better supported with more meaningful coordination.

High levels of turnover among both administrators, and teaching staff, must be considered in ongoing implementation plans and is critical to achieve successful implementation of RTSA.

Other educational services offered alongside RTSA (i.e.for credit recovery, and ELL) have not yet been fully aligned to the RTSA model and may depress the overall levels of student engagement.

12 The average stay at each camp was approximately three months.

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CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The designers of RTSA took some of the most innovative, research-based, educational practices centered on student engagement, and created a model that shows great promise for elevating educational delivery in the juvenile justice context. At its best, this model of instruction is clearly aligned with current Los Angeles County directives to "re-envision juvenile justice" away from punitive systems of control that has resulted in the further marginalization of disadvantaged youth and towards a system of care and educational engagement. By providing justice-involved young people with the opportunities to relate academic learning to their own lived experiences and curiosities about the world, we create a springboard for ongoing academic success and create clear pathways for them to continue to contribute to positive social change in their own lives and in their communities after their incarceration. The county and state must carefully consider that carceral settings are not the optimal setting for care-centered educational delivery, however, insomuch as children are in such settings, we are obligated to provide the very best evidence-based educational services, and to ensure that they are faithfully delivered as intended. Our students in juvenile justice contexts deserve the chance to reach their full academic potential, just like all school-age youth in the state of California.

Local (LA County) Recommendations

Develop strong systems of administrative and system accountability and capacity across agencies in an integrated fashion around student academic, social and emotional development, physical and psychological health. One cohesive, care-centered system is needed, not separate systems and efforts.

Establish ongoing, all-inclusive professional development to support implementation fidelity and alignment across all staff working directly with students. This should include other shared expectations and staffing needed to implement quality instructional models successfully.

Prioritize joint agency planning, capacity building and accountability related to the frequency and use of assessments to advance student learning, health and well-being.

Establish data sharing agreements between LACOE, the Department of Mental Health and Probation.

The appropriate and meaningful use of technology to enhance learning across all aspects of educational delivery must be considered, especially for RTSA.

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State Recommendations

Strengthen and incentivize the pipeline for diverse and talented educators committed to the educational success of justice-involved youth.The court schools are too often off the radar of policymakers and stakeholders as a high need area for well prepared, diverse teachers.

Create appropriate monitoring and data accountability systems to inform educational progress & re-entry. This monitoring and data use should work across the LAOCOE, Probation and the Department of Mental Health and other relevant agencies serving young people.

Focus on interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline through juvenile incarceration prevention by providing targeted funding & supports for Black & Latinx youth & communities across all 80 districts, especially in districts of origin for most court school students.

Our study suggests that a significant roadblock to RTSA model implementation on each of the campuses is the high rate of turnover of both academic and administrative staff. The observed turnover reflects a the need to recruit and to retain highly qualified educators to work in juvenile justice contexts, nationwide. Full and faithful implementation of the RTSA model requires ongoing development, and training of committed staff with exceptional capacity to prioritize student learning.

Survey results suggest that despite recently expanded mandates under the 'Every Student Succeeds Act' (ESSA) and 'Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act', timely assessment of students and the transfer of academic credits continue to be a nationwide problem *(Mazzafir, Burdick, McIrney, et al. 2020)*. In the present study, the proportion of students who did not have educational assessment data for both entry and exit ranged dramatically for each camp/subject area. Like schools in communities all over the nation, assessment data are integral to ensuring that "all means all" in terms of educational services delivery. Additionally, the county of Los Angeles and state of California have no data systems for tracking what happens to students upon re-entry. Such a system for statewide data collection and sharing between states could be built into California's longitudinal data system, which is currently under development.

Even as we celebrate the dramatic decline in the numbers of students in County facilities, we are concerned that whatever the numbers, justice-involved youth should be able to access the full range of educational services that are necessary to ensure their future success. Further, the disproportionate representation of youth with disabilities and other special needs, suggest the need for pervasive support for the entire education infrastructure in under-resourced communities. Prioritizing early education, equitably funded schools, housing, jobs opportunities and healthy neighborhood conditions for Black and Latinx youth, who too often are negatively impacted by poverty, as well as systemic and structural racism is the best path of prevention, opportunity, and cost savings for the state.

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APPENDIX

Figures A & B represent data visualizations of initial levels and of change in reading and math assessment levels for students having at least two assessment scores. In the graph, the midpoint (median) of the change scores is represented by the heavy line in the middle of the graph. The dots are the extreme outliers. In this case, the box plots show the presence as well as the magnitude of score change outliers that deviate significantly from what would be expected. Discussions with technical, teaching and administrative staff, as well as more detailed data scrutiny, led us to conclude that the outliers were not caused by simple recording errors, but rather, were likely caused by student disengagement/resistance to assessment. For example, in one case, a student went from 2nd grade to 11th grade levels, another student went from 10th grade to 2nd grade, and then back to 11th grade before exiting the facility. In our view, the substantial presence of such outliers at each facility suggested the need for further scrutiny.

Figure A: Changes in Reading Assessment Scores (using Grade Level Equivalent) (2017-2019)
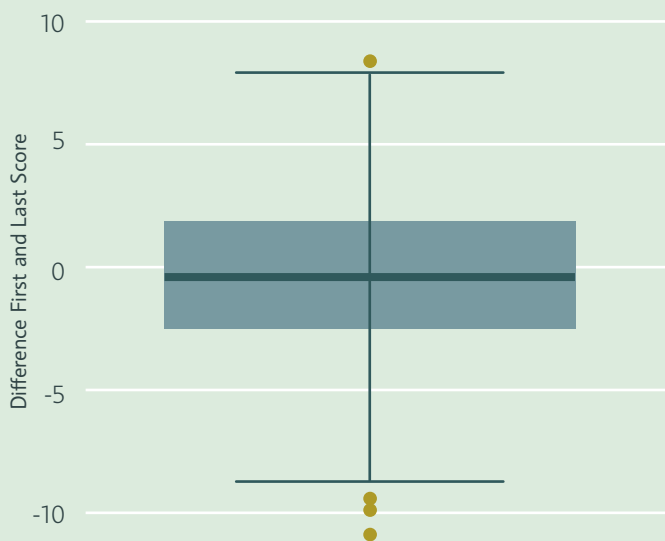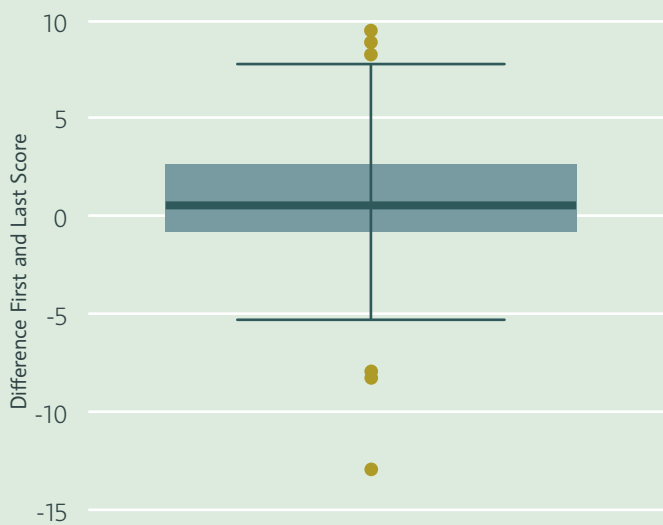

Figure B: Changes in Math Assessment Scores (using Grade Level Equivalent (2017-2019)

Legend

- ● Extreme outliers in student assessment score changes
- ▬ Inter-quartile range (IQR) of score changes (represents the middle 50%)
- ▬ Median score change
- — Upper and lower whiskers (scores outside the middle 50%)

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