
Advancing Competency Development
in
Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System

Summary of a White Paper

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Advancing Competency Development

One of the fundamental purposes of Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system, according to the explicit language of the Juvenile Act, is to develop “competencies” in delinquent youth. What does that mean? How is it done? This monograph attempts to answer those questions, articulating basic principles and identifying research-supported practices, outcomes, and measures for competency development that conform to the Juvenile Act’s language and purposes. It’s a distilled version of a more detailed document entitled *Advancing Competency Development: A White Paper for Pennsylvania*, produced by a focus group of state and local practitioners meeting over the course of two years under the auspices of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Committee. While it should be of immediate practical use to juvenile justice planners and decision-makers in Pennsylvania, it is not intended to be the last word on this vital issue, but rather the start of an extended discussion.

The Five Domains of Competency

Competency development is the process by which juvenile offenders acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become productive, connected, and law-abiding members of their communities. These fall into five basic domains or skill areas:

1. *Pro-Social Skills* help adolescents increase their chances of navigating their interactions with others. Goals for this domain include better social interactions, problem-solving, and impulse control.
2. *Moral Reasoning Skills* help adolescents to understand how their thinking, values, and choices affect their behavior and recognize thought processes that rationalize negative behaviors. Efforts to strengthen skills in this domain involve teaching young

people principles to live by and guidelines for making good choices.
The goal is making the right decisions for the right reasons.

3. *Academic Skills* include basic reading, writing, and math skills as well as general study and learning skills that help adolescents improve their chances of having a successful educational experience. Although the juvenile justice system is not responsible for “fixing” failing students or failing schools, it should take responsibility for advocating on behalf of offenders with educational gaps. Goals for this domain include catching up with peers in school and advancing to the highest possible level of academic achievement.
4. *Workforce Skills* help older teens improve their chances of being economically self-sufficient after schooling is completed. This domain includes a set of general skills for getting jobs, keeping jobs, and achieving promotions, as well as specialized skills needed for particular types of jobs. The goal for this domain is economic self-sufficiency.
5. *Independent Living Skills* help older teens, particularly those coming out of placement/foster care who are unable to return home, to improve their chances of living successfully on their own. Skills in this domain relate to such things as money management and budgeting, educational and career planning, and knowing how to get financial aid, housing assistance, and medical insurance. The goal for this domain is self-sufficient living.

Building Competencies Through Training

Building competencies in any of these five domains starts with direct training in pertinent skills. Effective skill training programs tend to incorporate some or all of the following elements:

- ⊕ *Presentation* of the skill in such a way as to convey its benefits.
- ⊕ *Modeling* that demonstrates use of the skill.
- ⊕ *Role-play/guided practice* that engages trainees in active, experiential learning, then affords time to reflect and opportunity to discuss.
- ⊕ *Corrective feedback* that helps trainees identify what they did well in the role-plays and what they need to improve.
- ⊕ *Generalization* that helps trainees identify a variety of settings or situations in which the skill can be used.
- ⊕ *Coaching* that encourages trainees to use specific skills in specific situations, follows up periodically, and re-teaches a point or principle as necessary.
- ⊕ *Positive reinforcement* for appropriate use of the learned skill.
- ⊕ *Recycling* of the skill.

Connecting Training With Real Life in the Community

Very little long-term, real-life change can be expected from training that stops immediately after the youth learns the skill in counseling, classroom, or role-play sessions. Juvenile offenders need real-life opportunities to practice and demonstrate their new skills in the community, for one thing. But they also need to establish positive relationships with law-abiding adults and peers, to form ties with pro-social community groups and institutions, and to receive services and supports designed to reinforce the skill-building. Because competency development is not just about training; it's about training and *connecting*.

For institutionalized youth in particular, that means new approaches are called for, incorporating work furlough and community service opportunities, off-site vocational training, and other pre- and post-release activities designed to bridge the transition from learning skills to using them in community settings. Residential service providers, probation departments, and families must collaborate while the youth is in placement so that skills can be sustained during home visits and upon reentry into the community.

The train-and-connect principle may call for a rethinking of community service as well. Typically, probation departments have imposed work obligations primarily to address accountability goals. But work service activities can develop and reinforce competencies as well, if they provide opportunities to reinforce skills, strengthen relationships with pro-social adults in the community, and increase bonds to positive groups/institutions.

Six Things Juvenile Probation Must Do

Probation departments, working under the direction of juvenile courts, play a central role in advancing competency development. Though that role may vary from case to case, juvenile probation officers should, at a minimum, do the following six things for every delinquent youth, whether the youth is placed on probation or ordered into a residential program:

1. *Assess.* Conduct a structured assessment across all five domains for the purpose of identifying competency development strengths and needs (especially those closely associated with the juvenile's offending behavior).
2. *Plan.* Develop a supervision plan based upon the assessment results. Clearly state expectations regarding the competency development goal and identify specific activities that each party (juvenile, parent, probation, provider) will engage in pursuant to the goal. Explain criteria for success or failure,

how the youth's progress will be monitored, and consequences for noncompliance.

3. *Connect.* Provide opportunities to practice and demonstrate new skills (e.g., community service projects) and make connections with pro-social adults and peers and community groups (e.g., mentoring, clubs, church groups). Identify services and supports in the community that will facilitate mastery of skills and make referrals to them.
4. *Oversee.* Monitor participation and progress and make adjustments as needed.
5. *Motivate.* Encourage and support individual's participation in the selected skill-training curriculum and reinforce learning. Apply incentives and sanctions to reinforce accountability.
6. *Document.* Record intermediate outcomes at case closing.

Competency Development Responsibilities of Other System Actors

Because advancing competency development is the collective responsibility of the juvenile justice system, other system actors have work to do in this area as well:

- ⊕ *Prosecuting and defense attorneys* should advocate for the development of good skill training, community service and other positive youth development programs in the community and recommend offender involvement in them.
- ⊕ *Detention staff* should develop relationships and apply a strength-based approach that is focused on recognizing a young person's strengths, potential and ability to become a productive, connected and law-abiding member of the community.

- ⊕ *Residential programs* should provide skill training, develop a relationship-strengthening and community-connectedness focus in order to overcome isolation, and find creative, positive and active roles for youth as leaders and mentors for other youth.
- ⊕ *Schools* should work to remove barriers to re-enrollment following release from placement, provide educational assessment and remediation of court-involved youth, and partner with juvenile probation to encourage good attendance and retention.
- ⊕ *Businesses, churches, and community groups* should create and support pro-social community activities in which youth can succeed and provide support to families and positive youth development opportunities.
- ⊕ *Parents and guardians* should actively partner with the court in supporting the development of youth competencies.

Measuring Competency Development

If the juvenile justice system is to take its full measure of responsibility for competency development, it must begin by consistently measuring its own performance and the results it achieves. For this purpose, measurement at case closing—the point of service termination, at which the direct and immediate effect of service delivery is knowable and relatively easy to document—makes the most sense.

One basic kind of competency-related information that must be collected at case closing is *output* information. Outputs include any skill-building or reinforcing activities engaged in while under supervision. A probation officer recording outputs related to competency would indicate (1) whether individual juveniles were assessed with respect to each of the five competency domains described above, (2) whether activities addressing needs in any of these domains were included in the

case plan, and (3) whether those activities were partially or successfully completed.

Probation departments must also collect *outcome* information at case closing. Outcomes include all goal-related results, at least as far as they can be known as of the time a case is closed. Specifically, probation officers should document evidence of goal attainment—the degree to which an offender is leaving the system more competent in terms of being productive, connected and law-abiding.

- ⊕ Indicators of *productivity* at the time of case closing would include the juvenile’s attending school and passing, attending a GED preparation or alternative education program, participating in vocational training, working or actively seeking work.
- ⊕ Indicators of *connection* with the community would include such things as active engagement with a mentor, positive peer group, club or other organized school or community group or activity.
- ⊕ Indicators of being *law-abiding* would include having completed the term of supervision without new adjudications, convictions or pending court cases.

Next Steps

Clarifying and implementing Pennsylvania’s vision for juvenile justice will be an evolutionary process. Although the White Paper begins the task of defining and giving substance to the system goal of competency development, much more work is needed. In the coming years, our efforts will be directed at all of the following:

- ⊕ *Assessment and case-planning protocols*: developing statewide protocols for assessing individual needs and using the results to develop goal-directed supervision plans, match clients with resources, and justify expenditure of resources.

- ⊕ *Promising practices*: compiling a compendium of proven and promising competency development practices and skill-training curricula.
- ⊕ *Case-closing form*: improving the case closing form and encouraging and supporting its use in all counties.
- ⊕ *Aftercare model*: developing an aftercare model that will incorporate best practices in competency development.
- ⊕ *Professional training and development*: instituting a program of competency development training and technical assistance for judges, attorneys, juvenile probation officers, service providers, and placement staff.

For more information, download the detailed white paper at www.ncjj.org, or contact:

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