

## The Road to Success Academy

As a system-level curriculum advisor supporting education in juvenile justice settings, I strongly recommend adopting the Road to Success Academy (RTSA) model across all court-involved youth programs. This model represents a powerful shift from disconnected, often punitive approaches to one that centers students' identities, emotions, and aspirations through interdisciplinary, project-based learning.

Too often, education in juvenile justice facilities is fragmented and inequitable. Students, especially Black, Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and disabled youth, are handed worksheets instead of meaningful lessons, and are isolated from the relationships they need to thrive (Southern Education Foundation, 2014; Anderson, 2016). RTSA challenges that reality. Founded in 2010 in Los Angeles County, it was designed with students, not just for them. It focuses on building trust, supporting emotional growth, and providing academic pathways that reconnect students with a sense of purpose.

From a system standpoint, RTSA reflects what the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education call for: high-quality, trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate education. Instead of treating school as a form of discipline, RTSA reimagines it as a space of healing, identity development, and empowerment. SEL is woven into every subject, not treated as an "extra" and students are encouraged to see themselves as capable learners and leaders.

One of RTSA's most important strengths is how it applies the Simple Interactions framework (Module 4.4.2), which emphasizes connection, reciprocity, inclusion, and growth. These values become visible in everyday classroom practices, when a teacher celebrates a student's effort, when students co-create learning goals, and when learning is made relevant to real life. As system leaders, we should ensure these practices aren't the exception but the expectation. That means investing in teacher training, curriculum design, and consistent professional development grounded in this relational framework.

RTSA also helps students build both bonding and bridging social capital (Module 4.4.3). Youth in confinement are often cut off from family, community, and future opportunities. RTSA addresses this by creating peer mentoring programs, student leadership opportunities, and community-based projects that help students imagine life beyond the system. These are more than academic tasks they're acts of restoration and possibility.

Some may worry that RTSA's focus on social-emotional learning and identity takes away from academics. But that's a misunderstanding. Research shows the opposite: SEL is essential for long-term success (Zakrzewski, 2014; Deming, 2017). When students feel emotionally safe and seen, they engage more deeply with academic work. RTSA proves that integrating SEL into challenging, standards-aligned projects leads to higher attendance, stronger engagement, and clearer post-release goals.

To bring this model to scale, system-level coordination is essential. Education for justice-involved youth is often overseen by multiple agencies school boards, court systems, corrections, and social services with little alignment (Southern Education Foundation, 2014). Implementing RTSA across settings requires unified goals, shared accountability measures, and cross-agency collaboration. It

also demands resources for trauma-informed training, culturally relevant curriculum, and especially special education since 65–70% of detained youth have disabilities (National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability, 2015).

Another crucial system responsibility is engaging families. Too often, caregivers are left out of the process. RTSA takes a different approach inviting families into the learning process through home visits, collaborative goal setting, and advisory boards. This aligns with Mapp & Kuttner's (2013) Dual Capacity-Building Framework, which emphasizes building trust and shared responsibility between educators and families. For system-wide adoption, these practices should become policy, not left to chance.

In conclusion, the Road to Success Academy model offers a bold and necessary path forward. It addresses long-standing gaps in juvenile justice education by rooting learning in relationships, equity, and real-world relevance. If we truly believe in the potential of every young person, then the system has to reflect that belief. Institutionalizing RTSA is more than a policy decision it's a commitment to human dignity, educational justice, and lasting change