Fourteen Steps We Can Take Now to Transform Juvenile Justice Systems

1. Incentivize and empower schools and law enforcement to respond to disciplinary issues with positive behavioral interventions and alternative dispute resolution – not with arrest, expulsion, and court referral. The school-to-prison pipeline denies opportunity to the most children who need it most – including, disproportionately, minority youth.

2. Create a range of diversionary alternatives to formal prosecution. Diversion should involve quick, meaningful connection to services that meet key developmental needs while helping youth to appreciate consequences. Consider creating specialized diversion options for youth whose involvement in the justice system is connected to a mental health disorder.

3. Support a continuum of community-based supervision options to reduce unnecessary juvenile detention. No child should jailed unless he or she is shown to be a danger to the community. Build consensus among stakeholders to eliminate the detention of nonviolent and status offending youth; provide respite care for youth with volatile living situations; and engage nonprofits to offer programs like after-school drop-in centers for youth whose juvenile cases are pending.

4. Engage nonprofits to offer service opportunities to justice system-involved youth. Every child needs an opportunity to give back, and community service can be a diversionary option; a cost-effective alternative to probation; a key developmental support that teaches self-esteem and builds civic responsibility; a productive after-school activity; and a chance to develop career interests.

5. Connect the parents of court-involved youth with the government benefits and programs and the nonprofit-sector services that can help them provide for their children’s needs, including housing and nutrition. Consider transforming juvenile court waiting rooms into clearinghouses for nonprofit and government assistance.

6. Create pathways to employment credentialing opportunities for justice system-involved youth and their families, including offering vocational certification in juvenile facilities, as a function of reentry programming; and as a part of parole.

7. Ensure that every child has a meaningful opportunity to get an excellent education by encouraging nonprofit, government, and business collaboration around providing supports – including case management, counseling, and vocational training – to students in alternative schools.

8. Treat justice system-involved youth as victims of trauma – because they are. Make sure that they have access to the supports, from therapy to medication, that they need to confront the chronic and acute traumas in their lives.

9. Design and implement a continuum of services for youth who are emerging from secure custody to ensure that they are successfully knitted back into the supports that they need in their homes and communities. We cannot afford not to invest heavily in these youth – the alternative is spending more later, at enormous cost to public safety.

10. Remove barriers to reentry and successful rehabilitation by banning the box and facilitating record expungement and sealing.

11. Launch a city-wide training platform to educate youth development professionals – from teachers to probation officers – on best practices in working with youth in the juvenile justice system. Focus on trauma-informed care, adolescent development, and cultural competence.

12. Protect the right of every child to fairness, dignity, and opportunity. Children in the juvenile justice system learn how their government is prepared to treat them – if the process is unfair, or if their rights are not respected, their encounter with the courts will serve to disconnect them even further. Ensure that all children have well-resourced defense advocates who can stand up for them in court and help them access the services and supports that they need to thrive.

13. Build consensus for reform as a way of protecting the public, helping children to develop, and spending public funds wisely. Engage youth and their families in those conversations, and listen to them carefully.

14. Insist that all juvenile justice policies be data-driven and justified by cost-benefit analysis – and only invest in solutions that work. Build a juvenile justice dashboard to track your efforts and your successes.