5-14-2002

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"These kids are your kids; they are not Training School kids," Deputy Supt. Roosevelt Benton tells a group of prominent visitors.

BY MARION DAVIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

CRANSTON — The classrooms are decorated with pictures and educational posters, and the grounds between the buildings have been prettied up with flowers, multicolored foliage plants and grass.

But the students here wear prison uniforms, and the windows — those that aren't obscured by thick screens — all look out at a tall fence.

The Rhode Island Training School for Youth is unlike any place most Rhode Islanders will ever set foot in. Yet last year, more than 1,000 young people spent time here, serving, on average, six- to nine-month sentences. Most are

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Youths

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back in our communities now, some trying to lead normal lives, others again committing crimes.

The problem is that while there is awareness of the needs of these youths, the child-advocacy group Rhode Island Kids Count and the Rhode Island School of Social Work in New England hosted a "Child Watch" at the prison.

For two weeks, 200 hours, about 30 business leaders, state officials, and other guests toured the Training School, spoke directly with incarcerated youths to find out what they can do to improve the teens' chances of success after they are released.

For 17-year-old, David Hurlbut, who has led the Training School through major improvements in the last five years, urged the visitors to recognize even this in a way that "nothing works" to rehabilitate delinquent youths.

But the effort to save these boys and girls can't end at the Training School's gates, Hurlbut and others said.

"These are your kids; they are not Training School kids," Deputy Supt. Roosevelt Benton said. "They belong to you. ... Their future is in your hands. I want a deal and return to the community to be productive citizens. They're here temporarily."

U.S. Rep. James B. Leach, who hosted the event with Channel 10 (WJAR) President Lisa Churchill, asked the guests to consider the overall impact of the Training School, educational disparities, family dysfunctions, and, for released inmates, a lack of support for their rehabilitation efforts. Hurlbut can stack the odds against youths.

It's not enough to feel sorry for the Training School's inmates, Reed suggested. "The real challenge is to put our money where our noble thoughts are."

DAVID (all inmates' names have been changed) has been at the training school since last November. He's serving six months for breaking and entering. His problem: alcohol and marijuana. He's been free for about three months, but then he started getting drunk and stoned "all the time." His friends were using him as a scapegoat to cover their own responsibilities. He said he's ready to get out of there for a chance to change his life.

"You don't want to come to the Training School to find out that you're wrong, so you're doing wrong," he said.

JOAO, another Project Peer speaker, told the guests that his experience at the school enabled him to improve his own life, and with the help of supportive adults at the Training School, he's made great strides in controlling his anger.

But asked what his greatest fear was, he said it's the temptations of the outside world.

I'm scared of what's going to happen — how am I going to react — so I'm going to lose control. Are people going to treat me? I'm scared. How are they going to see me? Are they going to see me as a champion, or is it a criminal looking for trouble?"

TROY, 14, an inmate for the last 17 months, took the guests around the High Security Unit, his home for the past year.

The classrooms there have no view to the outside, but visitors can look out the windows in the hallways. Troy said the Training School has helped him academically, because he gets more personal attention from teachers. He said he does not like to come to the school because "the gang stuff is too tough."

"The out side," he skipped school.

Troy also showed the guests the gym, and then the computer lab, where each youth gets two one-hour sessions a week to work on assignments, play games, surf the Web.

Finally, Troy showed them the dormitory, where he sleeps on a cot. He said that reformed inmates that are rated as Level 1 to Level 4, depending on points they earn for cleanliness, school work and behavior, can stay here an 8:30 p.m. bed time, and no privileges. With each level, the youth gets a later bedtime, more books, magazine subscriptions, etc.

"I'm a Level 3," he said. "I'm trying to get to Level 4 before I go to school on Monday, so they'll help me earn his release at a hearing later this month.

JEN, 17, led one of the last tours, through the girl's facility. The girls' facility at the Training School is overcrowded, the Census yesterday was 210, in a place with capacity for 180 inmates — but in this 220-celled unit, the impact is particularly noticeable.

Three double bunks narrow the hallway. The family-like atmosphere can accommodate five extra girls. And with girls awaiting adjudication mixed in with the sentenced inmates, the teachers often have to watch two programs, in the classroom and the day room, the class, Jen said.

"We don't learn much here," she said. "There's so many different programs. The program the teachers just try to come up with something everybody can do."

Only the math teacher has all the materials for each student's level, she said. Jen has no question that she's falling behind academically. She's not making much progress on the personal front, either.

"They call it a rehabilitation center, but there's not really much rehabilitation here."

HURBLUT is the first to acknowledge that the Training School can't help every inmate, especially those who stay only for a couple of months.

"The reality is, it's very difficult for us to change kids in a short period of time," he said. "In fact, he added, short-term exposure to a facility like that with the accompanying "trauma" can harm kids.

This is why Rhode Islanders should try to troubled young people before they're at the point that requires incarceration, Hurlbut said.

"This should always be a last resort."

To learn more about the Training School, go to:

http://www.brown.edu/Departments/ES/Reports/RTS