


A black and white illustration of a hand holding a book. The book's cover is heavily damaged, with a large, jagged tear at the top. The text on the cover is bold and stylized. The background is a textured, stippled grey.

NEW YORK CITY'S
**MOST
TROUBLED
YOUTH**

GETTING CAUGHT
READING AT PASSAGES
ACADEMY LIBRARIES

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I came to Passages Academy's Bridges site in September 2003 to serve as a literacy teacher. When I reported to work for the first day of my new teaching assignment, I was surprised to find that a juvenile detention center behind closed gates and barbed wire really existed in New York City. Can a free adult imagine being a young person of twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years of age and being locked up? Can one imagine spending one's days in a jumpsuit and nights sleeping alone in a small room far from family?

New York City has a long history of detaining young people it determines to be "juvenile delinquents" or "juvenile offenders." Dating back to the opening of the New York State Penitentiary in 1797, young delinquents have been removed from New York City's general population on an ongoing basis (Roffe n.d.). Today New York City's Department of Juvenile Justice, created in 1979, takes over five thousand young citizens into custody each year (NYCDJJ 2007).

Until 1998, the Department of Juvenile Justice was responsible for providing educational services to the residents in its custody. In January 1998, the NYC Board of Education began to operate Passages Academy, a full-time educational program providing standards-based credit-bearing courses to incarcerated students. To the greatest extent

possible, the goal is to minimize interruptions to a student's educational career. A student who is preparing to take the city's standardized exams in June and is subsequently taken into DJJ custody months, weeks, or days before the test date can now, thanks to Passages, continue to prepare for and take the exam. However, until Passages Academy created a library, there was literally no way for students to access information beyond materials prepared by a conscientious teacher.

History of Passages Academy Libraries

When it opened in 1998, Passages Academy was lucky to have a visionary teacher in Rebecca Howlett. Hired to teach social studies, Howlett was shocked and saddened to find that no libraries were available to students who were locked inside a building for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. "There were no rooms with books," she said in a recent interview (2008). "Each individual dorm area had books, but they were, more often than not, one of three titles: *GED Prep*, *New Testament*, or *The Cross and the Switchblade*. There were some other random books around like *The Von Trapp Family Singers*." Howlett recalls that, when she brought books into her classroom, her students enjoyed being read to and reading on their own. Remembering her own childhood love of reading, she decided that kids who were sequestered from their families and going through hard times with limited contact with the outside world needed and deserved to discover their own love of reading.

Over the next five years Howlett forged professional relationships with colleagues, staff, and administrators that would pave the way for the opening of the very first Passages Academy library at Horizon in 2003. Another five years later Passages

Academy's libraries have grown from that original single library into a small network of libraries doing their best to satiate the students' hunger for reading materials, and to support students' and the faculty's information needs at Passage Academy's seven sites. Some libraries have just been seeded, while others are flourishing.

Subsequently, Howlett initiated what is now a full-fledged non-profit agency, Literacy for Incarcerated Teens (LIT) <www.prisonreader.org/Lit.html> to provide strategic support to the library project, which is, like so many school libraries, woefully underfunded through government funding formulas. LIT has been a critical factor in the libraries' successes. While Howlett has moved on, her legacy continues under the leadership of Sydney Blair, Principal of Passages Academy. Blair's background in reading and her commitment to excellence in education for underserved and special-needs children have been key to the realization of Passages Academy's libraries.

Passages Academy's Libraries Today

Passage Academy's current library team includes two certified school library media specialists, two literacy teachers, a library coordinator, a library assistant, and an education paraprofessional. Our goal is to provide high quality school library services to the students we serve. Receiving a great deal of guidance and inspiration from both the outstanding Office of School Library Services in New York City and the New York Public Library's Young Adult librarians, Passages Academy Libraries publishes a regular e-newsletter to share the progress being made in New York City's secure and non-secure juvenile detention center school libraries.



In the last few years our collection has grown by several thousand books, circulation has increased, and we've implemented a popular Authors and Artists series, along with library programs and special events like zine workshops, readings, and poetry café open mikes. In addition to continuing our development of the collection, the next steps involve technology upgrades, renovations to create aesthetically pleasing teen spaces, professional development for teachers, and access to online resources for parents.

Unique Characteristics of Passages Academy's Libraries

Unlike other school libraries in New York City, Passages' libraries were initiated by teachers, administrators, outside supporters (including an array of community

partners), individual volunteers, and collaborating agencies. Initially the focus was on recreational reading. Now the library team is beginning to institute information literacy instruction. However, our setting, specifically the restrictions and configurations we face, impacts our program and services. The libraries' updated technology is designed to conform to the regulations of the Department of Juvenile Justice. Most significantly, this has meant no Internet access for students. Therefore, our instruction on information literacy and evaluation skills is currently based solely on print sources.

Serving as a librarian "inside" is professionally isolating, especially when contrasted with the large and wonderful professional community of almost nine hundred public school school library media specialists in New York City. At the same time, although we need to work independently, the ability to work with other people is particularly critical for student learning. For example, there is no open access to library resources. Unlike the average American middle school or high school library, which welcomes students throughout the day, after school, and during lunchtime, our libraries cannot be so accommodating. Passages' students cannot move throughout the building without escorts. As a result, students do not visit the libraries independently.

To make sure we maximize students' library use, we absolutely must create collaborations with colleagues on a daily basis, co-planning lessons that bring classes inside regularly. Developing and maintaining positive relationships with the Department of Juvenile Justice staff who supervise students' safety is essential. There is no room for lone eagles or prima donnas; teamwork and collaboration are required.

Planning for collaboration is further complicated by the unpredictability of any given day's attendance. Students are enrolled at our school on a short-term basis. They are in and out as they attend court, wait for another court date, wait for a placement, or await discharge. Planning instruction, nurturing relationships, and developing collections to serve instructional and recreational needs are all the more complex due to students' unforeseeable and frequent comings and goings.

Another difference concerns the discrepancy between our patrons' inner and outer lives. Although students' daily schedules are heavily regimented in this controlled setting, their inner lives may feel arid and even chaotic. Having lost the ability to come and go at will, they experience a kind of sensory deprivation. They can't go play video games after school or take part in some pick-up game or hobby. They can't drop in on the public library or closest bookstore to get their favorite urban fiction titles. They can't date or socialize in an ordinary way. They can't step outside for a breath of fresh air. In this heavily controlled setting, reading and libraries are simultaneously an escape, an emotional lifeline, and a tool for deeper self-knowledge.

What's Important about School Media Centers in Detention Settings?

As Rebecca Howlett said when I interviewed her for this article, "The correlation between illiteracy and delinquency is so well documented that it seems that excellent school libraries, coupled with a robust and real literacy program to help students with decoding and comprehension, are necessary if we really are trying to rehabilitate young people.

Statistically, if they can't read above a fifth grade level, then they are more likely to commit a crime, the more likely they are to be repeat felons. It is, sadly, that simple" (2008).

While advocating for social responsibility is on the agenda of every school library media specialist, inside a juvenile detention center advocating for an excellent school media program is part of working toward social justice. Passages' students might not have visited a school library on the outside because it wasn't the thing to do, or their school didn't have a library, or they didn't go to school, or the demands put on them by their family didn't encourage or permit time to spend reading or learning in school libraries. In this light, the libraries can make a significant difference in students' lives. Developing a powerful school media program at a juvenile detention center is a tangible and especially effective way to serve the underserved.

Advocacy and diplomacy are indispensable to the would-be school library media specialist who takes on the task of developing or serving in a juvenile detention center library. The rewards are significant.

Witnessing the library culture take hold and seeing students reclining comfortably on bean bag chairs while reading reminds us daily that our efforts are bearing fruit. Each time a student remarks "Do you have anything else like this one?" or "That was the first book I ever read!" we are motivated to continue our efforts. The library project is succeeding, and there is a great deal more that needs to be done.

Jessica Fenster-Sparber is the library coordinator at Passages Academy, New York City. She recently enjoyed reading Adam Hochschild's Bury the Chains.

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