Improving outcomes for youth in the justice system

An ASU professor shares what schools and communities can do to improve educational and re-entry outcomes for justice-involved youth

By Anna Cearley-Rivas, ASU News
October 28, 2026

Young people leaving the justice system often face significant barriers as they return to school and communities.

Sarup Mathur studies how education, supportive relationships and coordinated services can help them navigate that transition.

Mathur is the Ryan C. Harris Professor of Special Education and associate dean for scholarly advancement at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation.

Over more than 30 years, she has authored or co-authored more than 120 articles, book chapters and books in her area of research.

Her scholarship includes collaborations with principal research specialist Heather Griller Clark, and their latest article, "Opening doors: Strategies to improve educational access for adjudicated youth ," was published in Intervention in School and Clinic.

In recognition of Youth Justice Action Month this October, Mathur discusses what schools and communities can do to improve educational and reentry outcomes for justice-involved youth.

Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.

Question: What conditions must be in place for young people involved in the justice system to learn, develop and build successful futures?

Answer: These young people need to know that the adults around them recognize their strengths and believe in their future. I've seen through our research that education alone isn't enough. They also need stable relationships, mental health support, connections to family and community, and opportunities to prepare for work and adult life.

Also, planning for a young person's return to the community should start as soon as they enter a facility, not shortly before they leave. Schools, families, justice agencies, employers and community organizations must work together so young people aren't left to navigate complicated systems alone.

Most importantly, young people need a voice. When they feel heard and supported, and can imagine a different future, they're much more likely to stay engaged and move forward.

Q: Young people with disabilities are significantly overrepresented in juvenile justice settings. How can schools intervene earlier to prevent students from entering — or returning to — the justice system?

A: Schools are often the first place where we notice a young person struggling. Poor attendance, failing grades, repeated disciplinary referrals, changes in behavior or mental health concerns should signal that a student needs help, instead of grounds for punishment. I believe schools can intervene earlier by building caring relationships, offering positive behavioral and mental health supports and helping students develop problem-solving and self-advocacy skills.

Schools must also carefully review suspensions and expulsions, which remove students from the very environment that could support them. When students return from juvenile facilities, schools should enroll them promptly and ensure the seamless transfer of their records, credits and IEP information.

The first 30 days after release are especially important. A trusted adult should check in regularly, address barriers as they arise and help connect the student and family with needed school and community resources.

Q: Your research has examined educational access and quality inside juvenile facilities. What does a genuinely supportive and developmentally appropriate learning environment look like?

A: A supportive learning environment in a juvenile facility should feel like a real school, not another form of punishment. Young people should learn from teachers who understand that many have experienced school failure, trauma, disability or extended periods away from learning.

We have seen that students respond better when teachers build relationships and meet them where they are without lowering expectations. That must be paired with access to academic courses, credit recovery, technology, career and technical education, and credentials that remain valuable after they leave.

When education inside the facility connects to life outside, each young person leaves with greater clarity about the road ahead.

Q: Your grant-based work has explored approaches ranging from coordinated reentry support to career and technical education. What are the lessons learned?

A: Through a series of federally funded grants, we have learned that successful reentry depends on relationships, continuity and opportunities that young people can see leading to a better future. One of these initiatives, Project Re-Entry Intervention and Support for Engagement (RISE), helped youth develop their own transition plans, identify educational and employment goals, build

portfolios and connect with services before and after release.

We found that young people who became engaged in school, work or positive community activities within the first 30 days were more likely to remain engaged and less likely to return to the justice system.

Q: How are you preparing future generations for greater understanding around this work?

A: I have taught undergraduate and graduate courses focused on creating environments that prevent problem behaviors, promote desirable social behaviors and support self-regulation. Currently, I co-lead a federally funded Preparing Leaders in Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice project, which is supporting 12 doctoral students across three universities: ASU, University of Massachusetts and University of Illinois, Chicago.

Heather Griller Clark and I have also supported Paradise Valley High School students through internships, helping them understand how communities and systems support young people. They bring valuable youth perspectives. In turn, our network connects them with researchers and practitioners, and helps them explore college and career paths in fields where they can support justice-involved youth.

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

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Sarup Mathur