OVERVIEW

Over the past two decades, a growing number of jurisdictions around the nation have undertaken ambitious, comprehensive reform of their juvenile justice systems. As the number of jurisdictions engaged in this type of reform has increased, so too has our understanding of how to effectively implement radical, positive change in juvenile justice systems.

Looking at four jurisdictions with recent successes in youth justice reform (Milwaukee, New York City, Washington DC, and Virginia), JPI has gathered eight elements of successful strategies in youth justice reform. Here are the eight fundamental lessons:

LESSON 1

The fundamental mission of the juvenile justice system should be to transform lives:

Reform must be centered on the notion that the purpose of the juvenile justice system is to positively transform the lives of justice involved youth;
Reform should embrace and reflect the philosophy of positive youth justice: and
The culture of positive youth justice must be instilled throughout the juvenile justice system including prosecutors, judges, and others working throughout the system.

LESSON 2

Build broad-based coalitions:

It is essential to build a broad-based coalition of support for juvenile justice reform including legal, governmental, non-profit advocacy organizations, and foundation advocates;
It is crucial to include victims and families of youthful offenders in the coalition;
Broad-based coalitions can provide assistance in a range of areas: financial, technical, expertise, legal, and public opinion; and
They can draw on sources of support that are often overlooked.

LESSON 3

Develop a comprehensive plan for reform:

Reform requires extensive and comprehensive planning;
Planning efforts must include a broad range of stakeholders;

JUSTICE POLICY INSTITUTE

Planning should draw upon the efforts and expertise of other jurisdictions;
Planning should focus on reducing reliance on incarceration and increasing use of community-based alternatives;
Include a broad range of stakeholders in the design process;
Learn from other jurisdictions;
Understand the population of justice-involved youth;
Establish processes to guide dispositions;
Emphasize community-based services; and
Gather community input.

LESSON 4

Codify reforms through legislation:

For reform to be meaningful and lasting, it must be codified;
Legislation codifying juvenile justice reform must include funding mechanisms;
Funding for reform should include the diversion of monies spent on incarceration into community-based services and supports.

LESSON 5

Reduce the confinement of youth, and racial disparities, in secure facilities through careful risk and needs assessment and decreased length of stay:

Careful development and implementation of data driven risk assessment for decision making in regards to placement;
Reforms should emphasize both reduced placement in secure facilities and shortened lengths of stay; and
Reforms must address continuing racial disparities within juvenile justice systems, especially as they pertain to placement in secure facilities.

LESSON 6

Adjust hiring, training, and case management to reflect principles and goals of reform:

The successful implementation of reform requires improvements in both hiring practices, and training regimens, within juvenile justice systems;
Reforms should include careful evaluation and revision of case management practices;
Changes within hiring, training, and case management should all reflect the principles of positive youth justice and the use of data-driven decision making processes; and
Reforms should include processes that allow for continuous improvement through assessment, professional development, and research-driven innovation.

LESSON 7

Create a continuum of care

Creating a continuum of care, which provides supports and services needed by youth, is necessary to the fundamental reform of a juvenile justice system;
Continua of care must be available to youth in both residential and community-based settings;
Continua of care should offer a wide array of services to both youth and their families;
The supports and services provided to youth and their families should be designed to fit the needs of individuals.

LESSON 8

Gather data to measure progress and ensure continuous improvement:

Reforms must include mechanisms to measure performance and progress;
It is crucial to measure the impact and/or success of reforms in terms that go beyond recidivism rates and placement statistics;
Performance measurement mechanisms must assess performance both within the juvenile justice system and among community-based providers; and
Reforms should include processes that allow for continuous improvement through assessment, professional development, and research-driven innovation.