

**New York City Council
Preliminary Budget Hearing
Education Committee**

**ALTERNATIVE TO
INCARCERATION AND
REENTRY PROGRAMS**

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March 24, 2010

Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES)
Center for Community Alternatives (CCA)
Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)
Fortune Society
Legal Action Center (LAC)
Osborne Association
Women's Prison Association (WPA)

Testimony Presented By
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CEO / President
CASES

My name is Joel Copperman. I am the CEO and President of CASES, a member of the ATI/Reentry Coalition. The ATI/Reentry Coalition consists of seven programs that provide alternative-to-incarceration and reentry services. The Coalition includes the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), Fortune Society, Legal Action Center (LAC), Osborne Association and Women’s Prison Association (WPA). I am here on behalf of the Coalition and those organizations.

On behalf of the ATI/Reentry Coalition, I want to thank the City Council for the support you have provided us for over 10 years. Your assistance allows us to serve thousands of court-involved individuals. In FY 09, the seven organizations that comprise the ATI/Reentry Coalition served over 30,000 clients. The ATI/Reentry Coalition estimates that it provides over \$100 million in savings to the City and State correctional systems each year. We provide services in all five boroughs and recidivism analyses show that less than 20% of program graduates have a new criminal conviction within two years. I appear before the Council today to ask that you continue to support our efforts, particularly with respect to educational services for court-involved individuals.

We are cognizant of the difficult choices and competing interests the City faces as it develops the budget. It is against this backdrop that we emphasize the financial benefit of supporting the educational needs of court-involved individuals. According to research by Northeastern University and the Community Service Society, in lifetime budgetary terms, “each individual without a high school diploma represents a net cost to New York City of \$134,037, whereas each New Yorker with a high school diploma or GED yields a net benefit of \$192,715 – a swing of more than \$325,000 per person.”¹ “Thus, in the aggregate, simply helping one low-skilled New Yorker earn a high school degree or GED is worth more than \$325,000 to the city.”²

The status of New York City’s GED system is dismal. Preparation programs are under-funded,³ instruction is inconsistent,⁴ and there is a lack of supportive services such as guidance counselors and college advisors.⁵ “Programs funded at low levels typically cannot find, pay, and support good teachers...or support transitions from GED classes into work and/or higher education.”⁶ When it comes to test preparation, “[t]here is no single phone number to call, Web site to visit, or other centralized source of information across the variety of preparation options.”⁷ Even finding an open test seat is a challenge as there is no database or formal way of finding open seats at test sites.⁸

¹ Community Service Society, From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City at 9 (Sept. 2009).

² Id. at 1.

³ Id. at 13.

⁴ Id. at 14.

⁵ Id. at 16.

⁶ Id. at 14.

⁷ Id. at 17.

⁸ Id. at 17-18.

The court-involved youth who enter CASES have typically slipped through the cracks of the educational system, with few to no high school credits, a history of truancy, and unmet service needs. In response, CASES provides a number of educational services to court-involved youth.

CASES' Court Employment Project (CEP), an alternative-to-incarceration program for youth, offers literacy, pre-GED and GED prep classes, one-on-one tutoring, school liaison service, and college planning. The GED prep class is a small, specialized class focused on the writing, reading comprehension and mathematics skills needed to pass the GED. CASES also administers the GED exam on-site, meaning our students do not have to worry about not finding an open test seat. Since 2005, 103 people have taken and passed the GED exam at our testing site.

CASES operates Community Prep High School in partnership with the Department of Education. Community Prep is a transitional academy for court-involved youth returning to the community from custodial settings. The school enrolls students aged 14 to 17 who have spent time in detention centers and other justice facilities; it is the only school of its kind in New York City. Community Prep offers a credit-bearing curriculum taught by Department of Education faculty and intensive support services provided by CASES staff. At Community Prep, students build their literacy, mathematical and social skills, earn credits toward a high school diploma, and prepare to transition to an appropriate diploma-granting high school or GED program.

The Learning to Work (LTW)/GED program, a unique partnership between CASES and the Department of Education, offers GED instruction to students age 17-20. DOE certified teachers provide instruction in both pre-GED and GED level classes, where students are grouped by ability by subject. We offer the GED Predictor test and the GED exam approximately every six weeks. Because our students' test referrals come directly from the DOE, our students generally do not encounter problems finding an open test seat. Since 2007, 116 individuals from our LTW/GED program have taken and passed the GED exam.

Importantly, our LTW/GED program provides transitional and guidance services that are missing from other GED programs. We offer work readiness services, paid internships, and one-on-one counseling/advising. The Work Readiness Workshop is a three week long series of employment readiness classes designed to prepare students for the world of work. Students who successfully complete all workshops are then eligible to be placed in a paid internship where they can work between five and 15 hours per week, for the duration of their time in our GED program. We have placed students at internships in elementary schools, media casting agencies, hospitals, auto repair shops, and pharmacies. Last spring we created in-house internships which had students create and publish a journal of poetry, and a culinary arts internship which had students catering our weekly internship meeting. We offer graduate services to students who have earned their diploma with us which include: college application assistance, financial aid assistance, career advisement, resume assistance, and continued counseling with our career

development/community advisors. According to the Community Service Society, “Particularly for young GED candidates, organizations that offer GED instruction as part of a comprehensive strategy that also includes career readiness and job training can provide greater value than a program featuring test help or job readiness alone. Contextualizing GED attainment within a workforce framework also helps students grasp the connection between educational advances and the types of jobs—and level of compensation—they can expect and to which they can aspire.”⁹ This is precisely what our Learning to Work/GED program does.

Finally, what truly sets the CASES Learning to Work/GED Program apart from other Learning to Work/GED programs around the city is our dedication and commitment to serving youth involved with the criminal justice system. We are the only GED program in the city that prioritizes the enrollment of court-involved adolescents and can expedite the process to take as little as one week’s time from referral to sitting in class.

In closing, I note that between our CEP and Learning to Work/GED program, 219 students have passed the GED exam since we began offering these services. Based on the figure cited above (\$325,000 benefit to the City for each GED achiever), the 219 students who passed the GED exam represent a benefit to the City in excess of \$71 million over their lifetimes.

Once again, thank you for your ongoing support and thank you for this opportunity to testify on these important issues. We look forward to continuing to work with the Council.

⁹ Id. at 20.