



Transitioning to Working with At-Risk Youths

I would like to share a recent experience with you.

The week before Christmas, I participated in a resource fair held at Deerfield Correctional Center in Capron, Virginia. There were two hundred forty returning citizens there. Half of them were women from Brunswick Women's Work Center and Deerfield Women's Work Center and the other half were men that were incarcerated at Deerfield Correctional Center. I was one of approximately twelve vendors that were set up in work stations around the perimeter of the gym. Each vendor had a table with ten chairs directly in front of their table.

The inmates came into the gym and sat down in front of a work station. Each session lasted for ten minutes. We were given a two minute warning and at the end of each session the inmates would get up and rotate to the next station to the right. I was able to introduce Right Thinking Foundation twenty-four times that day. Ten inmates for ten minutes twenty-four times. I knew most of the inmates from being in the three facilities on numerous times over the past three and a half years.

Each time I would address a new group of ten inmates, the first thing that I would do would be to thank them for allowing me to come into their lives, to be treated so wonderfully and to learn so much from them. I let them know that Right Thinking Foundation had been approved to teach a pilot financial literacy program to high school students at An Achievable Dream Academy in the Newport News Public School System. I thanked them for helping Right Thinking Foundation achieve this and let them know that without me being able to be with them and be accepted and embraced by them the way that they have done, Right Thinking Foundation would never have been able to achieve this accomplishment. Many people that I come into contact with when they learn of the work that Right Thinking Foundation does in prisons in the area of financial education have said that the program should be taught in schools before the kids go out into the world unprepared to face life's challenges. This will now happen.

I then immediately asked them to picture a fourteen year old student in the back of a financial literacy class whose father has been incarcerated for twenty years. The child was born while his father was incarcerated. That child sitting in the back of that class no more wants to be taught anything by the teacher than the man in the moon. He's already involved in gang activities and has his own economy out in the streets. The last thing in the world he wants is to be in that class listening to that teacher. He can't wait to just get out of that room. I demonstrated to the ten returning citizens what the student looked like with his expression on his face of pure disgust and boredom, cursing under his breathe as he had to listen to the teacher not wanting to be there.

I asked the returning citizens in each of those twenty-four sessions “how does a teacher reach that student?” One of the responses that I got was “the teacher needs to keep them interested.” Another response was “the teacher needs to talk to them at their level.” I agreed and said “the teacher needs to love them and let them know that she or he cares about them.”

A teacher cannot teach what she or he wants to teach a student unless the student wants to receive what the teacher has to give.

I had the returning citizens each do a little exercise that I do wherever I go. I had them take their arm and put it behind their back and reach their thumb up as high as they could. I then told them that there's a switch there that they can't quite reach. It's that itch that you can't quite scratch. I let them know that we all have that switch and that we are the only ones that can cut that switch on. Each of us has to make up our own minds and until we do that no one else can do it for us. Right Thinking Foundation teaches people to flip on their switch so that they can learn things that will help them have a better chance to succeed in life. Once they make that decision, teaching them the tools is the easiest part.

I then gave the returning citizens a second thing to think about. I told them to picture a twelve year old child whose father has severely abused everyone in the family and his mother is an alcoholic. She is yelling at him, slapping him in the face, telling him that “you're going to be just like your father.” The returning citizens all said “yeah, I guess so, look at what the child's home life is. What choice does the kid have?” In the example that I wanted them to be looking at, I said that the kid yells back at his mother and probably slaps her back and yells “yeah, why would I ever want to be like you?”

I then asked the returning citizens what's going to happen to these kids. The answer was unanimous. “They're going to end up right where we are, here in prison.” I asked the returning citizens if maybe the two kids that I described was their own life story or if maybe it was their own kids.

That day in Deerfield Correctional Center, every one of those returning citizens encouraged me to succeed with the at

–risk youths that I'm taking the Right Thinking Foundation Program to because they said “they have got to be reached.”

The point is that we do have to reach this population of at-risk youths that are falling through the cracks of our education system and dropping out. They really don't have a fair chance in life. Their home environment is so dysfunctional that if we don't find ways to reach them they're going to fail. They have to be shown a reason to want to learn what is being offered that we know will make life easier for them.

What really touched my heart that day was I saw that those returning citizens, who have made mistakes and messed up their own lives and may never have much opportunity to go very far in life, desperately want young people to not follow in their footsteps. At this stage of their lives where they have worked so hard to prepare for their return to society

and are so close to being released from prison, it is beautiful to see that even if they think that they can't do much with their own lives because they are felons, they want to help others not go where they've been. They all encouraged me to go out and succeed with the at-risk youths that I'm going to be working with and accepted my thanks for the help they have given me in understanding the lives of at-risk youths.

I am honored to be the champion of those returning citizens as I go out in the world and help others to not follow in their footsteps. I am committed to carry the banner and succeed.

In the four years that I've been working with returning citizens inside prisons throughout the state of Virginia, I've learned a great deal. I'm incredibly thrilled to have the opportunity to take Right Thinking Foundation's program to at-risk youths at the high school level so that they can be better prepared to face the real world and not end up following in the footsteps of others that have failed and thrown away so much of their lives.

Right Thinking Foundation needs your financial support to help sustain its mission to reach at-risk youths that need encouragement and tools to succeed and to continue in its fight to reduce recidivism. If you are already a supporter, I thank you again from the bottom of my heart for all that you do. If you're not yet a supporter of Right Thinking Foundation, then please become one. It's for the kids.

Thanks,

Steve Coplon
Executive Director
Right Thinking Foundation

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