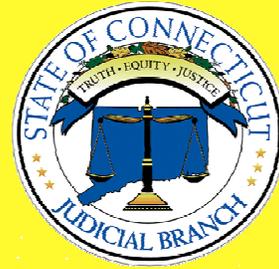


# CSSD Chronicle

State of Connecticut Judicial Branch  
Court Support Services Division  
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## Young male voices write loud and clear at SAGE and BRAVE Programs

...I was locked up for a long time, but I'm a new person. I am back in school here and learning more than I ever did. I'll go home get good grades and go on with my life in this direction.

~"Here It Is" by Jaron, *School of SAGE and BRAVE*



Innovation in Education, LLC (IIE) provides comprehensive education services for at-risk and adjudicated adolescent boys—and girls—within several CSSD-contracted juvenile residential programs. Two of these programs are the Secure Community Residential Program for Boys (SAGE), and the Community Residential Program for Boys (BRAVE), in Hamden. The SAGE and BRAVE programs, which serve young men up to age 16, are part of a network of adult and juvenile services provided by Community Partners In Action, Inc. (CPA).

For three weeks this spring, Susan Skipp, a teacher with IIE worked with a class of boys on an interdisciplinary unit that focused on introspection, resiliency, and empathy. Skipp was able to get the boys to do substantial writing and art work and helped them compile it into book form for them to take home. When asked if she was surprised with the number of poems and stories written by the boys, the 12-year veteran teacher replied, "No, I wasn't surprised. All they want is someone to listen." Skipp went on to remark, "When they are in my class, they are not defined by their crime, and it shows in the amount and quality of their work."

The 20-page booklet of the boys' work is boldly lettered in red with the title, *School of SAGE and BRAVE*. The reader hears from many young voices as they look out at the world—as well as inside themselves—and tell us what they see:

**Tylon**

*I am smart and funny.  
I wonder when I am going home.  
I hear sounds.  
I see people  
I want money  
I am smart and funny*

*I pretend to be famous.  
I feel dollar bills  
I touch the sky.*

*I worry about my family  
when the judge says I can't go home.*

*I am smart and funny.  
I understand life.*

*I say, "Mom!"  
I dream about leaving here.  
I try to do algebra*

IIE's educational philosophy uses a trauma and gender sensitive approach to teaching and encouraging change, as many students have long histories of abuse and neglect. The program's curriculum fulfills Connecticut's state education standards, and students earn credits that are transferred back to their sending schools when they return home. Susan Kaufman, Executive Director of IIE believes that in order for students to learn, especially at-risk students, they must feel that learning is relevant to their own lives and experiences. Kaufman feels it is important for educators to partner with students to help them participate and involve themselves in the learning process. "I've never met a student who didn't want to learn," says Kaufman. "But it's up to us, as teachers, to get kids to see that education is the key in overcoming their particular life struggles."

John Pollis, IIE's Director of Operations, and one of the program's teachers, agrees that finding creative ways to engage students in their own education is important. "Students rise to the level of expectation. When students are challenged to produce work of a higher quality, when they are able to see its relevance to their own lives, they respond with enthusiasm."

The program's teaching approach uses a four-step process: introduce students to

the topic or theory; present real live examples through books and other media; ask students, “Can you do that?” and explore opportunities to do it; and finally, have students articulate—in writing—what they have learned. Pollis notes that “depending on the level of ability of each student, there is a wide-range of responses in the last step. Students may struggle to put down a few sentences, or fill several pages. As teachers, we take the time to work with each student and help them articulate their message, no matter what their skill set is. I’ve seen college level work produced many times.”

Several types of material are used to enhance lesson plans. Books, educational texts, and articles are all excellent sources of information, but on occasion, movies of historical events and people are also shown. Pollis and Skipp used the 2003 movie *Antwane Fisher*, based on Fisher’s autobiography *Finding Fish*, to connect the boys with a familiar contemporary figure who went on to be a successful adult despite severe personal struggles that many of them are familiar with. The teachers knew they had successfully impacted the boys when they found them in competition for Fisher’s book of poetry titled *Who Will Cry for the Little Boy?* Pollis notes, “We only had one copy and they’d argue over who was going to read it next. When the time came, I’m sure Fisher’s book made it easier for them to write their own poems and stories.”

JC is a tall, lanky, 15-year-old from Hartford who has been at SAGE for many weeks. He wrote a fictional story titled *The Rock* for the *School of SAGE and BRAVE* booklet. The story focuses on two step-brothers from a blended family, and the rivalry that ensues between them over a coveted crystal rock. Bad luck seems to follow whoever possesses the rock—each boy has trouble at school, and at one point, the family splits up. But, once the



crystal rock is lost, the boys’ grades improve, their rivalry ends, and the family gets back together. When asked about his story, JC quietly noted that it was the first one he had ever written, and he is now writing another one. He proudly displayed a short research paper he recently completed (including citations), on rap music’s influence on urban adolescents. His research led him to realize the negative influence that some rap music has on those who espouse its message. JC notes in his paper that “kids are bombarded with messages of money as power, fast ways to make it, and it’s acceptable to use violence to get it.” Although he still enjoys rap music, JC now looks for rappers with more positive messages that promote education and encourage youth, “don’t go to jail.” He credits “Miss Skipp” with “making my brain get headaches” while researching his topic, a reference to IIE’s advice to all students to think of their brain as a muscle

that needs exercise in order to develop, just like other muscles in the body. Pollis and Skipp tell students, “If you leave class with a headache, then you know you did a good job.”

The **CSSD Chronicle** has focused on only a few of the pieces written for the *School of SAGE and BRAVE* booklet. **To request a copy of the entire publication**, and for more information on CSSD’s educational services for incarcerated youth, contact Amy D’Amaddio, Coordinator of Educational Services at [Amy.DAmaddio@jud.ct.gov](mailto:Amy.DAmaddio@jud.ct.gov).

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*The CSSD Chronicle is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to [Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov](mailto:Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov)*