

The Development of Criminal Justice Program in Georgia High Schools

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Abstract

*The criminal justice program for high school curriculum, approved in Georgia in 2005, has grown rapidly and gained widespread support from students and school administrators. The purpose of this study was to examine the implementation status of the program by surveying school principals and interviewing criminal justice teachers. Results of the study showed that program collaboration between P-12 schools and higher education institutions was still missing. Many transition channels remained to be opened.*

## Introduction

In recent years, many states such as Texas, Florida, New York, Nebraska, and California have developed a number of criminal justice and public safety courses in their middle or high school curricula. The development is based on the Law-Related Education Act of 1978 which calls for school students to be knowledgeable about laws, the criminal justice system, and fundamental and constitutional rights of citizens (Law Courts Education Society of BC, 2007). These criminal justice and public safety courses provide students an opportunity to explore practices for possible future careers in law enforcement and the legal system. Additionally, they can serve as a crime prevention and deterrence mechanism against school crime and violence (Bartsch & Cheurprakobkit, 2002; Cheurprakobkit & Bartsch, 2000; Crews & Counts, 1998; Hughes, 2004; Pereira & Rodriguez, 1997). In Georgia, the competency-based curriculum framework for Private Security and Protective Services was approved in 2004, authorizing criminal justice courses to be offered in middle and high schools to include (1) Foundations of Public Safety and Criminal Justice; (2) Introduction to Law Enforcement and Patrol Operations; (3) Constitutional and Criminal Law; (4) Criminal Investigation and Forensics; and (5) Law Enforcement Internship, in consecutive order. As the program is relatively new in Georgia, many questions remain unanswered. Therefore, a study of the implementation of criminal justice program in Georgia would help identify critical issues to be addressed for program improvement.

## Review of Literature

### Law-Related Education (LRE) Programs

The Law-Related Education (LRE) Act of 1978 is based on a philosophy that it is important that the public learns about the law which is a crucial element of society in the U.S. LRE is defined as education to equip non-lawyers with knowledge and skills pertaining to the law, the legal process, and the legal system that people need to function effectively in our pluralistic, democratic society based on the rules of law (American Bar Association, 2003). LRE has gained widespread support throughout the country and the practice of LRE was described as developing a love for the law (Developing a love for the law [Abstract], 1990).

### School-Agency Partnership as LRE Program

Initial criminal justice programs in middle schools and high schools were originally in the format of school-agency partnership operations. A school-police partnership program exposed students to all aspects of criminal justice system, including safety, law enforcement, corrections, conflict resolution and the court system (DeJong, 1993; Pendleton, 1990). A school-attorney partnership program placed emphasis on U.S. Constitutions linking legal issues to students' personal lives (Repa, 1990). A school-university partnership program prepared high school students to pursue tertiary education in the field of criminal justice after high school graduation (Johnson, 1998; Treese, 2010).

### Criminal Justice Program for Career Preparation

Some criminal justice programs helped prepare and motivate interested high school students to work in law while other programs focused on the preparation for protective services careers (Johnson, 1998; Treese, 2010). A high school in Florida offered a series of four criminal justice courses (Introduction to Criminal Justice; Patrol Operations and Field Investigations; Theory and Practice of Investigating Forensic Crime Scene; and Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Prevention) to students who also had the opportunities to engage themselves in extracurricular activities, such as a criminal justice club, charitable volunteers, and producing a monthly criminal justice newsletter (Johnson, 1998). An Ohio high school criminal justice program carried a practical orientation. It was developed to prepare students to get ready to serve in the legal field at time of high school graduation (Ohio State Department of Education, 2002).

### Criminal Justice Program and At-Risk Students

Review of the literature showed that at-risk students resulted in positive outcomes after the students completed the LRE programs. Participated students gained positive experiences and attitudes, including better understanding and appreciation of the purpose of law, reduced tendencies toward delinquency, fewer disciplinary problems in school, decreased associations with delinquent peers, improved self-control, improved attitudes toward authority and personal responsibility, enhanced communication skills, and improved school attendance (Law Courts Education Society of B.C., 2007). Similarly, a 5-year evaluation study of nine career academies of at-risk students was conducted by Manpower Research Corporation (Kemple & Snipes, 2000) to examine the effectiveness of this delinquency prevention program. Findings indicated that dropout rates in career academies were reduced by nearly one-third. Students attended school more and completed more courses to earn college credit. The program also provided students opportunities to set their goals and reach their academic and professional objectives that they could not attain otherwise.

### Criminal Justice Program and Crime Prevention/Deterrence

Repa (1990) suggested to link criminal justice issues to different aspects of students' lives and claimed that understanding the criminal justice system would inspire the younger generation for good citizenship. In tracing the development of school violence in the U.S., Crews and Counts (1998) found that offering criminal justice courses helped reduce the amount of school violence among teenagers. Pereira and Rodriguez (1997) found that the behaviors of high school students who completed courses in criminal justice program were less destructive than those who did not. The study of Hughes (2004) on juvenile violence yielded similar results.

### Criminal Justice Program Implementation

Ninety-nine percent of the high schools in the U.S. did not offer criminal justice courses in their school curricula (Gadek, 2010). However, many examples of excellent program could be cited from those high schools that did offer the program. A four year criminal justice magnet program attached to a high school in Texas provided students with the academic preparation to pursue a college criminal justice degree and practical preparation to start a career in the legal

field (Treese, 2010). Another outstanding criminal justice program was located in Ohio by employing Integrated Technical and Academic Competency (ITAC) approach (Ohio State Department of Education, 2002). Students in the program were ready to serve the community when they graduated from high school.

Bartsch and Cheurprakobkit (2002) and Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch (2000) surveyed all Texas middle and high school principals about criminal justice programs in their schools. Results of the studies disclosed that almost all criminal justice teachers in Texas schools had law enforcement backgrounds. It was found that the three courses most often taught were Introduction to Criminal Justice, Crime in America, and Criminal Law. These studies also found that the main problems facing their schools included difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers, identifying good textbooks, and looking for appropriate class schedules.

In summarizing the review of literature, it was found that criminal justice programs in middle schools and high schools were at their initial stage of development in the U.S. Only a few empirical studies were conducted on criminal justice curriculum issues in schools. In the State of Georgia, while potential interests in high school criminal justice program exist, systematic planning has to be done to lead the way to constructive program development. Therefore, the focus of this study is on examining important program issues such as college credit transferability, teaching certification program, and the need for training support and academic assistance in the criminal justice program in Georgia high schools.

### Research Questions

This study is designed to answer the following research questions: (1) Are there needs for high school criminal justice programs as perceived by teachers and principals? (2) What do high school teachers and principals perceive to be teacher related issues in criminal justice programs? (3) How do teachers and principals perceive the development of criminal justice programs in Georgia high schools? (4) What supports do teachers and principals perceive as needed for criminal justice programs in high schools?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

A mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative approaches was designed in this study. "Considering the breadth and magnitude of much of educational research, it is not surprising that a single study may require mixed methods." (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p. 277) High school principals in Georgia were surveyed and selected teachers in the criminal justice program were interviewed to solicit their perceptions of the program development. The use of a mixed approach presented a more holistic picture of status and quality of this new high school program.

## Participants

All of the 135 high school principals from 14 school systems in Metropolitan Atlanta Area, Georgia, were invited to participate in the study. Sixty-four principals responded with a 47.4 % return rate. Of the 64 participating principals, 57 provided with demographic information for reference. Thirty-nine principals (68.4%) were males and 18 (31.6%) were females. In ethnicity, 47 principals (82.5%) were Caucasians and 10 (17.5%) were African Americans. Most of the principals (27 or 47.4%) earned their Education Specialist degrees and 14 principals (24.6%) were holding Master's degrees. Sixteen principals were holders of doctoral degrees. About half of the principals (28 or 49.2%) had 6-15 years of experience as school principal while 21 of them (36.8%) had 1-5 years as principal and 8 (14%) had 16 or more years as principal. To gain a deeper insight about the criminal justice program, the researchers invited criminal justice teachers of the most substantially developed programs to participate in person-to-person interviews. They were highly recommended by the school principals as the ones who knew the criminal justice program best. As a result, five criminal justice program teachers volunteered to participate in the interview as part of the data collection process of the study.

## Survey Instrument

The quantitative survey instrument was researcher-constructed to survey principals' perception of the criminal justice program. Questions in the survey were focused on five areas. The first area was related to whether the school offers any of the approved criminal justice courses. The second area was about criminal justice teachers and their actual and perceived qualifications. The third area examined principals' perceptions about criminal justice program related issues such as enrollment, course pre-requisites, and college credits. The fourth area was associated with problems schools are facing in offering criminal justice courses. The fifth area related to the support schools need for program continuation. Varied data collection techniques were employed to include checking, rank-ordering, Likert Scale and open responses to suit the nature of different questions. The original instrument was piloted with a group of five school principals to examine its validity in contents, format and language. Principals' constructive comments and recommendations for improvement were incorporated into the revised version of the instrument.

In addition, seven open-ended questions were used for interviewing the criminal justice teachers about the criminal justice program in their schools. These seven open-ended questions relate to: (1) their background and initial involvement in the criminal justice curriculum; (2) the number of criminal justice instructors; (3) training received for offering criminal justice courses; (4) students' attitudes toward the criminal justice curriculum; (5) former criminal justice students seeking a criminal justice degree in college; (6) student satisfaction with the current criminal justice program; and (7) the most crucial support instructors need from school administrators. These open-ended questions helped solicit substantial qualitative data in support of the findings of this study.

## Findings

### Analysis of Quantitative Data

Findings from data analysis indicated that 17 participating high schools (about 27%) offered the five state approved criminal justice courses to students. Most of the schools (15 of 17) offered Foundations of Public Safety and Criminal Justice, Introduction to Law Enforcement and Patrol Operations, Constitutional and Criminal Law, and Criminal Investigation and Forensics. Law Enforcement Internship was the least available course to students, with only six schools (9.4%) offering the course.

Regarding the criminal justice teachers in high schools, findings of the study showed that the majority of the criminal justice teachers (20) were full-time school teachers. There were only seven police officers and two volunteers who helped teach the criminal justice courses. The principals also reported 23 out of 30 criminal justice teachers were certified. Other non-certified teachers would be certified eventually.

Findings from Table 1 showed the principals' perceptions of development of the criminal justice curriculum. Twenty-nine principals (60.4%) believed that the approved criminal justice courses should be given college credit. Over half of the principals agreed that prerequisites needed to be specified for taking criminal justice courses (28 principals or 58.4%). A majority of them believed that the criminal justice program was steadily developing as seen by the rise of student enrollment in the criminal justice courses (20 principals or 86.9%).

Table 1. Principals' Perceptions of Criminal Justice Program Issues (N=64)

Questions	Agree/ Strongly Agree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Criminal Justice courses should be given college credit.	29 (60.4)	19 (39.6)
Pre-requisite is needed for Criminal Justice courses.	28 (58.4)	20 (41.7)
Student enrollment is on the rise.	20 (86.9)	3 (13.0)

Participants' responses to the difficulties schools were facing in offering criminal justice courses are shown in Table 2. The three most serious issues were the difficulties in finding qualified teachers ( $M=2.87$ ), scheduling for classes ( $M=2.22$ ), and finding appropriate textbooks ( $M=2$ ). Other issues such as lack of support from parents, school board, and students were not as critical.

Table 2. Principals' Perception of Difficulties in Offering Criminal Justice Courses in School

Difficulties	Mean Score
Finding a qualified teacher	2.87
Scheduling for classes	2.22
Finding appropriate textbooks	2.00
Designing lesson plans for the courses	1.74
Lack of interest from students	1.60
Lack of support from school board	1.49
Lack of support from parents	1.45
Lack of support from school administration	1.32

Note: 1 to 4 scale

(1=Not Difficult, 2=Difficult, 3=More Difficult, 4=Most Difficult)

Principals' perceptions of support needed for the criminal justice program were analyzed: a state-wide promotion of the criminal justice curriculum (M=3.40), development of teaching certification programs (M=3.17) and recruitment for qualified criminal justice teachers (M=3.17). Other supports recommended by the principals included workshops on program setup (M=3.00), lesson plan development (M=3.00), program marketing strategies (M=2.96), and program evaluation (M=2.88). (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Principals' Perceived Need for Support of the Criminal Justice Program in School

Support	Mean Score
State-wide effort to promote the CJ curriculum	3.40
Develop a teaching certification program for CJ teachers	3.17
Programs to help recruit qualified CJ teachers	3.17
Workshop on how to set up the CJ program	3.00
Workshop for helping teachers develop lesson plans	3.00
Workshop for promoting the CJ program	2.96
Workshop on how to evaluate the program's effectiveness	2.88

Note: 1 to 4 scale

(1=Not Beneficial, 2=Somewhat Beneficial, 3=Beneficial, 4=Most Beneficial)

#### Analysis of Qualitative Data

Although only five high school criminal justice teachers participated in the interview, the data were very informative given the fact that two of these teachers were involved in the development of the criminal justice curriculum that was approved by Georgia's State Board of Education. Data showed that all of these criminal justice teachers had previously worked in law enforcement (one of them was a former probation officer) with high teaching credentials (one

with Ph.D. degree, two with Master degrees, and two pursuing Master degrees). Most of the high schools had only one criminal justice teacher. One high school had two. Teachers anticipated future student enrollment in the criminal justice program to rise with a great demand for teachers. Although only 17 high schools in Georgia offered criminal justice courses at this time, teachers could identify an approximate 100 high schools in Georgia working on incorporating criminal justice courses into their curricula. One high school, with the largest criminal justice program enrollment (265 students) in Georgia, had to turn down at least 200 students a year due to seat limitations. Teachers were surprised to find out that many colleges and universities in Georgia did not know about the existence of the growing criminal justice programs in high schools.

In teacher preparation, most teachers stated that there was no formal training provided to them. The teachers received training from various sources depending on resource availability and accessibility. Professional development was actually received through informal discussions and shared experiences with other colleagues through sessions offered by professional organizations like the Georgia Association of Public Safety Instructors. Training activities included one-on-one mentoring and online program on lesson planning and assessment.

Most teachers described student attitudes toward the program to be positive and exciting. Student participation in program activities was enthusiastic. Most first year students continued with the second and third year courses because of “hands-on and real-life” activities, including guest speakers, field trips, videos, current events, exercises and scenarios. Many students, particularly those in urban areas, expressed their interest in pursuing their criminal justice degrees at higher education institutions and choosing careers in the legal profession and the criminal justice field.

Most teachers were satisfied with the development of the criminal justice program in Georgia. They saw evidence of increasing growth of the program and increasing support from parents and school administrators. Some teachers believed that the program could be improved in many areas, including: (1) addressing the sequence requirement of the courses to ensure a logical flow of intellectual development; (2) helping new teachers to improve and more quickly prepare themselves for the classroom environment; (3) positioning the program with criminal justice career orientation; (4) integrating technology into the criminal justice program; and (5) addressing the scheduling issues so that criminal justice classes can be more readily accessible to students.

Finally, teachers anticipated support from administration to strengthen the quality of the program by understanding the program not as a dumping ground for troubled students and also by providing financial support for purchasing needed equipment and covering field trips’ expenses. Teachers particularly mentioned that block scheduling, used quite often in high schools, was not of much benefit to the criminal justice program. Another concern raised by the teachers was the lack of support in placing students in internship in public and private agencies, because of potential liability issues. To address this internship issue, a suggestion was to assign a contact person to bridge the gap between schools and professional organizations to facilitate internship placement.

### Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated that the high school criminal justice program was increasingly popular and had gained continuous support from students, parents and school administrators since its initial approval in 2004-2005. Although the law enforcement internship course proved to be somewhat problematic due to the legal liability concern, most schools now are aware of the issue and are able to place students at various internship sites.

Principals' responses in this study are consistent with those of the 2000 and 2002 studies of middle and high schools in Texas (Cheurprakobkit & Bartsch, 2000; Bartsch & Cheurprakobkit, 2002). In this study, almost all criminal justice teachers in high schools were former law enforcement officials and that the three main problems in offering the criminal justice program were similar to the previous studies. It is clear that criminal justice programs in different states faced similar difficulties in initial implementation.

Despite the increasing popularity of the criminal justice program in many high schools, the findings of this study revealed that a number of higher education institutes were unaware of the existence of the criminal justice program. Educators from P-12 schools and higher education institutes can launch a joint state-wide effort in promoting the most needed criminal justice program in Georgia.

Most importantly, the results of this study indicated strong potential collaboration between high school administrators and college/university faculty. High school principals and criminal justice faculty of higher education institutions could collaboratively address the issues and concerns of school's criminal justice program (i.e., a teaching certification program, recruiting qualified teachers, workshops on developing lesson plans and criminal justice programs, college credit transfer, and even the internship placement). Since the findings show that students' retention rates in the criminal justice program and students' interest in pursuing their degrees and careers in the field of criminal justice were high, such collaboration would greatly help with student transferability from high schools to colleges.

To conclude, findings in this study not only revealed the rapid and continuing growth of the criminal justice curriculum in high schools of Georgia, but also indicated critical areas of the program that needed improvement. The issues and concerns disclosed in this study are common among new programs and can be effectively addressed through proper academic channels and both formal and informal collaboration of the stakeholders. Future research could examine the following perspectives: (1) Can teachers without law enforcement background be effective criminal justice instructors in high schools? (2) What are the essential elements in the development of a rigorous criminal justice program? (3) What is the relationship between criminal justice program offering and school crime and violence?

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