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EDUCATION IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Many correction facilities offer both academic and vocational educational programs for the following reasons. First, prisons, jails, and other types of correctional facilities ideally are to serve rehabilitative purposes. Most of the people incarcerated have both substandard academic and vocational skills. At least one-third have less than an eighth grade education; about two-thirds have less than a high school education or GED (General Education Diploma). Most inmates function at a level that is two to three grades lower than the last grade completed. The high school diploma or the GED are often basic requirements for getting a job. People who cannot get a job often turn to crime.

Second, both academic and vocational programs can be utilized as a management tool for inmate administration. Programs give inmates something constructive to do with their time. Activity can assuage, to a degree, the violence, anger, hostility and frustration that are often a natural consequence of boredom.

Third, the Federal Standards for Prisons and Jails (1980) state that education programs should be available through the high school level in long-term facilities. Education programs should meet the needs of the inmates, including non-English speaking inmates. Other standards amplify the general goals of educational and vocational training. (See page 5 for further information on standards.)

The programs most often offered in prison are: (1) ABE, adult basic education, which provides for basic literacy and math skills necessary to prepare one for high school or for the GED study. (2) GED, general education (or equivalency) diploma is offered in lieu of the high school diploma and is based on general education and education consists of college level courses. (4) SE, social education, tries to teach inter-personal skills, communication skills, and generally, how to get along with other people. (5) Vocation education tries to teach marketable job skills. (6) The last category generally consists of self-help programs such as those for drug and alcohol addicts, counseling, or recreational programs. It is also true that some people in jobs have only one leisure activity, crime. They have never learned to use their spare time in a creative or recreational activity.

Another variation on the programs is an institutional chapter of the Jaycees. There are over 600 prison chapters with about 25,000 members. The Jaycees operate from the belief that the cost of recidivism is too high and that American communities need to become part of the solution to crime. One of the Jaycees projects is a Model Re-entry Program which seeks to facilitate the transition from prison life to being free. For further information on the Jaycees, write John Seymour, U.S. Jaycees, P. O. Box 7, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74121.

School programs are funded either by legislative appropriations or as a subsection of the correctional facility’s budget or through appropriations to the facilities that constitute a school district on the order of the rest of the state’s school districts. Texas and Arkansas are among the states that have prison school districts. The advantages to utilizing the school district approach are (1) there is homogeneity in planning and (2) funding is directed towards meeting specific educational needs. The primary disadvantage is that the school district may not have the special attention to the special needs of uneducated adults in a unique environment. The primary advantage to making the education programs a part of the corrections’ budget is that the programs can be a special innovative aspect of the facility’s daily operation. The disadvantage is that education programs are easy to cut in a time of short money supply.

The Texas Windham School District requires inmates to attend classes at least six hours per week if they achieve less than a fifth grade equivalency on a standardized test. About 10,000, or slightly less than half of the inmates, attend the remedial classes in a variety of other classes which are a part of the educational program. The facilities include the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. There are special programs with special teachers for the emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, blind, deaf and psychotic.

In 1979 the Windham budget was $6.2 million; $5.1 million came from the state. This funds a total staff of 324 teachers, counselors, aides, etc., who work both the academic and vocational areas.

By 1979, 14,434 inmates had received high school diplomas or equivalency diplomas; 5,422 had received vocational certificates. In the college program 970 had received the A.A. degree, and 67 a B.A.

The Vienna Correctional Center (VCC), a minimum security unit in Vienna, Illinois, is unique in that local citizens participate in classes with inmates. The VCC education program is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. In Fiscal Year 1979 VCC education program operated with a budget of $8.3 million. Although the VCC inmates have a minimum security status, they are not all the "cream of the crop." Other equally qualified or even better qualified inmates may be kept in the more secure institutions to provide a stabilizing influence.

Another significant point that inmates get a half-day’s experience in each of several curriculum areas to determine their interest and aptitude. There are 15 full time and four part time vocational courses at VCC. These range from office machines repair, surveyor assistance, and emergency medical technicians to the more traditional wood and body and auto mechanics courses. There are also special education courses such as driver’s education and job acquisition skills. College courses range from botany, to art and political science.

The California Youth Authority has extensive education programs for its wards. The Youth Authority provides for remedial education for students under 21 who are two or more grade levels below age/grade expectancy. Developmental education
prepares the student for the GED examination. Physical education courses meet high school requirements. Vocational education is succeeded by job placement and a follow-up to students who successfully complete an academic or vocational college courses which are applicable to an A.A. degree are offered at five facilities. The California Youth Authority also offers classes in survival education which include consumer economics, health, job survival, and legal rights. One unusual vocational course covers the skills used by commercial fishermen.

In Colorado, with an inmate population of 2,309, 29% of the inmates have less than an eighth grade education; 67% have less than a high school diploma; 32% have completed high school or have a GED; and 81% have some college credit. Fifty-four percent of the population is Anglo, but only 7.4% of the Anglos participate in adult education. Twenty-six percent of the population is Chicano, and 37% of the Chicanos participate in adult education. Nineteen percent of the population is Black, and 33% of the Blacks participate.

Colorado has found the illiterates the easiest to place in programs. Their deficiency is obvious even to them. Those who are within easy grasp of a GED are the next easiest to place. The hardest are the seventh, eighth and ninth grade dropouts. The GED is a lot of work to complete.

Colorado has two unusual programs in progress. One concerns the attempt to integrate vocational education with prison industries. The idea is to provide a realistic work environment while also providing training in marketable skills. The emphasis is on quality work within specific time frames. In a normal Vocation, a person cannot take all day to straighten a bent fender, and corrections industries try to impart a sense of self-discipline and promptness as well as quality accomplishment.

The Colorado Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Department of Education, Department of Higher Education, and two divisions of State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education have entered into an agreement to develop educational opportunities for both correctional staff and incarcerated adults. The DOC is basically responsible for providing educational programs for incarcerated individuals, while the Department of Education is responsible for providing educational programs for correctional staff and incarcerated adults. The agreement calls for cooperation between all agencies and expands the programs to provide opportunities for staff and students.

There are a number of problems in setting up any kind of educational program — either academic or vocational — in a facility that holds people against their will. Most people who already have experience in failure in education. They tend to be reluctant to try again. They also tend to be oriented toward immediate rewards, not something that will come months later. One inmate even through a suit claiming that enforced attendance in the Arkansas prison school district constituted a violation of his constitutional rights. (Rutherford v. Butts, 377 F. Supp. 268 (1974). The court found that the state had a right to rehabilitate convicts and had a vested interest in bringing them up to a fourth grade level.

Inmates may regard classes as busy work created for the convenience of management. In some cases, classes may be taught for occupations that require state licensing. Although the inmate may be skilled, he may be denied to ex-inmates. Another problem may be a variation on Catch-22. An inmate may have hopes of transferring to a maximum security facility to a medium security facility. The transfer will be denied if a program. On the other hand, the transfer may be denied because the inmate did not show enough interest to be in a program. At one time inmates in Connecticut were charged a "visit" when a teacher from the community college came.

Other inmates may consider education as a waste of time. If the inmate wins parole, there is generally no follow up or effort made to continue classes after release. In some cases the technology taught may be significantly inadequate and outdated.

Women traditionally have been steered into courses that would prepare them for lower paying jobs. If the men got computer programming, the women got key punching. Nine out of ten women leave the prison to be the sole support of themselves and their children. The belief persists that they will go back to a man who will take care of them.

In an effort to combat the special problems of women, the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor has joined forces with the Federal Bureau of Prisons to offer apprenticeship courses for women in non-traditional areas such as plumbing and carpentry. The effort has generally been successful for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

A conference was held at the Federal Bureau of Prison's Women's unit in Alderson, West Virginia to acquaint state officials with the apprenticeship program. It was found that Maryland and Oregon had already had programs and Ohio and Michigan had begun to explore the concept.

There are two basic difficulties with starting a women's apprenticeship program: (1) attitude, and (2) money. Many of the correctional staff are traditionally and not receptive to women doing "men's work." Many of the women who might benefit also have negative attitudes. If the effort to get into an apprenticeship program could probably already be working in prison industries. There the inmate can earn money to use in the commissary and in some cases earn enough to send home for dependents. To achieve concrete economic benefits for intangible ones in the future seems unwise. Although some states pay inmates to attend education programs, the rewards are seldom as great as those of the prison industry.

Last, some of the public resent inmates getting "free" education — either academically or vocationally. Their reasoning is that they have to pay for the education of their children and people who act can provide books, materials and supportive equipment for correctional education. They may authorize the appropriation of money to agencies to allow state for reallocation to provide or upgrade educational opportunities.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title I, provides for assistance for compensatory education for youth under 21 who are not in school and in some cases can earn enough to send home for dependents. To achieve concrete economic benefits for intangible ones in the future seems unwise. Although some states pay inmates to attend education programs, the rewards are seldom as great as those of the prison industry.
In the Education Amendments of 1978, P.L. 95-561, Part J, the "Correction Education Demonstration Project Act of 1978" was established. Funds were authorized but not appropriated for demonstration projects relating to the academic and vocational education of delinquents and adults. Almost all correctional inmates are qualified to receive financial assistance for college level courses through the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG). Most are not dependent upon their families and most are poor. These funds can pay for classes offered by junior colleges, via the Newgate Program in Federal Institutions and in similar programs in state institutions.

The Vocational Education Act of 1963 authorizes aid for those who need special vocational training - such as the handicapped, those who need vocational guidance and counseling, and those who need aid in language development to increase their job potential. This applies to many inmates.

The Veterans' Administration (V.A.), through P.L. 96-466, also has funds for the academic and vocational training of veterans. Many inmates are Viet-Nam era veterans and also suffer from service related disabilities. At present the funds available to correctional inmates who are veterans is in dispute.

The Ethnic Studies Act of 1974 calls for multi-cultural education which is particularly appropriate for institutions with large minority populations. In the last session of Congress, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island introduced S. 1373, the Federal Correctional Education Assistance Act. It authorized funding for education programs in correctional facilities. It recognized that the unemployment rate of ex-offenders is three times that of the general public and that this unemployment is related to the lack of education and vocational skills. The problem that Senator Pell sees is a lack of strong commitment to truly effective programs. The act would provide "a direct source of funding specifically for programs in corrections education" eliminating the piece-meal search that must go on now. A similar bill will be reintroduced by Senator Pell in the present session.

There are two consistent statistics that relate to correctional education. One is that the more violent crimes are committed by the less educated offender. Secondly, there is a correlation between unemployment and the crime rate. A number of studies seem to indicate that on the whole, offenders who have been in education programs do better after release than those who were not in programs. There are a host of variables which can skew such results. It may be that those who enter into programs already have a positive motivation to do better.

Since education is only one of the many factors that influence an offender, it is not possible to draw a direct cause and effect relationship between education and crime. What can be stated with assurance is that a competent education program changes one variable and at least broadens the opportunities for other changes.

Federal Prison Standards

Copies of Federal Standards for Prisons and Jails, 1980, are now available through:

Office of Public Affairs
U.S. Justice Department
Washington, D.C. 20530
(202) 324-2015

These standards will be used to determine if the federal government should initiate actions against state and local corrections systems under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act. They may also be used in determining the distribution of federal grants. The standards are not law, but they have implementation.