

REMARKS

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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Thank you, Gary [Dennis], for that kind introduction. I'm delighted to be here today to speak to this impressive audience of committed educators and correctional professionals. You are all doing some of the most important and most difficult work in the criminal and juvenile justice fields. I want to say how grateful we are at the Department of Justice for the work you do every day and for the difference you are making, not only in the lives of the men, women, and young people you serve, but in the safety of America's communities. You are all to be truly commended.

And I want to especially thank Morris [Dews] and Steve [Steurer] for their peerless leadership and for working so hard to help our nation's corrections system realize its full potential as an agent of positive and lasting change. Education is the key to unlocking that potential, and I'm so glad that we have an organization like the Correctional Education Association to turn the key.

And finally, congratulations to all of today's award recipients. You are a remarkable group of individuals who have distinguished yourselves among a pool of very accomplished professionals. We are inspired by your example and consider ourselves fortunate to count you as our partners.

We need committed, creative, and hard-working men and women like you – and like everyone here – to meet the many challenges facing those who come into and return from our nation's jails, prisons, and juvenile detention facilities. And let's face it, for all the progress we've made in recent years, the challenges remain considerable.

There are nearly 1.6 million people in our state and federal prisons. Some 640,000 return to our communities every year. More than 11 million cycle in and out of local jails. And about 4.8 million people are under some sort of community supervision – on probation or parole.

Of those in prison, we know that almost all will be released at some point. This is neither speculation nor wishful thinking – it's an iron law. And the fact is, if these individuals are not prepared – as we know so many are not – they will return to the system, some for violating conditions of probation or parole, but others for having committed new crimes. To put it in plain terms, if prisoners, jail inmates, and detained juveniles don't get the support they need to reintegrate, we are all at greater risk.

We also pay the costs – literally. Our nation spends about \$80 billion a year to house state and federal prisoners and jail inmates. The burden on taxpayers is immense, and it's unsustainable.

If we hope to blunt the economic impact of incarceration and, more important, if we want to ensure that returning inmates don't pose a threat to community safety, we must take seriously the notion that reentry – effective reentry – begins the moment an individual enters the system, and planning for that individual's return should span his or her entire time behind bars.

At the Department of Justice, we have made – and continue to make – a substantial investment in reentry programs. Since 2009, the Office of Justice Programs has made nearly 600 awards under the Second Chance Act, totaling more than \$300 million, to support adult and juvenile reentry programs across the country.

Our Second Chance Act programs are a centerpiece of our grant-making portfolio, but just as important – I'd argue even more important – strengthening reentry is one of the top policy priorities of our Attorney General and the Department of Justice. Eric Holder chairs the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, which involves Cabinet leaders and heads of 22 federal agencies, all working together to ensure that federal policies promote effective reentry in areas ranging from housing to healthcare. Among the issues of greatest activity has been the work we're doing on the issue of education.

We know that one of the best avenues to reentry success is through correctional education. A recent analysis by the RAND Corporation funded by our Bureau of Justice Assistance – the biggest analysis of its kind – found that adult inmates who participated in correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower chance of recidivating than those who did not. We don't hear returns like this very often, so this is very encouraging.

We know that these programs are also cost-effective; they save about five dollars for every dollar spent. And evidence suggests that those who participate in correctional education programs are more likely to find employment after release. The benefits of education, at least for adult inmates, are clear – and we should be working to expand access to these programs in our prisons and jails.

There are also promising educational programs for youth in juvenile detention and confinement facilities, though we are still learning about their level of effectiveness. What we do know is that adolescence is a time of rapid development. It's a period when young people acquire the knowledge, skills, experience, and training that prepare them to become responsible adults. Too often, confinement interrupts this pattern, and too many of these youth never return to school or complete their formal education.

We also know that education is supposed to be available to all incarcerated youth. While educational programming may be technically optional for adult inmates, we have an unquestionable obligation – both legal and moral – to provide these opportunities for juveniles in confinement facilities.

We are working with our partners at the Department of Education to ensure that confined youth have these opportunities. Our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Department of Education are collaborating to support demonstration grants for youth returning from secure confinement. The Education Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services is supporting the development and evaluation of models to help youth with disabilities make the transition into education, employment, and community programs.

And as part of the work of the Reentry Council, this month the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education sent a joint letter to every state school superintendent and every state attorney general describing our efforts to reduce justice system-involvement by school-age youth, from ending punitive and often discriminatory school discipline policies to addressing racial disparities in arrests and confinement. Specifically, they signaled our departments' commitment to working with state officials to ensure that confined youth have access to high-quality educational services. As a next step, our agencies will invest in a joint initiative to design an evidence-based education model for returning youth and to support demonstration projects in several jurisdictions.

These efforts come on the heels of a report submitted to the President by the My Brother's Keeper Task Force. The goal of My Brother's Keeper is to ensure that all young people who are willing to work hard can reach their full potential. The report recommends new action to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by too many youth, particularly boys and young men of color. Access to quality education is key to closing these gaps.

While too many youth in confinement don't have access to quality education, there are some bright spots. The Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings Youth Development Center in Washington, D.C., provides all youth with the opportunity to take English, math, science, and social studies classes that are aligned with D.C. public school standards. These classes aren't just about imparting knowledge; they're about opening minds. Recently, students were reading *Night*, Elie Wiesel's account of his time in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps.

And several states – Oregon, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, to name three – are using technology to connect confined youth to academic content on a par with traditional schools.

We should be encouraged by these pockets of promise, and I, for one, am optimistic that we are witnessing the beginnings of a new trend toward accessible quality education for confined youth.

But we can't take for granted that this trend will continue without our own efforts to raise awareness and educate policymakers and the public. There are still too many places where youth aren't getting the basic help they need. There are still too many examples of young people who come into facilities and leave having been denied that most fundamental and important of rights – the right to learn and grow and become good citizens.

Yes, young people must be held accountable for their wrongs. But they must also be given a fair chance to succeed. So many youth who come into juvenile facilities have never had that chance. Our juvenile justice system plays a critical role in finally setting them on the right path.

I'm grateful for the work that all of you are doing to support our youth – and to help all those coming out of our prisons, jails, and confinement facilities begin anew and become productive, law-abiding citizens. The safety of our communities depends on you, and I am glad that it's in your hands.

Thank you.

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