Rewarding Educational Achievements in Prison

What’s the problem?

Over 40% of those who leave MD prisons return (recidivate) within 3 years. Barriers to reentry challenge the returning citizen who is struggling to reintegrate into his/her community, one of which is difficulty finding employment. Some resort to crime to sustain their lives. To help people who have served time in our state prisons live stable, productive lives when they re-enter our communities, providing education while they are in custody is critical. As noted in a recent Rand Corporation study (2016), “Inmates who participate in any kind of educational program behind bars—from remedial math to vocational auto shop to college-level courses—are up to 43 percent less likely to reoffend and return to prison. They also appear to be far more likely to find a job after their release, and the social stability that comes with it.” Every dollar invested in correctional education, RAND concluded, saves nearly five in reincarceration costs over three years.”

Maryland’s correctional system allows inmates to earn “diminution credits” that can reduce the amount of time served inside our prisons. Unfortunately, current credits are awarded for “doing time” without infractions or completing work assignments, but not for educational achievements. Motivation is a key ingredient in educational achievement and our correctional system needs to use diminution credits to benefit both the State and the inmate.

What’s the proposal?

Add a new category of sentence diminution credits for the attainment of major milestones based on educational accomplishments, such as satisfactory completion of a course or achieving a diploma. The subcategories of accomplishment would be established by correctional authorities, as would the number of days for each accomplishment.

This would create a mechanism by which inmates who successfully prepare for release move closer to release. Inmates would be encouraged to see that “getting something done” that prepares them for release is rewarded. This puts a spotlight on reentry preparation — not on simply “being a good inmate.”

Will this work?

The Abell Foundation recently issued an extensive study of education in our prisons: *Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration*. Among their findings are:

> “Those best able to navigate this process have developed skills and credentials while incarcerated that are valued by potential employers, training programs, and colleges. In fact, a substantial body of evidence indicates that formerly incarcerated individuals—sometimes referred to as returning citizens—who receive high-quality educational services and supports re-enter their communities, obtain jobs, and become contributing members of society.”
“When formerly incarcerated individuals obtain jobs and remain crime free, we all benefit from safer communities, increased tax revenues, and decreased costs associated with crime and imprisonment.”

A comprehensive evaluation of correctional education programs completed by Rand Corporation in 2014 found that “the direct costs of reincarceration were far greater than the direct costs of providing correctional education.”

Status of the legislation.
House Bill 0295, introduced by Delegate Queen in the 2018 legislative session, proposes a specific solution to this problem. Entitled “Correctional Services - Diminution Credits – Education,” this bill allows for additional sentence diminution credits for the attainment of major educational milestones. In particular,

“An inmate may be allowed a one–time deduction in advance from the inmate’s term of confinement if the inmate successfully obtains:
(1) A certificate of completion of a technical or vocational training program approved by the Commissioner
(2) A State High School Diploma by examination under §2 11–808 of the labor and employment article;
(3) A High School Diploma;
(4) An Associate Degree; or
(5) A Bachelor’s Degree.”

Learn More:

Abell Foundation, Summer 2017
Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration

Rand Corporation, 2014
How Effective is Correctional Education, and Where do we Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.readonline.html

Rand Corporation, Jan 2016
The Case for Correctional Education in U.S. Prisons
https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2016/01/course-correction-the-case-for-correctional-education.html

The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) is a nonpartisan association of over forty community organizations and churches with members in every part of the state, formed to support justice reinvestment. Individual supporters include judges, attorneys, corrections professionals, as well as returning citizens, victims, and service providers.

Links in this document can be activated by going to http://www.ma4jr.org/education-credits/