

MARYLAND ALLIANCE FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Working to end unnecessary incarceration and build strong, safe communities



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 are the proposals?

Add new language to an already passed bill on risk assessment. Currently, corrections is required to consider the past history of an inmate such as mental health status, substance-abuse history, type of crime and others. There are no questions regarding job history, career goals or previous educational accomplishments. Our proposal emphasizes the early collection of these items to be used in overall reentry planning for each inmate.

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 reward. This puts a spotlight on reentry preparation — not on simply “being a good inmate.”

Will these 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 in the 2020 Session

In the 2020 Legislature HB 822 / SB 912 - Correctional Services - Diminution Credits - Education Milestones has been filed. This legislation is designed to restore an incentive — 90 days credit — for Maryland prison inmates who achieve **meaningful** education (GEDs, AAs, college degrees) and valuable vocational certificates. Consider these important points:

- Education of prison inmates reduces recidivism rates by 40 to 50 percent;
- Education leads to regular employment, also has similar proven value in reducing recidivism.
- In the past, Maryland law has diluted diminution credits with equal time off sentences for any “assigned tasks” regardless of their potentially minimal value towards rehabilitation.
 - The result: Inmates flock to these easier opportunities and waiting lists for education disappeared.
- In the past annual GEDs earned in prison has dropped from nearly 1,000 to between 300 and 400 with our prison population of about 18,000 inmates.
- Currently only about 15 percent of all inmates are reported to participate in educational programs.

Learn More:

Abell Foundation, Summer 2017, *Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration*, <http://www.abell.org/sites/default/files/files/Abell%20Prison%20Education%20Report%2072517%20final.pdf>

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.