

Why Maryland Needs a Commission to Study Correctional Education and Recommend Improvements

Why is correctional education so important? There are several reasons, but the most salient for our purposes here is that education reduces future crime by lowering recidivism, thereby changing the lives of incarcerated people, their families, and the community. Several [RAND Corporation research reports](#) on correctional education underscore the societal and financial benefits of correctional education. The major conclusion of the RAND research is that correctional education significantly lowers recidivism and provides a substantial return on our

Is Maryland utilizing education programs behind bars effectively? Looking at four decades of data, the conclusion is no. According to the available annual reports from the Maryland Departments of Education (MSDE) and Labor (DOL), the actual number of student academic and vocational program completions has declined significantly in the last 15-20 years. The same reports indicate that funding is much lower in real dollars and as a percentage of expenditures for corrections than it used to be.

Even though the number of incarcerated people in Maryland's prisons has doubled since 1982, there are fewer students. In addition, there are now significantly fewer teachers in the state facilities than there were two decades ago. According to the available annual correctional education reports and the testimony of former program directors, the annual GED completion numbers have dropped from a high of 1,000 in fiscal year 2000 to less than 500 in fiscal year 2017, 0 during COVID, and 171 in 2022.

DOL's website does not provide extensive or easy-to-find information on program completion in recent years, even though it administers the Maryland statewide GED Testing Program and is deeply involved with workforce development statewide. While some of the decrease in GED completions resulted from the increased difficulty of the revised GED 2014 exam, the number of students attending school has also dropped. Waiting lists for school have skyrocketed with the passage of legislation increasing mandatory school attendance to 240 days. And many people who were court-mandated to complete their GED are not enrolled in school.

Although a study by the Abell Foundation estimated that one third of incarcerated individuals had a high school diploma, it also found that without additional remediation many do not possess adequate reading or writing skills to succeed in postsecondary education. As a result, most of them have no gainful

career or job prospects. According to a 2019 Correctional Education Council Report from DOL, only 16 percent of those incarcerated participated in all educational programs. According to annual state reports, the numbers dropped from a high of 33 percent in 1989. Unfortunately, the Abell researchers were not able to obtain much detail from DPSCS and DOL about the educational programs in order to evaluate their quality and effectiveness for students who do participate.

Why are participation and completion rates low? There are at least two reasons. First, the correctional system does not assess educational skill levels at intake or take into consideration an individual's education history or work history. As a result, existing education and work history is not systematically used for reentry program planning. Numerous research studies indicate that many incarcerated students have a childhood history of learning disabilities and behavioral problems. Second, monetary incentives for incarcerated people to participate in school are no higher than for jobs in prison maintenance. According to the [Abell Foundation](#), prisoners "on work crew earn \$3 to \$4 per day, whereas those enrolled in education programs earn just \$1 per day."

How long has the Correctional Education Program been housed within DOL? Until the late 1970s, prison teachers worked for DOC. Staff were under the supervision of the institutional warden. Education funds were often used for other purposes, so there was a shortage of books, paper, and pencils. The percentage of students in school varied widely at each facility; attendance was low because students had no incentives to participate; and only those in work programs received a daily stipend. Unless prisoners received personal funds from relatives, they were not even able to buy snacks and hygiene items such as soap and toothpaste. Dr. David Hornbeck, who became Maryland Superintendent of Schools in the late 1970s, understood that separate funding and supervision was needed. He was able to persuade then-Governor Hughes to create a commission that recommended transfer of the Correctional Education Program to MSDE. In a 2022 letter to State Senators and Delegates, Dr. Hornbeck, founder of Strong Schools Maryland, supported House bill HB 416, which would create a bipartisan commission to review current programs now housed at DOL and recommend improvements.

How well did the new Correctional Education Program work at MSDE? With stronger centralized supervision of teachers and a budget separate from the DOC, the schools received more materials and books, and began conducting regular staff training. Starting in the 1980s, educational participation was treated as a special program awarding students an extra five days per month off their sentence for attendance. As a result, the waiting lists at most institutions were very long. Attendance rates were reported to be more than 87 percent in 1997.

More teachers were hired, and night school was introduced in the 1980s, lasting into the early 2000s. Teachers were offered a federally funded master's degree in reading from Johns Hopkins University. Seventeen staff earned a master's degree and many more enrolled in several courses. One of the offshoots was a peer tutoring program that engaged over 400 prisoners to work alongside teachers in all major institutions. A study sponsored by the National Institutes of Corrections in 1986 found that Maryland prisons had two of the best ten literacy programs in the U.S. (Source: Reginald Wilkinson, *Best Practices, Excellence in Corrections*, American Correctional Association, 1998.)

As a result of state budget problems, correctional education began to suffer funding cuts around 2000. Teacher salaries, based on local county teacher salaries, were reduced when a standardized state salary plan was legislated. The plan paid significantly lower wages than most of the counties, and it became more difficult to hire and retain staff. After Correctional Education was moved from MSDE to DOL, peer tutoring was abandoned, except at one facility.

According to former correctional education programs directors, after 2000 the number of programs in DOC facilities that made participants eligible for sentence reduction increased. When in 2019 a new state law required people without a high school diploma to attend school for at least 240 days, the waiting lists dramatically increased, according to DOL annual reports. However, some of those who complete the 240-day requirement are dropped from school, even before they achieve their GED diploma. Research by RAND and others shows that those released from prison without a high school diploma and/or a career certificate are unlikely to be able to earn a living wage, and many will return to prison to start the cycle all over again.

How has post-secondary education been funded in prisons? The state of Maryland has never funded post-secondary education in its prisons. Until 1994, the state relied solely on Pell grants to fund college-level programs, which were provided by Hagerstown Community College, Coppin State University, University of Maryland Baltimore County, and Morgan State University. Just before Pell grants ended in 1994, there were over 1,000 people in Maryland prisons attending college. Within a year or two, the number dropped to zero, according to annual state reports. In the following years Goucher College started its own privately funded program. Experimental Pell Grant funds became available during the second term of the Obama administration, and four Maryland universities and colleges were awarded federal grants and started programs: the University of Baltimore, Anne Arundel Community College, Wor-Wic Community College, and Goucher College. In 2022, Georgetown University initiated a program without Pell grant support. In July 2023, when Pell grants

were fully restored, Morgan State University, the University of Maryland Global Campus, Hagerstown Community College, and Georgetown University applied for and received Pell Grant approval by the U.S. Department of Education.

With federal Pell grant support, can the Correctional Education Program provide high school graduates with post-secondary programs? Because most Maryland prisoners do not have a high school diploma and many received their GED with a score below college readiness, the growing number of college programs will be competing for a limited number of students. The Correctional Education Program in DOL is the agency authorized to prepare students for post-secondary academic and career education programs. Currently, there is little or no formal coordination between the Correctional Education Program and the various colleges and universities. According to a high-level official at DOL, the Department decided not to coordinate literacy and GED programs with the growing number of colleges and universities. DOC has taken on the role and created a Correctional Program Director to work with the colleges.

Why create a Commission to study correctional education in Maryland's prisons? The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) endorses a Commission to study current programs and recommend how to improve the educational outcomes of Maryland prisoners. Education programs should be a central part of an overall rehabilitation and reentry plan, along with substance-abuse and mental health programs.

- An extensive body of research and literature on correctional education has been developed by the RAND Corporation, the Abell Foundation, the Educational Testing Service, the Vera Institute of Justice, and others. The Commission should use this research to evaluate Maryland's current educational and job training programs and make recommendations on how to improve them.
- The Commission should study the current reentry data collection and tracking system and recommend ways to include individualized educational and career plans in every incarcerated person's rehabilitation and reentry plan.
- The Commission should look at effective correctional education systems in other states and recommend a stronger and coordinated structure for all education programs within DOL and DOC along with the various colleges and universities. A guiding question should be: what is the most effective way to deliver a unified program to improve basic literacy skills, complete secondary education and career technical certifications, and pursue post-secondary degrees?

These measures will encourage more incarcerated persons to discover their own capabilities and become serious lifelong learners. If they leave prison equipped with up-to-date skills, diplomas, and certificates, they will have a better chance of becoming productive workers and tax-paying citizens. Ultimately, the state will save money, improve the tax base, and see less crime because reentering citizens will be prepared to enter the job market with credentials for well-paying jobs.

Resources

With its 2014 study [“How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go From Here?”](#), the RAND Corporation showed the connection between participation in education programs while incarcerated and a reduction in recidivism. Its 2019 study, [“Higher Education Programs in Prisons,”](#) showed the positive effects of higher education in particular on recidivism.

The Abell Foundation’s 2017 report identifies the untapped potential of correctional education in Maryland to improve criminal justice outcomes. That report, [Prison Education: Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration](#), recommends an enhanced incentive system.

In 2020, the Educational Testing Service Center for Research and Human Capital and Education published [How to Unlock the Power of Prison](#), a comprehensive report about prison education in the United States. It made many recommendations, including improving the quality and quantity of educational programs, providing greater incentives for incarcerated people to participate in them, and enhancing instruction in computer literacy and skills.

The Vera Institute of Justice has produced several [reports](#) on the benefits of offering higher education to people in prison.

From 1982 to 2009 the Correctional Education Council (under DPSCS and DOL) produced annual reports replete with program data, program descriptions, and recommendations. These reports were bound and stored in the Maryland Law Library in Annapolis. Unfortunately, an exhaustive search indicates that annual reports from 1997 to 2009 were not saved and given to the library. Efforts at recovering data from the Maryland State Archives, MSDE, and the GED Testing Office at DOL have not located these reports. Reports for the last six years or so are available on the [CEC website](#). However, because they lack comparative data they are not very illuminating.

