

# Overcoming The Obstacles in Effective CORRECTIONAL INSTRUCTION

By Anne F. Parkinson and Stephen J. Steurer

The public is increasingly aware of the mounting research demonstrating that the right type of correctional programming lowers the number of inmates returning to prison by 25 percent to 30 percent.<sup>1</sup> These reductions provide a taxpayer return on investment of approximately \$5 for every \$1 invested due to the avoidance of criminal justice costs.<sup>2</sup> Maryland analysts report a return of \$24 million per year because of correctional education programs — twice the state's investment.<sup>3</sup>

These impressive findings result in increased attention and pressure for raising the outcomes, quality and investment of such programs. Correctional educators and system managers must meet higher standards in training to ensure that they achieve the maximum recidivism reduction, thereby increasing an institution's overall effectiveness and quality.

Unfortunately, though many correctional teachers around the country are performing their jobs very well, the correctional system as a whole is not designed to maximize rehabilitation through education. Instructors and students face substantial intrinsic and extrinsic challenges to educational achievement. Many teachers struggle with the lower educational levels, preponderance of learning difficulties and styles, and lack of motivation among inmate students. Correctional educators also fight for adequate funding and resources. And, the prison environment itself presents several obstacles, including inmate transfers, competition with prison jobs, interruptions for counts and attitudes opposing programming.

## Eclectic Mixture of Students

Overall, inmates vary from the general population in learning styles, educational attainment, literacy and employment experience. Correctional populations have lower educational attainment than the general population: an estimated 41 percent of inmates do not have a high school diploma or a GED compared with 18 percent in the

general population.<sup>4</sup> This may be due in part to the higher rate of learning disabilities found among inmates. An estimated 30 percent to 50 percent of inmates have a learning disability compared with 5 percent to 15 percent of the general adult population.<sup>5</sup> Literacy is also lower within prisons. Further, inmates' work experiences and skills are well below those of the general population.<sup>6</sup>

Not only do correctional students differ from the general population, but discrepancies also exist within the group. Correctional educators face a classroom full of students with varied learning styles, educational needs, and school and work experiences. They somehow must make sure each student gets what he or she needs to obtain the desired outcome, whether a GED, trade certificate or other credential. In addition, they must do so in an open-entry/open-exit atmosphere under the constraint of multiple release dates. Learning for these students is more difficult, thereby making effective instruction more intricate.

## Low Motivation and Participation

Inmates do not enter a correctional facility to attend classes. They often do not see the importance of gaining an education, and many have a history of educational failure. They may not enroll in programs or participate in classes with the same enthusiasm as the noninstitutionalized population. Further, negative peer pressure can discourage inmates from joining programs, and inmates in some jurisdictions have to relinquish paying jobs to participate. Facility management and instructors often face the challenge of motivating inmates to involve themselves in available programming.

## Limited Resources

Programs resulting in substantial recidivism reductions require an investment in qualified instructors and materials, which research shows deliver a significant return. How-

ever, funding for correctional education has not kept pace with the near doubling of the prison population during the past decade.<sup>7</sup> Inadequate resources do not produce the type of quality programming required for the maximum impact on inmate lives. Courses must meet specific research-proven criteria to lead to the highest possible recidivism reduction, but management and instructors are not likely to implement such programs without funding support.

## Institutional Culture and Attitudes

The culture of the prison plays an important role in the success of programming. If an institution is not secure, few advances can be made in rehabilitation. But if safety and security are the only priority, rehabilitation is again hindered. In some institutions, correctional officers and other staff view programming as a nuisance or a privilege of which inmates are not worthy instead of a vital element to reducing recidivism. This feeling often permeates the prison culture and is supported by management. In such cases, educators must fight for respect and validation. They often face obstacles in the form of officers bringing students late to class, excessive disruptions for head counts and a living environment hostile to learning. “For class attendance to be encouraged and strictly enforced by correctional officers, the education programs need to have strong and constant support from the wardens and superintendents of the prisons. If that support does not exist, the programs will suffer.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the hurdles inherent in correctional programs, educating inmates continues to be fundamental to rehabilitation and to an institution’s quality. Many correctional systems are uncovering innovative strategies to meet the barriers they face.

## Effectively Instructing A Variety of Students

Institutional classrooms are full of struggling students, but studies are increasingly presenting how best to reach these learners. Grouping students by achievement level as much as possible will enhance instruction and learning. An educator can then use the instructional tools most effective with each particular class rather than trying to reach a varied group of students with different educational needs at the same time.

Presenting instructional material in a context familiar to inmates can have a tremendous effect on the understanding and retention of students with learning difficulties.<sup>9</sup> These learners need to know how a skill or piece of information fits into their lives — why it is useful for them to learn. Teaching material in context fulfills this need. Integrating academic and vocational instruction is also helpful. For some students, learning math in the framework of industry skills, such as carpentry, enhances understanding, increases motivation and helps them overcome the psychological barriers they may have because of past frustrating educational experiences.

The Lakeview Correctional Facility in Brocton, N.Y., adopted the Bridges Learning Systems program in 1998 to help improve learning for their Adult Basic Education (ABE) students. The Bridges program focuses on improving a student’s ability to learn — to process and retain information. All ABE students participate in a Bridges assessment, after which an individual learning plan is created based on each inmate’s strengths and weaknesses. About 180 students participate each year, according to Bridges specialist Kim Lesmes.

Lakeview decided to adopt the Bridges program after learning of its tremendous success at Shutter Creek Correctional Institution in Oregon. Bridges program participants at the Oregon facility had an initial recidivism rate of 0 percent. Lakeview does not follow inmates after release, so recidivism cannot be determined. However, a 2001 program evaluation showed statistically significant increases for participants in all the learning abilities addressed. Generally, Lakeview students improve two or more grade levels on the TABE test in the six months they are at the institution.

## Increasing Inmate Motivation And Participation

Correctional systems are increasingly using mandatory education policies to overcome the challenge of low inmate motivation and participation. As of 2002, 44 percent of states and the federal system had mandatory education laws or policies in adult corrections.<sup>10</sup> Requirements for both achievement level and program length have increased since 1993.

Requiring that inmates attend educational classes until they reach a specified achievement level is sound policy as long as sufficient monetary and management support is available to make the outcomes attainable. Mandatory education ensures that program resources are fully used and provides an “excuse” for inmates to be in school.<sup>11</sup> Class attendance is the first step in inmates achieving the outcomes that affect recidivism.

Unfortunately, the issue of motivation does not always disappear with the implementation of mandatory education. Instructors in such systems sometimes encounter apathy and even major resistance from some students that detract from the learning process of the whole class. Teaching students who have not chosen to participate then necessitates some creative encouragement. In addition, those working in systems without a mandatory policy must still find a way to elicit program participation.

To do this, educators can emphasize the relevance of the program to the students’ personal needs. Additionally, students need to experience success in learning to overcome their fear of failing yet again, so finding a way for each one to succeed is important. Holding in-prison graduation ceremonies and inviting the families of graduates can motivate others to complete their programs. Prison staff can stress the value of education and program completion, citing specific, relevant examples of former inmates and highlighting the effect on employment, wages and quality of life. Inmates can begin to understand why involvement is important, whether they choose to participate or not.

The mandatory education concept began with the Federal Bureau of Prisons in the early 1980s. Inmates had to achieve educational milestones in order to be assigned to better paying and higher level jobs in the system. Maryland and New Mexico soon implemented similar laws. Two decades later, 44 states have implemented mandatory education by either state law or correctional policy.<sup>12</sup>

In 1997, the Arkansas Department of Correction School District began requiring all inmates who did not have a high school diploma or GED to attend school. Previously, only inmates without a diploma or GED who scored less than the 5th-grade level on an academic achievement test were required to be in class.

At the time of policy change, concerns existed that inmates forced to attend school would cause disruptions, but the transition occurred incident-free due to a year of preparation.<sup>13</sup> Inmates were notified that they would be required to attend school if they did not prove that they had a high school diploma or GED and were given resources to request transcripts. Concerns that the inmates would not be able to do their jobs in the facilities were addressed. Principals scheduled classes around important job priorities to minimize impact on work supervisors.

The effect of mandatory education on the number of GED graduates was apparent the first year. During the 1996-1997 school year, 700 inmates graduated; this number increased to 865 during the 1997-1998 school year, the first year of mandatory attendance. The average number of students served daily in the classroom also increased from 2,056 to 2,680. Very few incidents have occurred within the school facilities, thereby enhancing safety.

## Overcoming Limited Resources

Ideally, prison programming would have ample funding and resources necessary to support a 25 percent to 30 percent recidivism reduction. Correctional facilities are increasingly held to quality standards that encompass program outcomes. Consequently, policy-makers and management must recognize the significance of providing adequate educational resources.

Making the required investments in education can be difficult for correctional systems, especially during tight fiscal times. Correctional educators and administrators in states that have reduced budgets or cut correctional programming altogether must creatively find a way to provide desired programs. Mary Ann Saar, Maryland's secretary of public safety and correctional services, recently announced an innovative strategy to continue the agency's focus on rehabilitation while still controlling costs.<sup>14</sup> The state undertook an audit to determine how many correctional officers were required to maintain safety and security within the prisons. The auditors reported an excess of 218 officers. As those officers leave or retire, Maryland will replace them with 210 additional teachers and drug counselors. Within three years, Maryland expects to treat more than four times as many inmates for drug abuse and increase slots for educational training by 1,550.

Peer tutoring is also a tool in meeting programming needs with limited resources. It can provide the intense,

individualized attention that illiterate students need with minimal instructors. The tutor also benefits from a structured arrangement, improving communication and educational skills. When the Eddie Warrior Correctional Center in Taft, Okla., added 28 tutors to its existing four and formalized the program, the GED attainment rate went from an average of 32 per year to more than 190.<sup>15</sup>

Recognizing significant numbers of illiterate inmates, the Maryland State Department of Education, Correctional Education Program launched the peer tutoring program in the early 1980s.<sup>16</sup> This initiative allowed larger numbers of illiterate and barely literate inmates to improve their skills before leaving the system. The National Institute of Corrections named the peer tutoring program one of the top 10 adult correctional literacy programs in the United States.

Since the early 1990s, all major correctional facilities in Maryland have had a reading lab with trained inmate tutors to help students unprepared to work independently. In these labs, students work with a tutor during the entire class period. An instructor monitors lessons and meets with tutor trainees. The literacy labs can accommodate at least 400 illiterate students per day — many more than would be served otherwise. On average, these students gain about three months in reading skill for every one month of instruction. In addition, the tutors learn how to help others, furthering their own rehabilitation.

## Supportive Culture and Attitudes

An institutional culture endorsing education augments the effectiveness of prison programming. Instructors in isolation cannot alter the prevailing culture, but may be able to enlist the support of other staff through sharing related research. Educators can also publicize success stories for present and former students. Prison management should ensure that all staff are aware of the rehabilitation and programming goals of the institution. Tying employee bonuses to those goals reinforces their importance. "Wardens and superintendents who value rehabilitative programs make sure that the incentives are properly structured and that correctional staff willingly and consistently ensure the smooth operation of these programs."<sup>17</sup>

Internal support across functions is vital as facilities work to achieve rehabilitation through education. A recent study conducted at multiple Kentucky prisons shows overwhelming support by prison staff for inmate programming.<sup>18</sup> A survey of staff from all departments found that more than 90 percent endorse literacy, GED and job training classes. The correctional education department in Maryland has a state accountability system that encourages wardens and staff to support education within their facilities. Correctional institutions receive report cards similar to those given to each public school. Measures reported include GED passing rate, occupational completions and program attendance. Prison management can see how they compare with other facilities and work to improve their relative performance. The report cards also have helped legitimize the correctional education system for the State Board of Education and others within the traditional system.

Bradshaw State Jail in Henderson, Texas, has created a culture, beyond its formal policies that support programs,

which has led to outstanding educational outcomes. Warden Michael Bell ensures that all security staff understand the facility's mission of educating the offenders in their care and expects all functional areas to support programming, according to Deputy Warden Bobby Pool.

At Bradshaw, a feeling of mutual respect exists between the security and education staff, according to Director of Education Clint Davis. One of the most important things in achieving an offender's education is attendance in class, and jail management instruct the security staff to make certain that the offenders are sent to class on time and to encourage those reluctant to go. In addition, Bell takes responsibility for both the positive and negative program results — a sense of accountability that filters down to the rest of the staff.

Bradshaw was the second private facility in the United States accredited by the Correctional Education Association and has maintained that accreditation. Texas recognizes the jail as a leader in education, which has been the third highest GED producer in the United States. More than 200 inmates per year have graduated with their GED while at Bradshaw since 1997, with 242 in 2002, the first year of the new GED format. Additionally, the facility saw 846 vocational graduates in 2002, up from 545 in 2001.

## Conclusion

Research increasingly shows that programming inside correctional facilities greatly affects what happens once inmates are released. As such, a prison's effectiveness and quality level are no longer dependent simply on its ability to safely house offenders. Instead, program-related outcomes leading to a significant recidivism reduction are also important. With a taxpayer return on investment of approximately \$5 for every \$1 invested, programs need to be recognized for their derived value.

Notwithstanding, correctional educators face substantial hurdles in delivering effective instruction. Fortunately, many agencies and organizations have implemented programs that demonstrate the success of correctional education in overcoming these barriers. Some correctional educators have the support of the agency or institutional administrators to try new approaches that maximize the potential of students. As institutions successfully address these obstacles, inmates leave prepared to positively contribute to society.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> After a review of 13 quantitative reviews of the literature, representing a minimum of 700 studies in all, Correctional Service Canada (2003), in *Principles of Effective Correctional Programming*, found that involvement in prison programming resulted in an average reduction in recidivism of about 10 percent. After further analysis of specific program characteristics, however, it concluded that effective (appropriate) programs are behavioral/highly structured in nature and target the criminogenic attitudes, values and behaviors of higher-risk offenders. Participation in appropriate programs led to an average recidivism rate reduction of 25 percent to 30 percent.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, S.L. 2000. Cost-effective correctional treatment. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 12(2):58-60. Correctional Service Canada: Ottawa.

<sup>3</sup> Steurer, S.J. and L.G. Smith. 2003. *Education reduces crime: Three-state recidivism study executive summary*. Centerville, Utah: Management & Training Corp.

<sup>4</sup> Harlow, C.W. 2003. *Education and correctional populations*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>5</sup> Corley, M. 1996. Correctional education programs for adults with learning disabilities. *Linkages*, 3(2). National Adult Literacy & Learning Disabilities Center.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence, S., D. Mears, G. Dubin and J. Travis. 2002. *The practice and promise of prison programming*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.

<sup>7</sup> Tolbert, M. 2002. *State correctional education programs state policy update*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Literacy.

<sup>8</sup> Tolbert, M. 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See Parkinson, A.F., I. Dulfano and C. Nink. 2003. *Removing barriers: Research-based strategies for teaching those who learn differently*. Centerville, Utah: MTC Institute.

<sup>10</sup> McGlone, J. 2002. *Status of mandatory education in state correctional institutions*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the policy implications of mandatory education, see Jenkins, H.D. 2002. *Mandatory education: A status report*. U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>12</sup> McGlone, J. 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Glover III, W.V. 2002. Successfully implementing a full mandatory attendance policy in the Arkansas Department of Correction School District. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 53(3): 101-105. Lanham, Md.: Correctional Education Association.

<sup>14</sup> Montgomery, L. 2003. Maryland prisoners to focus on rehabilitation. *The Washington Post*. Nov. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, H.C. 2001. Educating the incarcerated female: An holistic approach. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 52(2):79-83. Lanham, Md.: Correctional Education Association.

<sup>16</sup> Steurer, S. 2000. Best practice: The correctional education program, Maryland State Department of Education. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 51(1):165-167. Lanham, Md.: Correctional Education Association.

<sup>17</sup> LoBuglio, S. 2001. Time to reframe politics and practices in correctional education. In *Annual review of adult learning and literacy*, eds. J. Comings, B. Garner and C. Smith, 123. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>18</sup> Tewksbury, R. 2003. *Staff members' perceptions of institutional environments in the Kentucky Department of Corrections: Views on amenities, definition of purpose and factors influencing inmate victimization risks*. Frankfort, Ky.: Kentucky Department of Corrections.

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