

Prison Education

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2009 has to be a banner year for New Jersey elected officials. Nearly 50 elected and appointed officials ended up being indicted for political corruption. It may serve as a national record worthy of the Guinness Book. In a nation which has had its share of political corruption, New Jersey's achievement may stand for years to come. Perhaps an addition to the state license plate is in order - "the Elected Felon State."

It also may have a silver lining - because the New Jersey Legislature has just passed what may be one of the most sweeping corrections reform packages in the nation. Now cynics might suggest that the legislature is suddenly interested in reform because they fear being locked up themselves at some time in the future and want to improve conditions as a kind of insurance while they still have the clout. But of course the real reason is that it's finally dawning on legislators of all political persuasions that high rates of incarceration - particularly for people convicted of non-violent crimes - is simply not sustainable from a cost standpoint, in addition to not deterring crime and signs that it is further destabilizing low-income communities.

One of the New Jersey concepts I'm particularly supportive of for New York State is a unique provision for "in prison education." The Education and Rehabilitation Act (A4202/S11) "requires the New Jersey Department of Corrections...to ensure that incarcerated individuals attain the 12 grade education proficiency level." New York State needs this reform right away.

New York State has 60,000 people in prisons and releases about 25,000 each year, the overwhelming majority of them lacking a high school diploma. The state has the 5th highest rate of recidivism in the U.S. That's bad news in a good economy. In the midst of this recession, which threatens to drag on for months if not years, it's a disaster.

A program of "in prison education" could not only help the formerly incarcerated; it would help strengthen the communities of color in New York City which are home to the great majority of released prisoners. For the formerly incarcerated to find jobs in the community,

of course, would help economically. But it would also strengthen the quality of life in other ways. Consider that the principal victims of crimes committed by the formerly incarcerated are the very young and the very old in communities of color.

The national unemployment rate for black males without a high school education just crept past 24 percent and climbing. People coming out of prison with a criminal record and no high school education are virtually unemployable. If you've got people locked up for months and years on end, literally a captive population, the opportunity to engage in intense educational and vocational training is just too good a chance to miss. The possibility of linking completion of high school or a GED and college programs to early release seems to be a no-brainer. Nor does it hold the political liabilities of being soft on crime that once so dominated the political debate. In the closing days of the last Bush administration, the Republicans came up with the first efforts at improving job training for reentry populations.

My organization, the Community Service Society, is a founding member of the [New York Reentry Roundtable](#), which was established to help facilitate the successful reentry of people leaving the prison system by advocating in the state legislature for the removal of employment barriers from various laws.

As New Jersey indicates, the stars are coming into alignment for changing "in prison education." New York State Assemblyman Jeff Aubry introduced legislation (A8552) to bring back college courses to prisons. Ironically, one of the best passage rates for persons taking the GED in New York is among juvenile prison programs. And New York State is apparently in direct competition with New Jersey as to how many elected officials it can indict, so making prison reform and prison education a priority will both serve the public interest and make prison a nicer place for incoming elected and appointed officials.

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