WHY ARE WE DOING PRISON EDUCATION?

Concerns about literacy and general education among inmates are not new. Inmates need to begin removing their barriers to employment and re-entry into society. Many inmates will be released and need to be market ready for jobs. Their education and training continue to be inadequate to ensure personal fulfillment and participation in society. Inmates have limited skills and need to develop marketable skills. Adult prison inmates in California showed their test scores at the seventh grade reading level upon entry to prison and only one quarter of the state’s inmate population can read at the high school level. Many inmates are illiterate and a high percentage of inmates do not have a GED or diploma. Prison can offer educational and vocational opportunities to increase self-esteem and self-awareness to reduce recidivism. Inmates are generally less educated than the general public.

Many inmates have anti-social personalities and many carry a negative attitude for reasons related to having low test scores. Offering educational opportunities can make an inmate feel worthy and give them hope to change. Earning a GED can motivate an inmate to enroll into college. Research indicates that correctional education programs can significantly reduce the rate of reoffending for inmates when they are subsequently returned to the community.

There are two year and four year college degree programs available for inmates prior to their release date. This is helping inmates to re-enter society prepared to work in growth fields like information technology or to transfer to a four-year institution. (Pathways Project works in 21 prisons and 17 colleges in NJ, NC and MI) They also work with local businesses to determine what jobs need filling. Allowing offenders to return to their neighborhoods with education is an investment in a safer community.

Inmate education also improves prison management. Education makes it easier for prison administrators to safely manage the inmate population. Inmates are less likely to engage in disruptive and violent incidents when they are actively engaged in a program instead of being idle. There are not enough inmates participating in prison education, vocational or other education programs. College course level work has been traditionally accomplished through correspondence courses.

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