Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/reflecting-on-mandelas-education-as-the-weapon-to-change-the-world

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Since the death of former South African President Nelson Mandela, people around the world have united to celebrate his life and all that he stood for. For those involved in the justice and education sector, Mandelas fight for human rights, belief in educational opportunities for all, and unrelenting commitment to racial equality serve as an inspiration for our work.

Throughout his life, both as an activist and as a role model, he provided his audience, critics as well as supporters, with thought-provoking insights. I consider this powerful quote to be nothing short of a call to action:

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

I work on VerasPathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project, a five-year initiative in New Jersey, Michigan, and North Carolina that provides a coordinated in-prison and post-release continuum of educational opportunities, including mentoring, employment, and re-entry services. The program investigates whether access to education (and support services) for current and formerly incarcerated individuals can lower corrections costs and reduce recidivism.

Pathways has shown me how providing higher educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals can transform a persons life, stabilize families, and help build stronger communities. Students can explore new intellectual and emotional challenges, combat the cycle of intergenerational poverty by improving their chance for employment and higher earnings,and build a better life for themselves, their children, and their family.

Recently, on a site visit to Michigans Macomb Correctional Facility, the Pathways team had the opportunity to speak with students who had just started taking their first college readiness course, a digital literacy class. The men spoke of some of the challenges they faced in the past and how they saw the chance to attain a college degree as their saving grace. One student shared with the class his hopes of building his business skills and becoming a writer so that one day he could help his partner operate her business. This made me think of some other inspirational words from Mandela:

Everyone can rise above their circumstances and achieve success if they are dedicated to and passionate about what they do.

The chance for a better life and the desire to leave prison behind drives many of the men we spoke to, and their enthusiasm about embarking on this new educational journey is matched only by their commitment to succeed.

Recently, Fred Patrick, the Pathways Project Director, received the following note from a family member of someone in Pathways:

TodayI was informed by [my brother], a prisoner at Macomb County Correctional Facility in Michigan that he was chosen for the Pathways Project. It was one of the happiest phone calls I have everreceivedand the happiest I've heard [him] since he has been incarcerated.No words or simply a short email from a stranger could ever express my gratitude and complete and utterthanks for what this means to not only him, but to our entire family.I can only assume that this organization receives a great amount of doubt and scrutiny from reluctant individualswho don't believe inrehabilitationof inmates,but Ido. And Iundoubtedlyknow that my brother will takefull advantageof this wonderful opportunity that was given to him. Thanks again for all that you do.

Though the need for higher education in prison is still under-recognized, this message highlights the hope and call for collective and individual change through education that the Pathways Project embodies.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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