

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-commonwealth-of-second-chances>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As a former secretary of education for the Commonwealth of Virginia who served under Governor Bob McDonnell, I know firsthand the importance of education to the economic and social well-being of the more than 8 million people who call Virginia home.

For the more than 37,000 men and women inside our prisons many of whom are parents education matters to them as well. A [report released on February 5, 2018 at the inaugural State of Opportunity in America Summit](#) (hosted by the Center for Advancing Opportunity, where I am executive director) affirmed that people living in high-crime areas believe that education is one of the solutions to deter crime and support reentry.

As policymakers grapple with competing priorities, they should know that postsecondary education makes sense however you look at it. There is a return on investment in numerous ways: filling jobs that support the economy, reducing recidivism, and stopping the cycle of incarceration.

These discussions are underway right now in the Virginia General Assembly. For me, I want to express my support for expanding access to postsecondary education opportunities in Virginia's correctional facilities that I understand is currently under consideration in the forthcoming state budget.

The transformative power and benefits of education span across every socio-economic and demographic category that can be conceived, but perhaps none more so than among incarcerated populations. Virginia has seen great returns on its investments to date on reforms to its correctional system including educational requirements and pilot programs that are currently in place. We now enjoy one of the lowest recidivism rates in the country, though more is needed to continue these positive trends.

Sixty percent of available jobs within the Commonwealth's diverse and growing economy now require more than a high school diploma. Since 95 percent of Virginia's incarcerated population will eventually return to their communities, our challenge is to ensure they return home with the skills and education necessary to find long term employment, which reduces the chances of committing future crimes and ultimately results in safer communities and a better economy for all. Several evaluations of incarcerated people who participate in prison education programs indicate that they are less likely to return to prison or jail than those who do not.

State investment in expanding postsecondary opportunities within prisons is supported by a range of organizations including the Vera Institute of Justice and the Virginia Community College System. Five community colleges in Virginia (Rappahannock, Danville, Southside, Germanna and Piedmont) are already partnering with correctional facilities to provide postsecondary instruction toward an Associate of Arts degree as well as workforce certificates and credentials in skills in such as carpentry and welding. These programs have demonstrated some success, but have long waiting lists and still leave 34 of Virginia's 41 prisons without high quality post-high school educational opportunities.

In addition to making common sense, expanding educational opportunities in prisons also makes economic sense. The bottom line is that it costs more to incarcerate someone than to educate them in one of our fine public or private postsecondary institutions. The nationally estimated return on investment in postsecondary education in prison is five dollars to one, but perhaps more importantly, these programs can improve public safety by reducing crime, enabling prisoners to contribute to their local community and economy, and will ultimately save Virginia taxpayers money.

As Virginia House of Delegates and Senate Leadership and budget committee members discuss how to prepare Virginia inmates to reenter their communities, I hope that they will consider these facts when looking at the issue of expanding postsecondary education within our correctional facilities. My support for in-prison education does not make me soft on crime. Rather, it makes me a supporter of being smart about time.

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