

# FUTURES RECLAIMED

The Power of Education in Prisons

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# INTRODUCTION

In the corridors of America's prisons, a silent revolution is taking place. The power of education is driving an unlikely yet profound transformation within the confines of high walls and barbed wire. From Boston to Helena to Ossining, prison education programs are instilling knowledge, teaching skills, and providing second chances. These programs challenge the long-held belief that incarceration is the end of the road, instead presenting a new beginning for those willing to engage in academic and vocational pursuits.

Findings reveal that participating in a prison education program can:

- Decrease the likelihood of recidivism by 14.8%.
- Increase the likelihood of employment by 6.9%.
- Increase the quarterly wages for ex-offenders by \$131.

[Source: Are Education Programs in Prison Worth It?](#)

At the heart of this movement is a simple but powerful truth: Education changes lives. A growing number of studies show that prison education programs significantly reduce recidivism and increase post-release employment opportunities. The Mackinac Center for Public Policy has been at the forefront of this research, producing the largest meta-analysis of high-quality research on prison education programs, [“Are Education Programs in Prison Worth It?”](#) The findings reaffirm that education programs in prison are among the most effective tools for helping incarcerated individuals rebuild their lives and return to their communities with purpose and potential. With the recent reinstatement of federal Pell Grants for incarcerated students, the door to higher education has reopened for thousands more, promising to reshape individual futures and the broader criminal justice system.

However, states can do more to expand and improve the effectiveness of these programs. Driven by a desire to reduce recidivism, our most recent study [“How States Can Improve Education Programs in Prisons,”](#) identifies the most important policies lawmakers can use to improve prison educational offerings. These include 1) implementing a statewide school district to oversee programs, 2) automatically enrolling eligible inmates, 3) providing earned-time incentives to prisoners, and 4) regularly evaluating and publishing performance data. Based on these proposed policies, we developed the [“State Ranking of Prison Education Programs.”](#) This provides useful benchmarking to encourage states to expand the access to and operation of these programs for inmates.

Making these programs succeed takes more than just policy changes. It takes dedication, innovation, and a willingness to look beyond the prison walls to see untapped potential. This report delves into the stories of those leading the charge in prison education, shedding light on the programs that make a real difference in people's lives. Through interviews with program leaders, we explore the challenges, triumphs, and coalitions driving this critical work forward. Education can be a lifeline, restoring dignity, building confidence, and offering a path to reintegration. These programs are helping even the most overlooked members of society reclaim their futures.



# BOSTON UNIVERSITY PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM

BOSTON  
UNIVERSITY

The Boston University Prison Education Program in Massachusetts was founded in 1972 by Elizabeth Barker. It is a testament to the enduring belief in education as a transformative force. Recognizing the untapped intellectual potential within the prison population, Barker laid the groundwork for a program that continues under the leadership of current director Mary Ellen Mastrorilli. The program is built on the belief that “education is the best way to reduce recidivism,” Mastrorilli said in an interview.

Boston University has made a strong commitment to the Prison Education Program, which it funds directly. The program has a dedicated line item in the university’s budget that covers all associated costs, including instructor stipends, student scholarships, books, and supplies. “Boston University picks up the tab for all of the costs associated with this program,” Mastrorilli said. “They pay for the instructor stipends. They pay my salary. They offer scholarships to all

the students. We pay for books, we pay for supplies, we pay for it all.” Occasionally, this funding is supplemented by donations, such as a \$100,000 contribution from a private donor. By maintaining this financial model, the Prison Education Program remains independent of the influence of external grants or direct government support.

The program continuously evolves to enhance its effectiveness and sustainability. One area of focus is addressing the program’s limited staffing, Mastrorilli said. The Boston University Prison Education Program fosters a collaborative and inclusive educational environment by engaging educators from various academic institutions and former students who have graduated.

Mastrorilli said the program benefits from partnering with educators from other colleges and universities, such as Tufts University, Boston College, and Emerson College, to teach courses within the BU program.

“I’ve got people who reach out to me from other colleges and universities who want to teach,” she





Photo by Boston University

explained. This approach allows the program to maintain “consistent academic integrity and rigor” while drawing from a range of academic expertise. Partnering with the Petey Green Program provides volunteer tutors who staff study halls in conjunction with each semester’s course offerings. This rich, multidisciplinary, and supportive educational community provides valuable perspectives.

The program also seeks to elevate the status of its instructors, who are currently classified as “volunteers” rather than “vendors.” Mastrorilli said, “In the prison hierarchy... volunteers [are] almost on the same par as visitors.” This reclassification could provide instructors with more seamless access to the facilities and more consistent class time. Additionally, Mastrorilli pointed to opportunities for growth in expanding faculty involvement, and the program aims to continue providing a robust and high-quality educational experience for incarcerated students.

The Prison Education Program collaborates with community-based organizations like Partakers, Inc., a small nonprofit organization that helps reduce recidivism by promoting higher education and providing community mentoring for men and women who are incarcerated. This collaboration is essential in building pathways for students to transition from incarceration to higher education.

Mastrorilli emphasized the importance of expanding the program through “innovative delivery” methods, such as virtual, face-to-face, and hybrid formats, to enhance accessibility and adapt to the diverse needs of incarcerated students within the constraints of the prison environment.

Boston University’s Prison Education Program, which is known as BU PEP for short, gives incarcerated students an opportunity to earn a Certificate of Liberal Arts. This option provides substantial educational benefits without requiring the full commitment of a degree program. The certificate allows students to take a series of liberal arts courses to enhance their knowledge and skills. Students have been able to earn a full bachelor degree from Boston University, but unfortunately admissions into this academic offering is currently paused.

BU PEP serves nearly 40 students in two medium-security prisons. Boston University’s ongoing dedication to providing educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals reflects its unwavering belief in the power of education to change lives.





Photo by Adobestock

## HELENA COLLEGE



Helena College provides short-term, skill-focused programs to help prepare incarcerated individuals for reentry into society. This two-year community college in Helena, Montana, offers various academic programs, including associate degrees, certificates, and technical education, to prepare students for immediate employment or for transferring to four-year universities. Three years ago, the college expanded its program to include a structured education program for inmates in the Montana State Prison under the revived Second Chance Pell Grant initiative, providing educational opportunities for rehabilitation and reentry into society.

The program has specific criteria to ensure participants are prepared to benefit from the training. Applicants are evaluated based on academic ability, such as completing a high school equivalency diploma. The program targets individuals within five years of parole eligibility, maximizing the chance they can use their skills soon after release. It also considers sentencing restrictions such as limited

access to resources like computers, which may be excluded from certain courses. These guidelines help create an effective educational experience for eligible participants.

Focusing on “smaller, short-term programs” of “one year [or] two years tops” in areas like automotive technology (their current program offering), Education Services Bureau Chief Travis Anderson explained that the program provides practical skills suited to the regional job market. When asked about expansion, Anderson noted that extended programs are more challenging to manage due to issues like early release, parole, or violations that may disrupt continuity. More adaptable short-term educational options help meet reentry needs and incarceration constraints.

Anderson described some traditional, expected challenges for the program. Using computers or accessing digital resources can be difficult due to security protocols that limit participants’ use of these tools. There are also logistical issues, such as managing class schedules around security checks and possible delays in accessing classroom spaces. Nevertheless, the program has garnered strong support from





Photo by Adobestock

the Montana Department of Corrections and the broader community.

“In order for these programs to be successful, there has to be a coalition of the educational institution providing the services and the facilities that are receiving them.” With each cohort comprising about 10 participants, the program is poised to expand its offerings by seeking input from an advisory council that consists of “former individuals who are incarcerated that now work in various industries around the state.” This feedback helps the Helena College program determine whether proposed offerings align with real-world opportunities to support successful reintegration.

## STUDIES OF PRISON EDUCATION FIND THAT THESE PROGRAMS

**DECREASE THE  
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**14.8%**

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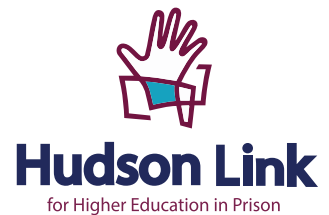
**\$131**





Photo by Adobestock

# HUDSON LINK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON



Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, based in Ossining, New York, combines educational opportunities with comprehensive reentry support. The program was established in 1998 in response to the 1994 crime bill that eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated individuals. Determined to fill the gap left by this legislation, Hudson Link focuses on reducing rates of incarceration and poverty through robust educational programs and comprehensive post-release support services. Program Director Joel Jimenez and Deputy Director Lila McDowell highlight the program's dedication to providing educational opportunities and reducing recidivism. "Hudson Link boasts a recidivism rate of less than 3% over 27 years, compared to recidivism rates of 43% statewide and 68% across the country," Jimenez notes.

The program operates on private donations and grants. This sustainability has been further strengthened through strategic partnerships, allowing Hudson Link to broaden its course offerings to

include degrees in behavioral science, liberal arts, and organizational management.

Partnerships with colleges work by matching a prison facility with a nearby college that can provide professors and the necessary curriculum for degree programs. Hudson Link collaborates with six college partners across five prisons in New York. Professors from partner colleges teach courses within the prison. Hudson Link raises funds to cover on-site academic coordinators, tuition, textbooks, computer labs, supplies and professor salaries when needed. There are more than 450 students enrolled in college programming through Hudson Link.

This collaborative approach allows Hudson Link to provide structured, degree-granting education rather than just standalone courses, ensuring incarcerated students can achieve meaningful academic qualifications, such as associate and bachelor degrees.

Hudson Link's commitment to reentry support is comprehensive. The program provides transitional services as part of its reentry support for individuals





Photo by AdobeStock

## “HUDSON LINK BOASTS A RECIDIVISM RATE OF LESS THAN 3% OVER 27 YEARS.”

who are released from prison. These services include help with FAFSA applications, college enrollment, and other paperwork necessary to continue post-prison education. Hudson Link's Finish Line Coordinator helps individuals, including support for graduate school and vocational training, complete the steps needed to continue their education upon release.

Hudson Link employs a case manager who works directly with alumni to address their immediate needs upon release, such as securing housing, obtaining identification (like a driver's license or social security card), and accessing public benefits. The case manager helps with job searches and supports integration back into society. Hudson Link also hosts interns, often Master of Social Work students, to assist the case manager and support the transitional services team, providing more personalized guidance and follow-up for alumni to help them reintegrate successfully. It also runs The Boutique, a free clothing shop where alumni can find professional attire.

Hudson Link recently established a transitional housing and employment program, known as New

Beginnings. “We take dilapidated homes in the neighborhood,” Jimenez said. “We fundraise and hire a contractor who works with recently released alumni, providing transitional employment as they rehabilitate dilapidated homes in the neighborhood while also building their own lives. We currently have three homes, housing about 20 people, and a fourth is under construction.”

With more than a 1,000 degrees awarded and over 1,700 alumni returned to their communities, the program has created a strong community of support. A key element of Hudson Link's success is putting directly affected voices into leadership positions within the program. Most of the salaried staff and leadership team are formerly incarcerated. This inspires current students to complete the program and helps maintain high standards as new funding opportunities, like the reinstatement of Pell Grants, become available.



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# TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVE



Holistic support is a central theme of the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative's mission. The initiative fosters stakeholder relationships and provides long-term student support. Julie Duchin founded the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative in 2012 with a clear purpose: to reduce recidivism through educational support and robust stakeholder relationships.

The Nashville-based nonprofit's achievements are a testament to this comprehensive strategy. Rachel Zolensky, vice president of strategy and impact, highlighted the initiative's steady growth — from a small team of two to a dedicated group of about 20 staff members. Today, the program collaborates with faculty members at four colleges: Nashville State Community College, Dyersburg State Community College, Belmont University, and Lane College. It provides eight degree programs through these partnerships at six prison sites across the state. The

programs are tailored to the needs of individuals who are incarcerated.

The Tennessee Higher Education Initiative initially paid a per-course fee to colleges at a discounted rate to cover the lack of financial aid for incarcerated students. This payment model shifted to ensure equity in tuition charges, and the program no longer pays a per-course rate with most colleges. Instead, funding for the programs, including teacher compensation, now comes from a combination of state appropriations, grants from the Department of Correction, and other state agency grants. This multi-source funding model supports the overall operation of the education programs, including costs associated with paying educators.

Financial sustainability has been a cornerstone of THEI's success, achieved through a mix of private and state funding. Since 2016, the state has provided 50-60% of the organization's budget, including a specific line-item appropriation. This financial backing has enabled the program to provide high-touch support





Photo by Adobestock

to its students. Staffers make weekly visits to facilities to offer crisis support, address urgent mental health needs, and provide reentry services such as housing and employment assistance.

The Tennessee Higher Education Initiative has established strategic alliances with a wide range of partners to support its educational programs for individuals who are incarcerated. THEI works closely with state legislators and the governor's office to secure financial and political backing. Collaboration with prison facility leaders, including wardens and security staff, ensures effective implementation and support within the prisons. THEI engages with organizations such as the Tennessee Prison College Coalition and Unlock Higher Education to advocate for expanding educational opportunities. It also partners with the Tennessee Board of Regents, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and the Department of Labor to align policies and secure funding.

By forging strong partnerships, THEI serves 210 current students in the college programs and an additional 100 students in the College Prep program. Currently, participants enrolled for at least one semester have a recidivism rate of less than 15%, and no graduates have returned. THEI's success is directly linked to these concentrated efforts in coalition building, Zolensky said, which have enabled

it to deliver effective educational opportunities and support services.

#### EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

THEI transforms lives by coordinating degree-granting college programs within Tennessee prisons. Through strong partnerships with the Tennessee Department of Correction and state colleges and universities, they provide incarcerated individuals with access to higher education, fostering personal growth, empowerment, and brighter futures.

**203**

STUDENTS CURRENTLY  
ENROLLED

**98**

STUDENTS ENROLLED  
IN COLLEGE PREP

**147**

GRADUATES  
TO DATE

**103**

COURSES COORDINATED  
LAST YEAR

**1,145**

SERVICES PROVIDED  
LAST YEAR

**48**

DEGREES CONFERRED  
LAST YEAR



Photo by Vocational Village

# VOCATIONAL VILLAGE



Michigan's Vocational Village program takes a unique approach by integrating employer partnerships directly into the correctional environment. Vocational Village in Michigan is pioneering the field of corrections-based vocational education through its innovative model. Established in 2016, the organization creates an intensive training environment that directly integrates industry-recognized credentials and employer partnerships within the correctional setting.

Jake Gorden, Vocational Specialist, explains how other states have recognized and replicated this model, which often cites Vocational Village in their legislative efforts to secure funding for similar programs. A key element of its success is a top-down approach, where leadership strongly promotes and supports the program.

The program employs a selective application process to determine participant eligibility, focusing on preparing prisoners for successful reentry into society. Participation is not automatically granted. Individuals

undergo vocational counseling sessions assessing their interests, aptitudes, prior work experience, and educational backgrounds. Only those who meet specific criteria, such as being within two years of their earliest release date and demonstrating a genuine commitment to vocational training, are invited to apply. Successful applicants are then relocated to specialized Vocational Village facilities, receiving intensive training and living in dedicated housing units separate from the general prison population. This rigorous selection process ensures that participants are well-suited for the training and can maximize their employment prospects upon release.

Employers participate in the program by conducting job interviews with participants still incarcerated and helping shape the curriculum. When a large employer expressed a need for diesel mechanics, the program quickly adapted by creating a tailored training module. This employer-driven approach ensures that participants gain industry-recognized credentials and leave with concrete job offers. Vocational Village's recidivism rate is more than two times lower than the national average. The program has strong job placement and retention outcomes, leading to high employer satisfaction and repeated hiring. "We see





Photo by Vocational Village

**“66% OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE PAROLED OUT OF THIS PROGRAM RECENTLY HAVE SUCCESSFULLY FOUND MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT IN THEIR CHOSEN FIELD.”**

a significant reduction in recidivism among our participants, not just because they have skills, but because they leave with a sense of purpose and a clear path forward,” Gorden said.

The Vocational Village program has garnered national recognition and support, drawing visitors from more than 35 states, including employers, legislators, diplomats, and other state corrections officials. These visitors participate in regular tours to observe infrastructure, culture, and vocational training methods that could be replicated in their own jurisdictions.

Vocational Village continues influencing and inspiring correctional education initiatives nationwide, but their success did not come without challenges. Technology has historically been limited in correctional facilities due to complex security requirements inherent in the setting. More recently, significant technological updates have provided a positive outcome to this hurdle. Another challenge seen in other state correction departments is the

cultural resistance to new programming, where initial skepticism or logistical concerns from staff must be addressed to foster a supportive environment for the program’s innovative approach.

Despite these challenges, Vocational Village continues to set a standard for corrections-based vocational education through robust state funding, bipartisan support, and data-driven outcomes. Part of Michigan’s Vocational Village success is having top-down internal support from staff, including officers, administration, physical plant and more, who are supportive and educated on the importance of this model.



Photo by Windham School District

# WINDHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT



Windham School District in Texas addresses the prison education challenge at a large scale, supporting tens of thousands of students through a wide variety of academic, life skills and technical programs. The district, which was established in 1969, serves as the education provider for those residing within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, offering a broad range of programs to support the education and rehabilitation of individuals who are incarcerated.

According to Danielle Nicholes, communications administrator, Windham provides options for students to earn a high school diploma or equivalency as well as opportunities to participate in dual-credit programs that count toward high school and college credits. Windham partners with colleges, allowing students to take courses and earn credits while incarcerated. In addition, the district offers around 40 career and technical education courses, such as welding, truck driving, RV service technician training, and culinary arts. These are all designed to meet current workforce demands and enhance job readiness for successful reentry into society.

Windham School District serves approximately 50,000 students per school year with just over 1,000 staff members, including teachers, spread across 100 campuses throughout Texas. The educational programs are coordinated closely with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Principals work directly with individual wardens to schedule classes, graduations, and special events like Family Literacy Days. Some programs have secure online access to facilitate learning within correctional facilities. Windham also collaborates with the state department to align residents job assignments with their training fields, such as placing those in culinary education in kitchen jobs. Students can apply their skills practically while still incarcerated.

Windham is funded by direct appropriation by the Texas Legislature every two years and receives additional grant support. Nicholes pointed to the success of their academic program, noting, "It's a pivotal moment when students achieve this, especially for those who never thought they would earn a high school diploma or equivalency." These life-changing educational milestones give participants a sense of achievement that can open doors to new opportunities upon release.





**“78% OF ALL CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION PARTICIPANTS SECURED AT LEAST ONE JOB RELATED TO THEIR TRAINING AFTER RELEASE.”**

**“WINDHAM STUDENTS WHO COMPLETED TRAINING PROGRAMS OR THE LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM WERE LESS LIKELY TO BE REARRESTED WITHIN THREE YEARS OF RELEASE COMPARED TO THE MATCHED SAMPLE.”**

Windham School District faces several current challenges, including staffing shortages, technological barriers, and issues related to occupational licensing for its students. Staffing remains a significant concern, affecting both Windham and the correctional facilities, as both entities must work closely together to ensure smooth operations. Windham meets the technological challenges with a plan that includes updates and upgrades to improve secure online access for educational programs. The district is also seeking legislative support to address occupational licensing barriers. The Lone Star State in 2023 enacted a law that allows incarcerated students to apply for licenses before release, minimizing employment gaps.

Windham's leaders actively engage with policymakers and stakeholders to raise awareness about their programs and secure the necessary support and resources. The district remains adaptive, conducting bi-annual evaluations to refine its programs. This

ongoing evolution allows Windham to meet labor market needs effectively and support the successful reintegration of its students into society. Windham participants are 17.6% less likely to recidivate than the average of prisoners statewide.



# CONCLUSION

The power of education within correctional facilities is not just theoretical — it is a proven catalyst for personal transformation and societal benefit. The stories and insights shared by Boston University's Prison Education Program, Helena College, Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, the Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, Vocational Villages, and the Windham School District all show that education in prisons has a profound impact on reducing recidivism and supporting long-term rehabilitation.

These programs are more than just academic or vocational training. They serve as lifelines, restoring dignity, building participant confidence, and offering hope for a better future. By tailoring their approaches to the unique challenges of the prison environment, these initiatives provide a pathway to a second chance. The success of these programs is rooted in a deep understanding of the participants' needs, along with extensive support services for reintegration.

However, their success is not guaranteed. It depends on the collaboration of multiple stakeholders: prison administrations, educational institutions, community organizations, policymakers, and employers. This coalition-building ensures that the skills and knowledge provided in these programs are relevant and immediately applicable upon release. The adaptability of these programs, coupled with substantial financial support from private donations, state allocations, and federal grants, demonstrate that these programs are sustainable. Investing in these programs is not just about reducing recidivism. It's about breaking the cycle of incarceration and creating productive members of society.

Despite technological limitations, staff shortages, and bureaucratic barriers, these programs continue to exhibit remarkable resilience, embracing innovative solutions, adapting to new policies, and leveraging emerging opportunities. The evidence is clear: Education within correctional facilities is a powerful tool for change, with benefits that extend beyond the prison walls and into the communities to which these individuals return.

For policymakers, educators, and citizens alike, the challenge is clear: Support expanding these transformative programs to ensure that every incarcerated individual seeking a second chance through education can access it. By increasing investment, fostering partnerships, and advocating for policy changes that remove barriers, we can break the incarceration cycle and build more robust, resilient communities.





TO LEARN MORE

# Policy Brief

MACKINAC CENTER

FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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## Are Education Programs in Prison Worth It?

A meta-analysis of the highest-quality academic research

By Steven Sprick Schuster and Ben Stickle

(Editor's note: This analysis was turned into an academic paper and published in the American Journal of Criminal Justice on Oct. 21, 2023. It is available here: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12103-023-03917-3>.)

### Introduction

More than five in every 1,000 people in the U.S. population are behind bars, the sixth highest rate in the world, even though many other countries have higher violent crime rates.<sup>1</sup> The Prison Policy Initiative project that 6% of Americans will be imprisoned at some point in their lifetimes, including one in 10 men and almost one in three African-American men.<sup>2</sup>

The impact of high incarceration rates extends beyond the effects on inmates and their families. There are large societal costs, directly and indirectly, with each crime and corresponding imprisonment. Direct costs consist of the expenses to house prisoners and other forms of public expenditures within the criminal justice system. A 2017 estimate places the cost to house prisoners at \$80.7 billion, while the costs of policing, courts, health care, and various other expenses brings the total price to \$182 billion.<sup>3</sup> The cost of crime on victims themselves is another significant, if difficult to quantify, cost of criminal activity.

The indirect costs of imprisonment are also a concern and may be even more impactful to society. For example, incarceration decreases employment, social

engagement, civic participation, and education rates for the incarcerated. Imprisoning parents increases the likelihood that their children also end up in prison.<sup>4</sup>

With all the costs and negative impacts of incarceration, how could the situation be improved? Because a sizable portion of prisoners are repeat offenders, one strategy is to rehabilitate the incarcerated and provide them with education or training while in prison.<sup>5</sup> This will set them up for productive and legal work when released.

Unfortunately, this effort is not new, and the disappointing prospects of rehabilitation eventually gave way to the 70's mindset of "nothing works."<sup>6</sup> This conclusion led to bipartisan support for increasingly punitive prison sentences and a reduction in rehabilitation programs. After all, if nothing worked in rehabilitating criminals, why waste money on education and training instead of just locking the cell and throwing away the key? Combined with a dramatic increase in crime and escalating punishments in the '80s and '90s, incarceration rates dramatically increased.<sup>7</sup>

While incarceration rates have recently slowed (down from the peak in the 2000s), they remain high and are four times the rates in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Education programs within prisons are gradually experiencing a resurgence as funding for programs is restored.<sup>9</sup> Government

# Policy Brief

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## State Ranking of Prison Education Programs

By Ben Stickle and Steven Sprick Schuster

### Introduction

The United States has the world's largest prison population and spends billions annually on incarceration.<sup>1</sup> State policymakers could get more value from this expenditure by expanding access to education within prisons. This policy brief builds upon recent research, highlighting the benefits of prison education programs and state-level policy reform.

Prison education programs have been marked by significant policy shifts. Most notably, the 1994 federal Crime Bill, which barred incarcerated individuals from Pell Grant eligibility, led to a significant reduction in prison education programs, particularly college-level courses. This policy change resulted in a steep decline in educational opportunities for prisoners, impacting their post-release outcomes. However, in June 2023, the federal government restored access to Pell Grants for incarcerated students.<sup>2</sup> This is a testament to the growing acknowledgment of the benefits of prison education.

Disproportionately low literacy and education levels among prisoners underscores the importance of expanding access to education. Further, the largest meta-analysis of prison education research showed that effective prison education programs could directly reduce the costs of incarceration. They lower

recidivism rates (by an average of 6.8 percentage points), improve post-release employment rates (by an average of 3.1 percentage points) and post-release annual earnings (by an average of \$565).<sup>3</sup> The study showed that these programs pay for themselves in reduced costs from lower reincarceration rates.

Given the effectiveness of prison education, it is important to consider the role of public policy in promoting these efforts. In a corresponding study, we discuss three specific policies states can implement to enhance the effectiveness of education programs in prisons.<sup>4</sup> These include:

1. Automatic enrollment in educational programs for inmates lacking certain educational attainment.
2. Establishment of a school district or state office to oversee adult prison education.
3. Provision of sentence-reduction incentives for participation or completion of educational programs.

In this brief, we rank each state based on the level of prison education offered at state and private prisons and on their use of these policies.

Are Schools in Prison Worth It? The Effects and Economic Returns of Prison Education





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