

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

HB416 — Resources and Education for All Prisons (REAP) Act

February 21, 2023

Testimony of Stephen Steurer, PhD, Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform

Good afternoon, Chairman Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and other members of the House Appropriations Committee. I would like to thank Delegate Amprey for his support of this bill. My testimony will focus on HB416.

Most of my professional adult life has been devoted to education of incarcerated adult and juveniles. My entire career has been in public high school teaching and then in the Maryland adult and juvenile education systems. Over a decade ago I retired from State service after serving as the Academic Education Coordinator for Correctional Education at the Maryland State Department of Education 30 years. In addition, I was the Executive Director of the national non-profit professional Correctional Education Association for many years. Today my role is primarily as a volunteer helping to coordinate the reentry and education programs as a board member of CURE National, the Petey Greene Program and the Barbara Bush Foundation.

Why do I think correctional education is important? The reason is simple, education reduces recidivism and changes the lives of former offenders, their families, and the community. The 2013-2014 RAND Corporation research of correctional education underpins the societal and financial benefits of correctional education. The conclusion of the RAND research is that it significantly lowers ex-offender recidivism and provides a very substantial return on our tax dollars.

Is Maryland utilizing education programs behind bars effectively? Since education reduces recidivism are we providing adequate programming? The answer is probably not. There are many devoted state employees in the Correctional Education program now run by the Department of Labor (DOL) but the actual number of teachers has dropped and the number of academic and vocational program student completions has declined significantly in the last 15-20 years. The Abell Foundation 2017 study of students illustrates some of the numbers. Even though the inmate population had doubled since 1982 in 2017 we were not serving larger numbers of inmate students. There are currently significantly fewer teachers in the state facilities than there were two decades ago. And the annual GED completion numbers have dropped from a high of 1000 in fiscal year 20 to less than 500 in

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fiscal year 2017 to 0 (ZERO) during COVID. DOL has not provided information on GED completion in recent years, even though it also administers the Maryland statewide GED testing program. While some of the decrease was due to the increased difficulty of the newer GED 2014 exam the number of students attending school has also dropped. Waiting lists for school have skyrocketed with the passage of legislation to increase the number of mandatory school attendance to 240 days. Many people who were court mandated to complete their GED are not attending school. The percentage of Maryland prisoners without a high school diploma is around 50% and most of them have no gainful career training history. According to the 2017 Abell study of Maryland's correctional education programs only 15% of inmates participated in education in 2016. Unfortunately, the researchers were not able to obtain much more detail from the correctional system (DPSCS and DOL) about the educational programs to evaluate the overall quality and effectiveness for those students who do participate.

What are the reasons for low participation and completion? There are at least two causes for the low participation and completion rates. First, at intake the correctional system does not adequately assess and take into consideration an individual's education history or work status use existing information as a consistent part of ongoing reentry program planning. Secondly, the incentives for inmates to educational participation are no better than prison maintenance jobs. In fact, many menial jobs pay more than the stipend for educational participation. A few decades ago, educational participation was treated as a special program awarding students an extra 5 days per month off their sentence for attendance. The waiting lists at most institutions were very long as a result. More teachers were hired, and night school was introduced. Most of those evening programs ended and many teachers have left for better pay in the public schools. Unfortunately, the number of special programs eligible for the sentence reduction has increased many times over and school lists and participation fell dramatically, as a result. With the introduction of a 240-day mandatory education participation 4 years ago for those without a high school credential, the waiting lists have dramatically increased. Testimony from incarcerated and newly released individuals indicates people wait months and years to enter school. Once enrolled, those who complete the 240-day requirement are often dropped from school, even before they complete the GED program. What can we expect from those released from prison without a high school diploma and/or a career certificate? Most of them will not find a job with a living wage and will likely return to prison to start the cycle all over again.

The state of Maryland has never funded post-secondary education in the prisons. Up until 1994 the State relied on Pell grants to fund college level programs delivered by Hagerstown Community College, Coppin State University, University of Maryland Baltimore Campus, and Morgan State University. At the time Pell grants ended there were around

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1,000 people in Maryland prisons attending college. Within a year or two, the number dropped to 0. Goucher College started its own privately funded program several years ago and more recently Georgetown University has initiated classes as well without Pell grant support. Certain Pell Grant funds became available in the last 6 years and several universities and colleges were awarded grants and started programs. They include the University of Baltimore, Anne Arundel Community College, Wor-Wic Community College and Goucher College. In 2023, Morgan State University, the University of Maryland Global Campus, Hagerstown Community College, and Georgetown University have applied for and received Pell Grant approval by the US Department of Education.

Since most Maryland inmates do not have a high school diploma and many received their GED with a score below college readiness, the college programs will be competing for a restricted number of students. The Correctional Education Program in DOL is the agency authorized to prepare students for post-secondary academic and career education programs. Currently, there is little or no formal coordination between the Correctional Education Program and the various colleges and universities. The Commission needs to study the current structure of programs and make recommendations on how to build a coordinated program delivery system to include post-secondary education.

What are our proposals? The Maryland Alliance for Justice Reform (MAJR) endorses HB416 which is likely to improve the educational outcomes of Maryland prisoners, to enhance public safety and, subsequently, to save on the costs of future incarceration. HB416 creates a data collection and tracking system to assist case management to develop individual educational and career plans. HB416 also creates a Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission to research and evaluate the current educational and job training programs and make recommendations on how to improve the coordination between DPSCS, DOL, and MSDE to deliver individualized programs for basic literacy skills, a high school diploma, career technical certifications, and college degrees. These measures will encourage more incarcerated inmates to discover their capabilities and become serious students. They will leave prison equipped with up-to-date skills, diplomas, and certificates to succeed and become tax-paying citizens and parents. At the same time, the State will save money, improve the tax base, and see less crime because people who are prepared to enter the job market with credentials for well-paying jobs. We highly and wholeheartedly recommend the Appropriations Committee to approve HB416.

Resources

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The RAND Corporation conducted the research that proved the connection between education participation while incarcerated and the drop in future recidivism with its 2014 study *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education*. RAND has conducted additional research which further confirmed and refine the conclusions of the 2014 study.

The 2017 report of the Abell Foundation identifies the untapped potential of correctional education in Maryland to improve criminal justice outcomes. That report, *Prison Education, Maximizing the Potential for Employment and Successful Community Reintegration*, recommended an enhanced incentive system. HB416 encourages an improved planning system and authorizes the creation of just such an incentive system.

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In 2020 Educational Testing Service Center for Research and Human Capital and Education published a comprehensive report *How to Unlock the Power of Prison Education* on prison education in the United States and made several recommendations for the improvement of educational program delivery.