Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission Meeting Minutes

March 6, 2025
9am-10am

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Adam Cummings, Ainsley Moench, Alyssa Fieo, Amanda Owens, Andrea Cantora, Anne Bocchini Pack, Arinze Ifekauche, Brandi Cahn, Dr. Charles Adams, Christian Gant, Danielle Cox, Del. Elizabeth Embry, Gordon Pack, Initia Lettau, John Feaster III, John Griffin, Karen Jones, Lindsey McCullough, Marc DeSimone, Mary Gable, Meredith Conde, Nick Moroney, Ramieka Robinson-Peoples, Rose Dailey, Sara O'Donnell, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Victoria Devore

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I. Housekeeping

The meeting was called to order at 9:04am.

A. Approval of minutes from February 6th

The February meeting minutes were approved.

B. Discussion on correctional institution visits

Ainsley Moench discussed the correctional institution visits the Commission would be attending. There will be three different correctional visits. The first visit will be to MCI-W and JCI. The second visit will be to MCTC and RCI. The third visit will go to ECI. These visits will be held in April and May, and Commissioners are encouraged to fill out the visit interest form so they can claim one of the eight spots available to visit.

C. Update on HB 877

Dr. Stephen Steurer gave an update on HB 877. The bill was introduced in the House Judiciary Committee. The bill will extend the time of the Commisison.

D. Update on research and surveys to national correctional education officials

Dr. Stephen Steurer mentioned that Danielle Cox sent out a survey created by himself and Ainsley Moench to correctional education directors of other states to understand the problems they are experiencing and what has been helpful for them in administering it.

Ainsley Moench said that they have around 9 responses so far.

Dr. Stephen Steurer reminded everyone that looking at best practices around the country is part of the Commission's duties.

II. Report back from workgroups

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked members of workgroups to report back on what their workgroups are working on.

A. Career Technology and Workforce Development

Adam Cummings announced that he will be joining the Office of Correctional Ombudsman and wanted to know what would happen to his appointment to the Commission. He also mentioned that he has been pushing hard to get the workgroup to focus on finding a way to get formerly incarcerated people jobs in state agencies. Someone suggested that they reach out to HR Departments and speak to them about the benefits of hiring formerly incarcerated people.

Ainsley Moench said that the appointments go through the Governor's Office of Appointments, and she would follow up with Adam Cummings about navigating that process.

B. ABE/GED/SPED

Dr. Stephen Steurer went over the updates for the ABE/GED/SPED workgroup. The workgroup received some data from the Department of Labor. The workgroup is wondering what the curriculum is for transition classes and how many hours are in each class. Another concern is the question of computer literacy and how many computers are operational in each facility. The other question is on what exact occupational programs are still operational given cuts and staff vacancies. Adam Cummings said that he is still working on getting MCE waitlist information. Danielle Cox responded that the list of occupational programs are available.

C. Higher Education

Dr. Andrea Cantora talked about funding for higher education, which is the top issue ofr the workgroup. Higher education programs rely on Pell Grant funding, and some programs are able to supplement with private programming. The workgroup is looking at alternative funding as Pell Grants do not cover materials or the cost to run the programs. One solution has been looking at states that provide state funding for their programs, such as through state scholarships or state financial aid. These funds would be accessible by adding a specialized scholarship or tuition waiver program, or by explicitly stating that incarcerated students can obtain state-funded scholarships. Danielle Cox is working on talking to the Maryland Higher Educaiton Commission about this issue.

Part of the survey that Danielle Cox sent out asks about funding options in each state for higher education programming.

Danielle Cox added that because of the uncertainty at the federal level, all education funding is at risk. The Pell program is running at a deficit.

Dr. Andrea Cantora went over the issue of space. In order to expand programs, space is needed. Approximately 300 students are currently being served across four programs. Goucher College recently got a grant to obtain two trailers at MCI-W, which will add capacity. Commissioners will be looking at the issue of space during the correctional institution visits.

Danielle Cox talked about the current technology available for higher education students. Students have access to laptops that connect back to the University's system. She is investigating obtaining an LMS system on the laptops, with Bowie State pilotign the program this spring.

Dr. Andrea Cantora related the issue back to cost. Colleges currently have to pay for the cost of running the Origin system. In the current system, it is difficult to communicate with students. Danielle Cox added that students can take employment-related classes.

Dr. Andrea Cantora went over the issue of incentives. Most higher education students do not receive incentives for daily participation except for Georgetown students, as they are day program. Most higher education students have a day job and attend classes at night.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked if they could be paid in addition to the day jobs, and if they earn diminution credits. Danielle Cox responded that incarcerated students get diminution credits on the completion of their program, but they cannot be paid from two programs.

Dr. Stephen Steurer said that the issue about incentives has existed for a long time. Only around 10% of the population is eligible for higher education or career technology programs because they require a GED. He recommended that the Commission look at the incentives to encourage program participation.

Gordon Pack said that incentives do not necessarily have to be monetary. Most incarcerated individuals want to get out of prison faster and have better employment options upon release. Dr. Stephen Steurer agreed, and added that special privileges, special housing situations, and different goals are all options. He recommended that the higher education workgroup look into this issue and write some recommendations.

Adam Cummings asked John Feaster III about utilizing work opportunity tax credits to incentivize employers to hire returning citizens. John Feaster III replied and made a comment that most programs have a waitlist, so focusing on incentives may not be the right issue to focus on at this time. He also added we may want to hear from people from the Department of Labor and DPSCS on their perspectives of how things are going. The federal bonding program allows the DoL to say to prospective employers that if they have concerns about hiring a returning citizen, the DoL will provide up to $10,000 in damages if they occur. However, bonds are rarely used, as it requires returning citizens to advertise they have a criminal record, and many people do not want to disclose that. As for the work opportunity tax credit, it is used more frequently, but it is not limited to returning citizens. The incentive is not large, and many companies do not use it. Danielle Cox agreed that these programs are not used often.

Gordon Pack emphasized the power of diminution credits and other sentence reduction methods as incentives. He suggested putting something on tablets that displays the benefits of engaging in education or success stories from returning citizens.

John Feaster III said that although talking about incentives are important, the Commission may want to prioritize getting the waitlist down before adding more people to the waitlist.

Danielle Cox added that incarcerated students do get incentives for participating in education. Incarcerated students get 10 days off every month for participation, and JRA eligible students get 20 days off. Obtaining a GED, certificate, associates degree, or bachelors degree will take 40 to 60 days off their sentence.

The group went back to talking about ABE/GED/SPED.

Dr. Stephen Steurer went over a list of questions the ABE/GED/SPED workgroup came up with to ask the Department of Labor and the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. The workgroup would like a waiting list for academic programs by institution. Cancellation data indicates there are a large percentage of cancelled school days due to staffing shortages. Rough data also indicates that from 2013 to 2024, 52,000 people came in without a high school diploma and 10% of them received a GED during their incarceration, though that could be for a variety of reasons. Dr. Stephen Steurer also said that key performance indicators should be looked at routinely for budgeting and planning purposes.

Dr. Stephen Steurer went on to talk about special education services. The workgroup is looking at how many students with disabilities are eligible for special services under IDEA by disability, how many students wiht disabilities attempted a GED and passed or failed, how are students screened to determine if they have an IEP when they enter a facility, what is the process for reviewing IEPs, what are the hours of instruction and class schedule for special education students, what is the status of updating the special education written policies and procedures, have their been any reports by MSDE related to monitoring special education services and compliance, have there been any complaints pursuant to IDEA, what are the policies and procedures regarding parent/guardian participation, and how many IEP meetings are held on what frequency.

John Feaster III said that the Department of Labor could get answers to some of the questions, but the Commission may want to narrow their focus and questions in order to get more work done. He believes that there are some low-hanging fruit that the Commission could focus on improving, and focusing on a limited number of questions may result in greater outcomes. Dr. Stephen Steurer responded that he was asking what the Commission would like to do with all of the questions, and there are some questions that are important overall, but some questions regarding special education do not apply to everyone. There are a lot of questions and data should be available to evaluate how the state is doing.

Danielle Cox commented that between 2008 and 2024 there were 73,936 individuals admitted to prisons. Of those, 16,000 had a high school diploma or GED at intake. 52,000 did not have a GED or high school diploma, though that number includes those who had 18 months or less on their sentence and thus are not mandated to take GED classes. 5,361 were awarded GEDs. John Feaster III replied that the Department of Labor does offer free adult-based education services through the Office of Adult Education to anyone who has a short term and is released.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked what the salary system is for correctional education teachers. John Feaster III replied that salaries are commensurate with MSDE teacher's salary scale, but no hazard pay is offered. Danielle Cox said that salaries are renegotiated every two years, and the salary scale is public.

John Feaster III added that there are only six vacancies statewide with over 80 positions filled. Danielle Cox commented that DPSCS is in a staffing crisis and that affects the availability of educational

programming. Dr. Stephen Steurer replied that perhaps the report should indicate that the Department of Labor is doing well at hiring vacant positions.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked the Commission where they would like to go with these questions and responses.

Adam Cummings asked John Feaster III if the waitlist mentioned earlier was about students joining the adult education program, and John Feaster III answered yes. He asked why there was a waitlist if the teacher positions are almost all full. John Feaster III answered that there are only so many students that can go through a program in a designated amount of time. To increase capacity, there should be an increased number of school days and access to asynchronous learning.

Dr. Stephen Steurer said that the Department of Labor should track how many students are in a program, how many people are on a waiting list, and number of vacancies. Waiting lists should be centralized. John Feaster III replied that the infrastructure for a centralized waiting list does not exist as each institution has a waiting list, so moving people around to available programs at other institutions is not possible. Therefore, investing in the infrastructure has not been a priority. Danielle Cox agreed that each school manages their waitlist on their own. They are looking at improvements that does not compromise security.

Danielle Cox added that the increase in waiting lists can partly be attributed to the increased days of mandatory education (140 to 240), which was done to make ensure students see marked progress towards their GED and want to complete it.

Anne Bocchini Pack asked why there are so many cancellations at MCI-H. Danielle Cox replied that 600 IIs had to be taken out of MCI-H and moved to MCTC because of HVAC and water system maintenance. With ongoing construction, it's difficult to keep adequate staffing.

Dr. Stephen Steurer summarized that there are lots of complications and questions to be answered. The Commission will meet again in April to discuss these issues.

John Feaster III asked what the timeline on the Commission was. Dr. Stephen Steurer replied that currently, the Commission is authorized for one year, but there is current legislation to extend the length of the Commission.

Stephen Steurer announced that the next meeting will be on April 8th from 10am-11am and thanked everyone for their hard work on the Commission.

The meeting adjourned at 10:31am.