ABE/GED/SPED Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

January 27, 2025
10am-11am

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Alyssa Fieo, Anne Bocchini-Pack, Christian Gant, Ainsley Moench, Danielle Cox, David Domenici, Del. Karen Simpson, John Feaster III, John Griffin, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Mary Gable, Renee Yarbough-Williams, Stephanie A. King, Dr. Stephen Steurer

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I. Call to Order

Dr. Stephen Steurer called the meeting to order at 10am.

II. Discussion on workgroup vision

Dr. Stephen Steurer went over the vision for each Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission workgroup. He believes that successful ABE/GED/SPED programming would consist of a school system for adults that takes advantage of technology while prioritizing face-to-face instruction, has coordination between various state agencies, and has high-level leadership.

III. Discussion on workgroup chair

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked if anyone would like to chair the workgroup. Danielle Cox volunteered and said she would if no one else wanted to, but would like to see how this meeting goes first.

IV. Discussion on data

Dr. Stephen Steurer went over some data gaps that would be helpful to obtain for the workgroup. There is no data on daily enrollment at each institution, the number of school days at each institution, length of waiting lists to be in educational programming per institution, how many students pass the GED with college-ready scores, the number PIN positions both current and historic, if programs are losing staff, and funding over time.

Alyssa Fieo asked if the Maryland State Department of Education has been monitoring the special education program and if there have been any compliance issues identified through that monitoring.

John Feaster III made the distinction that students who receive special education are never on a waiting list. Danielle Cox added that all special education students are placed in a special education class with a special education teacher, and if there is no space available, they will transfer the student to an institution with space.

Anne Bocchini Pack asked if the 18 year-olds to 21 year-olds who are entering the adult system are being tracked to see if their transition to the adult system is successful. Dr. Stephen Steurer added that not everyone who is 18 is a special education student, but students may not be screened for needing special education services. Danielle Cox responded that every incarcerated individual under 22 is screened for special education needs. Any incarcerated individual under 22 is also put on priority placement for educational programming if they do not have their high school diploma, and that data is tracked because there are special funds given to special education students.

Del. Karen Simpson said that sometimes, people can have areas they excel in in education and areas they struggle with. There needs to be balanced support. She asked if there is historical data on incarcerated students, and Danielle Cox answered that the Department of Labor has data going back to 2008 when they took over correctional education.

John Griffin asked if there are educational coordinators for those under 22. Danielle Cox responded that those educational coordinator positions were part-time, contractual positions and many of them had been cut due to budget constraints. Currently, educational coordination has gone to the administrative side.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked if incarcerated individuals age 18 to 22 are placed in separate institutions or mixed in with an all-ages population. Danielle Cox replied that all institutions are all ages. Most people age out of crime, so having a concentrated population of young people would be problematic.

Alyssa Fieo talked about a 2019 report on the rights of special education students in correctional facilities. Special education students have a right to FAPE (free and appropriate public education) until graduation from high school with a regular high school diploma, and the letter specifically notes that a GED is not a replacement for a regular high school diploma. Under Maryland law, incarcerated individuals can only obtain a GED, which may threaten Maryland's compliance with federal law. John Feaster III replied that all people who obtain a GED are given a Maryland diploma. Danielle Cox agreed and added that after 2014, the state recognized that the GED had become more rigorous and made that change. Alyssa Fieo replied that she is wondering if it is still a GED even if the degree says Maryland high school diploma. In

the juvenile system, youths are given a high school diploma from their home district. Danielle Cox responded that technically the only federal requirement for education in adult prisons are for special education students ages 18 to 21. Maryland, however, established additional requirements that every incarcerated individual must have 240 days of mandatory education. Alyssa Fieo said that a GED may be significantly more difficult to attain for students with an IEP versus working through the high school curriculum in their home district. Danielle Cox responded that the GED passing rate is over 90%, and Alyssa Fieo asked if there is data for special education passing rates specifically. Danielle Cox replied that out of the students with IEPs, there are it is very rare they have problems obtaining a GED. Dr. Stephen Steurer said that the group will continue to look into this issue. Mary Gable offered help from the Maryland State Department of Education if the group needed anything.

John Feaster III asked if the group was going to look at both the adult correctional education system and the Department of Juvenile Services education system. Dr. Stephen Steurer replied that they will not be looking at the DJS system unless the Commission can learn from it, as DJS went through a reorganization of their education system.

Dr. Stephen Steurer talked about the response from the Department of Labor that they do not track employment after release. Additionally, there is no data on attendance, enrollment, or number of school days per institution. Danielle Cox clarified that previously, the Department of Labor was not tracking employment after release because they were legally not allowed to. Legislation passed that allowed for tracking of employment after release and the Department Public Safety and Correctional Services and Department of Labor are working with the Maryland Longitudinal Data Systems Center to track employment of those who participated in correctional education programs upon release.

V. Planning next steps for the workgroup

The group discussed how they would like to meet in the future. The group will meet monthly, and Alyssa Fieo, Danielle Cox, and Anne Bocchini Pack will meet weekly on Friday to get work done.

Dr. Stephen Steurer talked about how he believes many more people in prison should attend correctional education programs.

John Griffin mentioned that correctional education programs have issues with space which prevent more students from being involved. Danielle Cox agreed and said that there are also issues with understaffing, though while institutions are understaffed education is the last program to be cut.

Dr. Stephen Steurer said that the group is beginning to schedule prison visits and will want to investigate different spaces around the prison. Anne Bocchini Pack said that sometimes prisons need to get creative about space use, as sometimes other programs may be taking up space that they do not need.

VI. Adjournment

Dr. Stephen Steurer thanked everyone for their time and concluded the meeting at 11am.