Thoughts on the Recent Prison Visits and Other Items

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Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission

Several members of the Commission recently completed visits to 6 of the prison education programs. We visited RCI and MCTC in Hagerstown, JCI and MCI-W in Jessup, and ECI-E and ECI-W in Somerset. At each site, we were escorted by correctional and/or educational staff, visited many classrooms and talked to teachers and principals, wardens and assistant wardens. In some institutions, we spoke with a number of students. Generally, we felt that the staff were open, welcoming, and able to answer our questions. It would be good for us to take time to have further discussions about our observations and findings. As Chair of the Commission, I would also like to visit more of the prison education programs and, possibly, return to others to learn more about successes and problems that we observed.

As Chair, let me offer my opinion about what we saw in the educational programs in Maryland's prisons. First, however, I must note that Maryland's prisons are in the midst of a crisis at several locations, primarily because of a lack of security staff. The current correctional staff are acting heroically and keeping the lid on potential powder kegs. In the eastern and western parts of the state, incarcerated individuals (IIs) are locked in their housing units and cells for 22 or more hours per day. Professional corrections experts will tell you that perpetual lockdowns are dangerous for both IIs and staff and will eventually result in violent events. Under these conditions, the provision of education and other services is next to impossible.

Please remember that the incarcerated population is characterized by low levels of educational achievement, high levels of mental health issues, and frequent substance abuse problems. Given the current shutdowns due to security, staff shortages mean that program staff for education, mental health, and substance abuse cannot provide regular services.

ECI and RCI

Our visits clearly demonstrated that teachers in ECI and RCI prisons rarely have students in their classrooms. Instead, they are busy creating assignments for students and sending folders back and forth to the housing units. A number of teachers expressed their frustration

trying to help students through the exchange of written work and comments. The only other educational resource teachers can employ is a small number of educational tablets, far fewer than the number of students who need them. At RCI, for example, about 50 tablets are carted to the housing units, but students are not allowed to keep them overnight. Some teachers expressed that they feel more like clerks than teachers, pulling together materials, sending them out, collecting and grading them over and over again. Uniformly, they told me this is the worst possible way to educate students, but especially students with as many skill deficits as those in prison. Interviews with special education teachers indicate that their students have to be transferred to other facilities that operate special education programs.

We had brief discussions about possible solutions to the current lack of security staff. While interactive technology could help, there are not enough educational tablets and no Intranet for students and teachers to communicate via Zoom or electronic messages. We heard from administrative staff that efforts are being made to acquire more tablets and to establish an Intranet for teachers and students to communicate. Funding is a perpetual issue. Even if RCI and ECI had enough tablets and an Intranet for students and teachers to interact, we know from the COVID experience in public schools that even tablets and intranet instruction are not as effective as face-to-face instruction and current interactive digital technology.

JCI and Central Region

In the central region of the state, schools were open and students attended school on most days. Students and teachers were enthusiastic about each other and instruction. Interviews with principals and teachers demonstrated that educational staff are positive, qualified, and devoted to doing a good job under the current conditions.

While attendance is relatively high, enrollment is far below classroom capacities, particularly in academic classes. Most literacy and GED level classrooms are rated at 15-20 students, but our visits indicate that enrollment is less than 50% of classroom capacity. Teachers who have been in the system since before the COVID epidemic indicated that both enrollment levels and classroom fullness were higher prior to COVID, and enrollment and classroom capacity have not recovered over the last 3 to 4 years. I ask the Commission to approve a new item of classroom capacity in the data collection for each institution's monthly educational reports. The Commission needs to know not only enrollment and attendance, but also the rated

capacity of each academic and career class in each institution. Historically, there were more students in prison classrooms and, as a result, there were higher levels of program completions.

MCI-W

At MCI-W, we were told there are no waitlists to be in an academic or occupational program. However, I observed that in one classroom, there were only 5-6 enrolled students with at least 15 computer stations. The teacher shared that she had screened about 25 students and recommended them to the principal for her class. She showed me the files she kept for each potential student and said it takes 2-3 months for them to be processed into her class. Some of us should revisit MCI-W to research the identification and school enrollment process with the teachers, principal, and case management. There are two basic questions:

1. Who identifies, screens, and places students in school?
2. Is there a process with a timeline?

There is a nationally recognized GED screening that indicates thst a score of 145 or better predicts a student is likely to pass the actual GED exam. We heard from the Academic Coordinator that the Correctional Education general policy is to recommend students to take the GED exam if they score 145 on the screening test. The principal at MCI-W stated she requires a score of 150 on the screening test. Why does MCI-W have a different policy for its GED test-takers?

MCTC

At MCTC, we observed that occupational classes were relatively full. Each teacher's class can serve from 15-20 students. Discussions with academic teachers indicated that their classes were not anywhere near the rated capacity of 15-20 students, similar to the capacity issues found at MCI-W. MCTC has a population of about 1900, according to the Assistant Warden, similar to its population for many years when classrooms were full. While the Assistant Warden stated that some units are on lockdown, given the educational deficits of the general population, shouldn't there be enough mandatory students to fill both career technology and academic classrooms?

Mandatory Education

The Commission has been looking at the 240 day mandatory education requirement. If there is a 240 day mandatory education requirement, why are classrooms not operating at capacity? I would recommend that the Commission seriously consider recommending changing 240 “calendar” days to 240 actual days in school.

Special Education

Advisory Stakeholder Group member Alyssa Fieo has a number of questions about Special Education which she will share with the Commission. Given the problems of security staff shortages and the relatively low numbers of students in academic classes where there are sufficient security staff, it would be good to have some additional visits to look at Special Education instruction.

Correctional Education Council

For the benefit of the Commission, let me summarize state law in MD Labor and Employment Code § 11-901 and § 11-902. It is the responsibility of the CEC to

- actively advocate and promote the interest of educational programs and opportunities in correctional institutions,
- seek to ensure that a quality education and equal educational opportunity are available to all inmates at correctional institutions,
- review the program instruction used in educational programs at correctional institutions on a regular basis to ensure that the unique educational needs of the populations of correctional institutions are being satisfactorily met.
- The Council shall include in its review:
    - curriculum guides,
    - courses of study,
    - resource materials,
    - textbooks,
    - supplementary readers,
    - materials of instruction,
    - visual and auditory aids, supplies,
    - teacher performance, and
    - other teacher aides.

- The Director of Correctional Education shall meet with and advise the Council about these programs and consult with the Commissioner of Correction and the warden of each institution about the operation of these programs.

At my request, Ainsley Moench and I attended the Zoom Correctional Education Council (CEC) meeting last week. We were allowed to watch the meeting which lasted almost 2 hours. However, participation was view-only, and the CEC was not told about our participation. Over the years, I have attended numerous CEC meetings as well as its predecessor the Educational Coordinating Council for Correctional Institutions when the Maryland State Department of Education was in charge of Correctional Education. The last CEC meeting I attended was prior to COVID. It was surprising to me that, while the meeting consisted of reports on the various programs and accomplishments, there was no mention of any of the issues reported in the recent Interim Report of the Commission, nor any mention of the Commission and recent visits to the CEC. Given its legal responsibilities, the Correctional Education Program Director should be sharing, reviewing and discussing the work of the Commission with the CEC.

Funding

DPSCS reported that for many years, it has had at least 2 million dollars in funding which was used to assist the DOL Correctional Education Program with educational and library items and even part-time teacher and librarian contracts. In the last three years, the amount was $4.3 million. DPSCS reported that DOL had not spent these funds. Without DPSCS's knowledge, DOL requested that the Department of Budget and Management move these funds into DOL. $2.7 Million was moved to the DLR budget for FY26. Delegate Marlon Amprey's office requested information from me on this budget move and I forwarded a detailed email from DPSCS to his office. I believe the Commission should be given an explanation of why it requested that the funds were moved and how it intends to spend them.