Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission Meeting Minutes

August 7, 2025
10:00-11:30am

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Dr. Stephen Steurer, Dr. Andrea Cantora, Del. Elizabeth Embry, Dr. Charles Adams, Meredith Conde, Danielle Cox, Jamel Freeman, Mary Gable, Christian Gant, Karen Jones, Initia Lettau, Amanda Owens, Del. Cheryl Pasteur, Del. Karen Simpson, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Ramieka Robinson, Ainsley Moench, Ruschelle Reuben, Alyssa Fieo, Zakiya Lee, Anne Bocchini Pack, John Griffin, Arinze Ifekauche, Judith Lichtenberg, John Feaster III

I. Housekeeping

The meeting was called to order at 10am. Everyone gave an introduction.

A. Approval of July meeting minutes

The July meeting minutes were approved.

B. August 20th MEJC Panel

Ainsley Moench announced a panel discussion on the interim report at a Maryland Equitable Justice Collaborative event on August 20th. The panel will be chaired by Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, and there will be a Zoom link for those who want to attend remotely. Christian Gant encouraged everyone to attend.

II. Report back from correctional institution visits

A. Chair's report

Dr. Stephen Steurer reported on the visits to MCI-W, JCI, MCTC, RCI, ECI-E, and ECI-W. The Commission was able to talk to correctional and educational staff, incarcerated individuals, and visit classrooms. There were critical issues such as lack of staff, which leads to lockdowns and program cancellations. In some institutions, educational programs are limited to sending packets back and forth. Teachers mentioned that packet learning is not the best way to teach, and not every institution has a special education program. Some institutions do not have enough tablets or internet, so students and teachers struggle to communicate.

At JCI, there are no occupational training programs. The Commission heard from Certified Peer Recovery Specialists at the institution, who are involved in mentoring and tutoring. Some classrooms are enrolled below capacity. Dr. Stephen Steurer asked the Commission to approve receiving capacity data for each program.

At MCI-W, there was a waiting list of students waiting to be enrolled in classes who need to be screened, despite classes not being at capacity. Dr. Stephen Steurer also asked the Commission to look into the case management process for enrolling students in school. There is a policy inconsistency where students at MCI-W must achieve 150 on the readiness test for a GED exam, versus 145 at other institutions.

At MCTC, vocational classes are filled; however, academic classes are below capacity.

B. Discussion

Alyssa Fieo discussed special education, noting she is an education attorney and not a special education provider. The Commission does not have MSDE's latest correctional education monitoring report or the new special education handbook. At Jessup, there are no special education services, requiring special education students to go through the transition process to another institution. There were no special education students in the women's institution. Special education students who are in solitary confinement receive packet work.

Mary Gable said she would resend the email asking for the latest MSDE correctional education monitoring report and special education handbook.

Alyssa Fieo mentioned that only around 2% of special education students pass the GED, and the Commission may want to look into offering a certificate track for students who are close to completing their diploma and have to now work for a GED. She asked what the requirements are for getting a special education certificate diploma versus a GED. Mary Gable responded that there are students who may not be able to achieve the credits needed to graduate high school, and thus students can go through the IEP process to get an alternative certificate.

Mary Gable asked why students have to take a GED readiness test before the GED. Ruschelle Reuben responded that the GED readiness test gives an idea of if the student will be able to pass the GED, or if there are sections where students could use additional support. The special education handbook has to go through several approval processes, but is almost through all processes, before it can be shared. As to the certifications, other Local Education Agencies employ the alternate certificate process for special education students, and correctional education is applying to employ it in correctional education.

Dr. Stephen Steurer asked where the special education manual is in the approval process. Ruschelle Reuben answered that it is currently going through the legal department at the Department of Labor.

Dr. Stephen Steurer expressed concern about the Correctional Education Council's lack of awareness regarding the Commission's interim report and issues raised, despite the CEC's mandate to advocate for and review educational programs, based on their July meeting. He also raised some concerns about funds being transferred from the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services to the Department of Labor, and what the money is going towards, and how it will be accounted for. Ruschelle Reuben clarified that the attended meeting was an end-of-year reporting session, and discussions about incorporating the commission's work could be scheduled for a subsequent meeting. John Feaster III added that the CEC is comprised of many parties and is not controlled by the Department of Labor. As to funding, in the first year, the funding was allocated, DOL was not informed. The second year, DOL put together a spending plan that had to be approved by DPSCS; however, it was not approved. In the third year, DOL talked to the Department of Budget Management and got approved for a smaller portion of the funds. Talks about funding involved both DOL and DPSCS. Dr. Stephen Steurer asked DOL and DPSCS to clarify the situation.

Dr. Stephen Steurer requested that the Commission approve adding classroom capacity as a new item in the data collection system for each institution's monthly educational report. Ruschelle Reuben said this would be possible, and Danielle Cox added that there are fire marshal codes about how many desks and students can be in each classroom. The request was approved.

Anne Bocchini Pack asked if it was possible to get an operations chart detailing how each department works together in correctional education, especially if some funding sources, such as federal funding, are being threatened. John Feaster III said it was not common practice to share detailed funding information without a formal request. Dr. Stephen Steurer put forth the question if the Commission would like to request a report on all funds used for correctional education. There were no objections.

Ramieka Robinson highlighted a disconnect between case management and the education department, as well as institutional rules and external factors that create barriers to student eligibility and participation in programs. They explained that infraction-free periods, such as a six-month waiting period, hinder incarcerated individuals from accessing educational opportunities, suggesting a reduction to 90 or 60 days to make programs more accessible. Dr. Stephen Steurer acknowledged these points, emphasizing that DOL and DPSCS's screening efforts are affected by these additional factors.

III. Report back from workgroups

A. ABE, GED, SPED

Ainsley Moench reported on the ABE/GED/SPED workgroup, noting a presentation from Ruschelle Reuben on the current state of special education, GEDs, and Adult Basic Education. They proposed moving the work group's meeting schedule from the day after the commission meeting to the second week or the last Friday of the month. Dr. Stephen Steurer suggested discussing and making this change at their upcoming meeting.

B. Career Technology and Workforce Development

Ainsley Moench provided an update on the career technology and workforce development group. The last meeting had a presentation on licensing restrictions for incarcerated individuals post-release. Dr. Stephen Steurer requested a more extensive report on licensing for the September commission meeting due to its importance and the helpful information gathered.

C. Higher Education

Dr. Andrea Cantora gave a report on the Higher Education workgroup, which recently had a presentation from Zakiya Lee from the University of System of Maryland to share an overview of USM's efforts to expand higher education in prison. Jamel Freeman and Ainsley Moench gave presentations on other statewide coalitions for higher education in prison and access to state tuition for incarcerated learners. At the next meeting, the workgroup will hear from several states about their efforts to create statewide coalitions. The workgroup is looking to recommend a way for incarcerated students to have a tuition waiver or access to state financial aid.

IV. Future presentations

A. Mackinac Center for Public Policy

Ainsley Moench announced that researchers from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy will be presenting their report on best practices for correctional education at the next Commission meeting, with a Q&A portion afterwards.

B. Dr. Lois Davis from RAND Corporation

Dr. Stephen Steurer announced that Dr. Lois Davis from the RAND Corporation in October.

V. Discussion

Dr. Stephen Steurer expressed his thanks to everyone working on the Commission, mentioning that he may not have all the information or be able to solve all issues, but everyone is working together well. There is an opportunity to recommend some improvements to the correctional education system.

John Griffin commented that the Prisoner's Rights Information System has sent DPSCS and the Attorney General a letter threatening legal action for the lack of correctional officer staffing. This letter may have a

collateral effect, as education is affected by correctional officer shortages. Stephen Steurer inquired if the letter was public and requested a copy. John Griffin said the letter was public and he would provide the Commission with a copy.

Anne Bocchini Pack informed the commission about a conflict between a case management policy manual and statute regarding the earning of diminution credits by incarcerated individuals. While the statute allows 20 credits, the policy manual limits them to 15, and they are preparing a written response to this discrepancy. Dr. Stephen Steurer urged Anne Bocchini Pack to submit this information to the Commission.

Dr. Stephen Steurer emphasized the joint responsibility of DPSCS and DOL for education and expressed a desire for tighter collaboration to solve issues or bring them to the attention of appropriate individuals. They thanked John Feaster III and Ruschelle Reuben for their positive responses and changes in data collection practices, noting their commitment to continued progress. Stephen Steurer also thanked the delegates for their commitment to working on legislation to address commission recommendations.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:30am.