Prison Education Delivery Reform Commission Meeting Minutes

September 4, 2025
10:00-11:30am

Virtual Meeting

Attendees: Dr. Steven Sprick Schuester, John Feaster III, Ruschelle Reuben, Lucy Steinitz, Anne Bocchini Pack, Dr. Andrew Denney, Dr. Ben Stickle, Del. Elizabeth Embry, Danielle Cox, Alyssa Fieo, Amanda Owens, Dr. Andrea Cantora, Christian Gant, Gordon Pack, Dr. Judith Lichtenberg, Jessica Johnson, Josh Weinstock, Dr. Stephen Steurer, Mary Gable, Arinze Ifekauche, Ainsley Moench, Del. Karen Simpson

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I. Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 10am.
Everyone went around and introduced themselves.

A. Approval of August meeting minutes

The meeting minutes were approved.

B. Overview of the recommendation process

Ainsley Moench went over the recommendation process, noting that the annual report is due in November. The workgroups have been working on recommendations that they will vote to approve in September. The Commission will vote on the recommendations in October and then vote on the final report in November. She encouraged everyone to submit recommendations by the end of September.

II. Workgroup updates

A. ABE, GED, SPED

Ainsley Moench went over the last ABE, GED, and SPED meeting, where Jessica Johnson and Danielle Cox discussed the latest technology updates. The group changed their meeting dates to the end of the month, and is looking to add another special education expert to the meetings.

Stephen Steurer added that the group's early work focused on data collection, which led to improved reporting of attendance, enrollments, and capacity.

B. Higher Education

Dr. Andrea Cantora reported on the August meeting, which included presentations from Virginia and New York on their statewide prison education efforts. The work group is considering recommendations such as creating a statewide coalition for higher education in prison to improve organization and access to grants, enabling incarcerated students to access state financial aid, and studying capacity for higher education programs in Maryland to address long waitlists and barriers related to space and resources. Dr. Andrea Cantora also shared that Goucher College has implemented trailers at the women's prison to expand

access and introduce a full-time college student job assignment, allowing students to earn pay and good time credits.

C. Career Technology and Workforce Development

Diana Bailey reported on site visits to occupational programs in various correctional facilities. The group reviewed credentialing options across states to identify best practices for Maryland and plans to meet with the occupational coordinator to discuss proposed programs. They observed advanced training programs and noted inconsistencies in security limitations that could pose barriers to employment or program completion, such as restrictions on certain implements, whereas others, like hammers and saws, are allowed. Dr. Stephen Steurer emphasized that these visits reveal opportunities to adjust prohibitions to allow for full program completion.

III. Presentation from Dr. Ben Stickle, Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster, and Dr. Andrew Denney

Ainsley Moench introduced Dr. Andrew Denney, Dr. Stephen Sprick Schuster, and Dr. Ben Stickle, who were invited to present their research on measuring prison education across states.

Dr. Andrew Denney explained that their presentation would cover the development of a national scoring system for prison education, highlighting the historical context of correctional education and its resurgence since 2015, partly due to the Second Chance Pell experimental sites initiative. He noted that while high school diploma attainment has increased, disparities remain for incarcerated individuals, particularly for vocational and college degrees. He emphasized that research consistently demonstrates the of prison education, including reduced recidivism, long-term cost savings, and increased economic productivity for individuals upon release. The study's main goal was to systematically evaluate current educational programming in US prisons and develop a scoring system to rank states based on their offerings and policies. The objectives included examining the extent and variation of programming across states, identifying disparities, and assessing the impact of programs on incarcerated individual participation.

Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster explained the methodology, which utilized two surveys: the 2019 Census of Correctional Facilities and the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates. He highlighted the importance of states responding to data collection processes for future updates, as non-responses can misrepresent educational offerings. Additional data was hand-collected from the websites of state departments of corrections and the National Conference of State Legislators. He outlined three research areas: whether vocational education leads to increased participation, strategies states can use to enhance offerings and participation, and how states rank in four broad categories of prison education: literacy/adult basic education, secondary education, vocational training, and college education. He noted that certain categories like ESL and special education were difficult to measure accurately from existing data due to their common delivery through study release programs, leading to their exclusion from the main scoring system.

Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster presented data showing a positive correlation between the availability of vocational education and incarcerated individual participation. He also showed that federal, state, and private prisons have generally increased educational availability over the past 30 years, with federal prisons showing the largest jump. He noted that state institutions have seen significant increases in vocational and special education, while growth in secondary and ABE education has been marginal due to already high offering rates. Findings indicate that generally, the security classification of a prison and the

male/female population served do not significantly impact the rates of educational offerings. However, prison location is a major determinant, with Southern states systematically offering fewer educational programs, especially ESL, compared to the Northeast and Western regions.

Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster detailed the policy criteria used to score states: implementation of automatic enrollment for incarcerated individuals not meeting specific benchmarks (e.g., low reading levels), establishment of a school district or state office overseeing public education in prisons, and good time incentives (sentence reduction) for educational program participation. He explained that these criteria were compiled from Department of Corrections and education websites, and the National Conference of State Legislators. States were scored based on the percentage of prisoners with access to the four main educational programs (literacy/ABE, secondary, vocational, and college education) and whether they met the three policy criteria. States received points based on their quartile ranking for program availability and an additional point for each policy implemented, resulting in a total score between zero and seven. He noted that the scores are helpful for cross-state comparisons and for tracking growth or decline over time. Ohio and California were identified as the highest-scoring states, while Maryland was near the bottom due to being below average in offering all four program types.

Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster ended the presentation by noting policy implications, emphasizing the importance of mandatory enrollment rules for assessing incarcerated individuals upon intake. He also emphasized the importance of prioritizing prison education.

A. Q&A

Dr. Stephen Steurer noted that correctional education is highly organized and well-placed in states like Ohio and Texas. He questioned if Maryland should have ranked higher, suggesting that the initial survey may not have been fully answered. Danielle Cox concurred, sayin that the survey was not seen by her department. She suggested direct outreach to education directors, CEA, or COABE as better data sources as current state websites lack comprehensive information. John Feaster III expressed concern about Maryland's low ranking, especially since the state is already implementing the recommended five strategies, suggesting that the survey's incomplete data collection might be the reason for the low score.

Dr. Ben Stickle acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining comprehensive and accurate data through the 2019 Census of Correctional Facilities and the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates. Danielle Cox offered to connect the researchers with the Correctional Education Association (CEA) and the Coalition of Adult Basic Education (COABE), noting that these organizations regularly conduct surveys among correctional education directors and their members. Dr. Stephen Steurer, a former head of CEA, affirmed that these professional groups yield better response rates. Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster confirmed that if provided with complete and up-to-date data from reliable sources like Danielle Cox, they could re-evaluate Maryland's ranking based on full reporting. John Feaster III stated that only Danielle Cox and Ruschelle Rueben could provide all the necessary information for Maryland, emphasizing the high stakes involved in accurately representing Maryland's programs, given current policy discussions. Danielle Cox reiterated that direct surveys to prison wardens are insufficient because wardens do not have access to all partner data, whereas the 50 state directors possess comprehensive information and can coordinate with partners.

Ainsley Moench inquired about patterns observed in top-performing states. Dr. Steven Sprick Schuster explained that a strong centralized structure appears important for both policy establishment and program correlation, although approaches vary, with some top performers like Texas being heavily centralized and

others like California being less so. He also noted that extremely decentralized structures, such as Alaska's, often correlate with poor performance, partly due to low reporting rates.

Dr. Ben Stickle emphasized that the research aims to provide tools for advocating for prison education, allowing stakeholders to demonstrate its impact, including cost savings, to policymakers. They encouraged using the report as a catalyst to advance specific areas of prison education, even if the data has limitations, highlighting the practical, non-theoretical nature of their work focused on driving positive change. Dr. Stephen Steurer commended the presentation, noting that it provided a crucial overview and structure for evaluating delivery systems, something he found unique among research in the field.

IV. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:32am.