



Jorge Renaud, Policy Analyst

Work: (512) 441-8123, ext. 102

Cell: (512) 825-6586

jrenaud@TexasCJC.org

www.TexasCJC.org

TESTIMONY 2013

H.B. 3531

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to present testimony in favor of H.B. 3531, which will provide much-needed educational opportunities for individuals incarcerated in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) by building upon innovative programming that already exists in our state prisons. This low-cost approach will decrease in-prison disciplinary actions, result in safer prisons, and allow participating individuals to become better educated, preparing them for a successful life after prison.

EXPANDING INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS CURRENTLY IN TDCJ WILL INCREASE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In 2011, state budget cuts resulted in the loss of 271 employees from the Windham School District (WSD), the in-prison entity that provides educational and vocational programming for inmates in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ); this included the loss of 157 teachers.¹ Due to these cutbacks, WSD officials estimated that 16,700 individuals would lose seats in WSD classrooms.² **Because education is such an integral component of a successful rehabilitative process, individuals incarcerated in TDCJ should have access to educational opportunities**, whether or not those opportunities result in the granting of a degree or a certificate.

In place since 1999, TDCJ's Peer Educator Program trains qualified incarcerated individuals to hold workshops for their peers in select subjects. In 2012, more than 79,000 individuals on 100 TDCJ units participated in such workshops.³ This program should be expanded: **TDCJ should identify incarcerated individuals with specialized knowledge and encourage them to initiate workshops in their area of expertise.**

Specifically, TDCJ should identify prisoners with academic or professional degrees, those who have served as shop assistants to the instructors in the various vocational programs, or those who have extensive professional expertise. The Department could use the training procedures already in place for the Peer Educator Program, and provide existing space in classrooms or libraries for the newly identified Peer Educators to hold workshops on various topics for interested participants. This would help fill the educational gap created by the budget cuts to WSD.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Texas Government Code stipulates that TDCJ shall allow incarcerated individuals to act as tutors to other incarcerated individuals.⁴ This stipulation supports the current Peer Educator Program and allows for its expansion, with the codicil that **these individuals function only as teachers and exercise no supervisory authority over other incarcerated individuals.**⁵
- **Studies consistently show that in-prison educational programs can decrease misconduct, violence, and in-prison disciplinary infractions,**⁶ with peer education teachers developing "a positive focus and purpose in their lives, empowered by the perception of their ability to influence others in ways never believed possible – thus improving self-esteem, knowledge, and renewed commitment to the community."⁷
- **In-prison education programs are critical in helping individuals prepare for future employment opportunities**, which contributes to lowered recidivism.⁸

Continued on reverse.

COST-SAVING AND PUBLIC SAFETY-DRIVEN SOLUTION: SUPPORT H.B. 3531 BY REPRESENTATIVE ROSE

H.B. 3531 will increase educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals, filling the gap created by recent budget cuts to the Windham School District. In-prison education is effective and cost-efficient. This bill encourages incarcerated individuals to participate in informal education, which will enhance their rehabilitative progress, providing them with tools they will need when they are released to the community.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to testify in favor of this bill. It is a much-needed measure that will enable incarcerated individuals to become better informed, more disciplined, and able to maintain responsible, productive lives in their communities after release. The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition strongly urges you to support it.

Citations

¹ Mike Ward, "Prison school district in lawmaker's sights," *Austin American-Statesman*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.statesman.com/news/news/state-regional-govt-politics/prison-school-district-in-lawmakers-sights/nT6Qn/>.

² Cody Stark, "Windham School Cutbacks Reduce Staff, Programs for Inmates," *Huntsville Item*, September 4, 2011, <http://itemonline.com/local/x1642540258/Windham-school-cutbacks-reduce-staff-programs-for-inmates>.

³ Texas Department of Criminal Justice, *Report on HIV – AIDS Information*, January 4, 2013, http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/documents/Report_on_AIDS_HIV_Education.pdf.

⁴ TEX. GOV. CODE § 501.005

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ K.F. Lahm, "Educational participation and inmate misconduct," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 2009, 48, (1), http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ863285&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ863285.

⁷ T.M. Simmons, "Inmate Peer Educator Programs: 101," *The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource*, 2004, <http://www.thebody.com/content/art13033.html>.

⁸ S. Aos, E. Drake & M. Miller, "Evidence-Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not," Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2006. In this meta-analysis, authors looked at 291 evaluations of in-prison programs and examined 22 different types of programs at all levels of jails and prisons; they found that vocational and higher education were among the most effective in-prison programs when it came to lowering recidivism.