

TEXAS CRIMINAL JUSTICE COALITION
PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION FOR THE SUNSET ADVISORY COMMISSION

PEER EDUCATOR PROGRAM

INTENT – The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should expand the scope of its Peer Educator Program, which has proven to effectively supplement traditional educational programs.

Following Texas' 82nd Legislative Session (2011), the budget for the Windham School District (WSD) shrunk dramatically, resulting in 157 teachers being cut and the elimination of educational access for more than 16,000 individuals incarcerated within TDCJ.¹ **TDCJ should rely on existing programs that can provide real solutions to the educational deficit in TDCJ without increasing costs to the state.**

BACKGROUND

The Peer Educator Program began in Texas correctional facilities in 1999 and focuses on Sexual Assault Awareness, HIV/AIDS, and the spread and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. In 2011, a total of 1,334 incarcerated peer educators conducted classes that reached 70,565 TDCJ prisoners in 86 correctional facilities. The Peer Educator Program conducts classes in English and Spanish and extends classes to incarcerated individuals in the Gang Renouncement and Disassociation program.

Evidence suggests that participation in educational programs while incarcerated is one of the most reliable predictors of post-prison success.² Sunset Commission members indicated their belief that WSD's primary educational purpose—providing General Equivalency Degree (GED) instruction to TDCJ students—could be better achieved by contracting with outside entities. However, the educational opportunities offered to TDCJ inmates could be greatly enhanced and effectively met by relying on existing, proven methods, such as the Peer Educator Program, at little or no cost to TDCJ. **The agency should use the Peer Educator Program as a model to implement a wider variety of courses, which would help to close the current gap in educational course provision.**

Implementation of peer-led courses would offer additional benefits throughout TDCJ units: Studies have linked in-prison education to decreased inmate misconduct, violence, and in-prison disciplinary infractions; safer conditions for prison staff and inmates; increased leadership skills for peer educators; and a renewed commitment to serving one's community.³

NOTE: Implementation of this recommendation would result in no fiscal impact.

REFERENCES

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- ¹Cody Stark, "Windham School Cutbacks Reduce Staff, Programs for Inmates," *Huntsville Item*, 4 September 2011, available at <http://itemonline.com/local/x1642540258/Windham-school-cutbacks-reduce-staff-programs-for-inmates>
- ² 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).
- ³ K. F. Lahm, "Educational Participation and Inmate Misconduct," *Journal Of Offender Rehabilitation*, 48 (1). Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2009-01482-003&site=ehost-live>.