

## Educational Needs of Texas Prisoners

*Daniel H. Harris*

---

The Texas prison education program does not fill the needs of modern prisoners. It requires extensive changes to its curriculum, the addition of incentives to attract students and give them reason to apply themselves, and expansion of access so that all prisoners have a chance at educational programs to challenge their intellects and expand their minds.

The curriculum in prison must implement intensive reading comprehension courses. In my years here in a Texas prison, I have seen many examples of prisoners unable to comprehend what they read. This is one of the most prevalent problems faced by prisoners. When individuals cannot comprehend what they read, they are limited in their ability to learn. Many prisoners are illiterate, or at least semi-literate, but once individuals are taught to read well, comprehending what they read and how to use their own intellect and logic to examine material in detail, they have the key to all knowledge.

One way this could be done would be to train prisoner-teachers and have them work in two ways. First, they could do one-on-one teaching, and second, they could lead reading circles where prisoners would take turns reading out loud. Reading out loud would help them learn the proper way to pronounce words, and give them confidence to use these words in conversation. Classes could also be held in debating. That would be a wonderful way to teach prisoners—most of whom come from violent backgrounds—that there are non-violent ways to settle differences. It takes more intelligence to see another person's point of view than it does to close your mind and see only your own position. Debating could even teach prisoners to value each other for their differences, a valuable lever with which to fight prejudice. We can always agree to disagree.

The system gives good time credit for going to school, but that is not enough when most prisoners are not eligible to receive good time. Anyone convicted for a violent crime is considered to be doing aggravated time. For them, good time credits mean nothing. Neither do the work time credits they receive as payment for working. These credits do not even make them eligible for parole sooner. For those prisoners doing time for nonviolent offenses, these good time and work time credits at least make them eligible for parole sooner. But when you add the penchant for Texas prisons to take good time and work time credits away for disciplinary infractions, you see that this is a

paycheck nearly impossible to cash. Never is any form of good time permanent. When prisoners make parole they are forced to sign away all good time credits before getting out. Once good time credits are lost or signed away, they are gone forever.

I propose a system of automatic time cuts for educational achievement. For example, a prisoner has a ten-year sentence for drug possession. He gets a GED, which is worth ten percent of his sentence, and one year is either subtracted from his sentence or is added to his flat time credit. This would give all prisoners a real incentive to get an education, and those serving the longest sentences would have even more incentive. Very seldom is an individual unchanged by education. The system for automatic time cuts proposed here would give all prisoners hope and make Texas prisons a much happier and safer place in which to do time, not only for prisoners but officers as well.

It is important to keep in mind that in prison most crimes go unpunished. When prisoners have no hope of freedom they can, and often do, become very dangerous. The chance of getting a new charge is slim due to the lack of caring by the staff. Even crimes against officers go unpunished because there is a lack of proper investigation and evidence. I have witnessed prisoners living as slaves for other prisoners with the knowledge of the administration. With a time credit system that gives real rewards for education, this behavior would end or be limited.

Prisoners enrolled in educational programs should, where possible, be housed together. These individuals would be able to work together and tutor one another. They could discuss books and philosophy rather than drugs and pimping. They would set positive goals for when they are released, and the recidivism rate would drop. Once these newly educated men went home, there would begin to be a drop in the crime rate due to the effect educated former prisoners would have on their neighborhoods and youth. Surely it would take time, but eventually violence in the school housing areas of the prison would be the exception rather than the norm. Educated individuals are much more likely to use their minds than their fists.

Educational access must be expanded so that no prisoners are denied a chance to better themselves. At this time in Texas, close custody and two levels of administrative segregation have no access to education, not even library privileges. These problems can be overcome. Prisoners should be given access to correspondence courses so their minds do not atrophy. The library should be made available to all and not treated as a privilege. For prisoners in

administrative segregation, speakers with on-off switches could be installed in all cells and used voluntarily to play recorded programs at set times: book tapes, lectures on diverse subjects, spelling, news, debates—the list of possibilities goes on into infinity.

In administrative segregation you have human beings locked into tiny cells twenty-three or more hours a day. Many have not got the reading skills to pass their time in a constructive manner, and the administration pretends they do not understand why these men become so violent and frustrated. It is because so many of them are badly in need of education and have been living with this need for many years. Education and learning is what makes for a civilized world. If we can civilize our world by civilizing and challenging the minds of these individuals, and in doing so create a safer and less violent prison, why not do it?

In conclusion, education must never be treated as or considered a privilege. It is the only tool we have to rebuild the minds and morals of the prison populations. Only through education can we ever really get tough on crime. Only through progressive and radical changes in educational opportunities in prison can we ever hope to live in a world free of crime and violence, where individuals love their neighbor as they love themselves.

There are very few prisoners who are not capable of becoming productive members of society. The greatest crime our society committed in the twentieth century was to allow the incarceration of youth to become big business. No one cares now if prisoners are rehabilitated. There is too much money being made creating prisons and assuring a constant growth in the prison population. I hope that I live to see the day when people realize what has been done. Surely on that day, although it may be too late for me, we will see educational programs implemented to save our youth, to rehabilitate them, and to let them go home to stay.

**Daniel H. Harris** may be reached by writing to him at #622851, Estelle Unit H/S, 264 FM 3478, Huntsville, TX 77320.