

Washington Prison Finds Inmate Education 'Pays for Itself' in Lowering Chances of Recidivism

THE MORE EDUCATION prison inmates receive, the lower the chance of recidivism.

That fact drives many correctional education programs, like the one at Coyote Ridge Correctional Center, a minimum security prison in Connell, WA, serving about 600 male inmates.

Washington state prison education programs are run in conjunction with community colleges, explains Gary Isakson, Education Director/Instructor at Coyote Ridge.

Columbia Basin College in Pasco, WA is Coyote Ridge's partner in programs for inmates, who register just as any other student would and receive certificates or degrees as appropriate.

Coyote Ridge receives both inmate transfers from other prisons who are nearing the end of a longer sentence, and those with shorter sentences who come straight to the facility. Assessments on arrival gauge reading ability, math skills and other factors. Then, teachers create an educational plan for each inmate.

Most attend Offender Change Classes, one on Victim Awareness and another on Anger Stress Management. Many also participate in chemical dependency sessions. In addition, "they're expected to work," he says. "Some have jobs in the facility – janitor, clerk, etc.; and some are on work crews that go out to community and work for Parks & Recreation, or maintain grounds at college, etc."

Then come academics and/or vocational training. Inmates under 22, by state law, must attend GED classes for three hours/day, five days/week. Those over 22 and seeking the GED certificate attend classes one to two hours/day, five days/week.

GED classrooms are open labs, with 10 to 12 students per class, each working at his own speed. Teachers and aides are on hand to answer questions. Isakson has been using videotapes to support the curriculum,

because "they are really popular" with the inmates. He had been hoping to add *GED Connection™* to his arsenal, and was delighted when he won a complete set of the tapes and workbooks at a recent conference.

"I had been looking at those," he recalls, because different tools complement different learning styles; and tapes provide another means of reaching learners, in addition to books and computer activities. He plans to let learners check out the tapes and work at their own speed.

Isakson, who had not used KET programs before, thinks that *GED Connection* will be a good fit for his students. "I had no idea I would win," he adds. "I had wanted them, so it's kind of neat that I won them."

Proctors visit Coyote Ridge once a month to give the GED tests, and four to five inmates per month pass.

In addition to GED classes, courses run through the College include English as a Second Language; Adult Basic Education; computer science (a vocational offering



available after the GED is obtained); and building maintenance, a quarter-long class exposing learners to the construction industry and covering the "very basics" in carpentry, plumbing, and heating/air conditioning. "This would qualify the inmate to be in building maintenance, for example. Or, he can go deeper into one field, like carpentry," Isakson notes.

In the past, Coyote Ridge held annual graduation ceremonies for inmates who earned the GED or reached other educational milestones. But because length of sentence is so varied in the population, many graduates would be released before "their" ceremony. Today, the facility recognizes achievement each month. Graduates of any program don a cap and gown, and are photographed with the appropriate certificate or diploma. They receive a tassel and photos, which can be sent on to loved ones. "We hear inmates say, 'I'm the first one in my family that graduated,'" Isakson says. "They're proud."

Success Stories

For many inmates, Coyote Ridge provides the first exposure to computers, "and they really like that," Isakson says.

He recalls one inmate who served as a clerk in the computer science room, earning 35 cents per hour. After his release, he interviewed to manage the computer network for a trucking company. When asked what he had earned in his previous position, he answered, "35." The company hired him, at a salary of \$35,000 a year.

Inmate success stories are many. "We're just here to meet educational needs. Before I got into adult education," notes Isakson, who taught GED classes for the college before entering correctional education, "I had no idea there were so many dropouts and so many illiterate adults." Many Coyote Ridge inmates "dropped out of school, and had negative experiences in traditional education. Here, the students like coming to the classes, and it surprises a lot of them that they can do it. We treat them differently. We encourage them."

Teaching adults is very satisfying, he adds. "Adults want to be there (compared to a high school situation). Students get the GED, experience successes, and the teacher reaps benefits; the teacher helped them. The learners put forth the effort; the teacher just steered and guided. It's rewarding to hear students say thanks.

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"Inmates learn about themselves and human relations, and that can make them different when they leave here than when they came in," he adds. "We just need to get them educated."

In addition to education's life-changing impact on individual inmates, there is a social benefit. "Education is a small part of the corrections budget, but we know that education reduces recidivism," Isakson says. "The higher the (educational) level inmates reach, the more recidivism drops. They can go out and be successful. It's a good investment. The public resists sometimes, but it does pay off." In the 2001 *Three State Recidivism Study* (focusing on Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio), recidivism rates are "37% for those without education, vs. 27% for those with education. In the big picture, that's a lot. It's expensive to keep inmates. Education pays for itself." 📖