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# The Suffolk County Sheriff's Department

# Correctional Education Program

Robert C. Rufo, J.D., M.P.A.  
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*This article describes the Sheriff's Department correctional education programs at the Suffolk County House of Correction and Jail. It points out the tremendous need for educational services given that more than 60 percent of those incarcerated in these institutions are high school drop-outs, and a much higher percentage are functionally illiterate. Because 95 percent of those incarcerated at this facility will return to their communities within three years, educating prisoners serves as a constructive and cost-effective means of preventing recidivism and an effective investment in public safety. The authors also discuss the new Mandatory Literacy Law, which essentially links literacy with parole and other institutional privileges. Finally, the article suggests that the success of these tightly controlled and highly structured programs may provide important lessons for those charged with repairing the broken-down Boston public school system.*

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**I**magine a classroom filled with the collective failures of the Boston public school system. Practically every student in this room has the potential for violence; most students have either dropped out or been expelled from high school. A random look through student records reveals a common history of crime, drug addiction, and family instability.

Now imagine a classroom where disciplinary problems are rare. The students are clean, straight, and sober. Instead of breaking into fights, students engage in competition for the privilege of tutoring one another in class. In the event of an infraction of the rules, teachers wield ultimate authority in determining whether a student stays or goes.

As widely divergent as these classrooms seem, they are one and the same at the Suffolk County House of Correction, where the only admission requirements are a mug shot and a criminal conviction. At the House, nearly six hundred inmates attend adult basic education classes in subjects ranging from basic literacy skills to

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college-level business. Another hundred detainees are enrolled in similar courses at the Suffolk County Jail, the House of Correction's sister facility.

The commitment to education of the Sheriff's Department, which runs the program, is underscored almost the minute an inmate presses his or her fingertips to an inkpad, when tests are administered to determine the individual's education level. Those assessed as functionally illiterate must attend literacy classes or risk parole denial under Chapter 452 of the Acts of 1991, also known as the new Mandatory Literacy Law.<sup>1</sup> In addition to teaching nonreaders the basics of reading and writing, the educational program awards over one hundred twenty-five high school general equivalency diplomas (GEDs) annually and enrolls dozens of students in its college program. With these and other services offered to more than seventeen hundred male and female inmates at the Jail and the House of Correction, the Sheriff's Department educational program has grown into one of the largest adult basic education programs in Massachusetts.

In an age when many are clamoring for stiffer prison sentences and reinstatement of the death penalty, and public safety is increasingly equated with a handgun stashed in the nightstand, teaching convicted criminals to read and write, not to mention providing them with college courses, is hardly a political mandate. Yet educating prisoners is one of the most constructive and cost-effective means of preventing recidivism, which is directly and vitally linked to public safety.

Furthermore, the success rate generated by the tightly controlled and highly structured education program in the Sheriff's Department provides important lessons for those charged with fixing the broken-down Boston public school system. While the prison's format is not offered as an exact prototype, many of its elements could be replicated through appropriate adaptation to the school system. The following is a brief exploration of the education program's potential not only to enhance the safety of Boston neighborhoods, but also to enhance the learning experience of its schoolchildren.

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### **Prison Education: An Investment in Public Safety**

Not so long ago, the governor of Massachusetts, in an effort to demonstrate a tough law-and-order stance, stated that prison should provide an experience as close as possible to "a tour through Hell." By the same token, it is also not uncommon, in these times of economic hardship, for some to question the necessity of educating prison inmates when public school systems do such a poor job of educating law-abiding students.

While it is politically tempting to capitalize on the prevailing sentiment of "lock 'em up and throw away the key," to do so would be to overlook some compelling facts, particularly as applied to a house of correction like the one in Suffolk County. In such a relatively short-term medium-security facility, 95 percent of the inmate population will be back on the street in three years or less. At least 60 percent are high school drop-outs, and a far greater percentage test as functionally illiterate. Undergoing a "tour through Hell" without any attempt to correct these severe educational deficits or provide job skills hardly serves as a recipe for turning inmates into upstanding citizens.



So while the facility's primary and undisputed purpose is to incarcerate offenders, the operative philosophy of the correctional education program is that "doing time" doesn't have to mean wasting time. To this end, the department offers an extensive array of courses and programs to support its four major goals: to provide literacy instruction for those assessed as functionally illiterate; to prepare students for a high school diploma or a GED; to assist students who have such diplomas prepare for and enroll in college programs; and to teach students employable skills and help them define career objectives.

This philosophy serves not only the individual inmates but the larger Boston community to which these inmates will inevitably return. Instead of menacing anew city neighborhoods and businesses on their release, inmates educated and redirected by their correctional experience can play a crucial role in rebuilding their communities. For some inmates, the correctional education program is their last chance to develop literacy skills and earn GEDs, prerequisites for employment, college, and the successful transition back into working society. In this way, the correctional facilities and educational programs help rejuvenate surrounding neighborhoods, serving as a positive and contributing influence on community institutions.

For those who would begrudge the use of their tax dollars to educate prisoners, correctional education programs can be justified economically. Given that it costs upward of \$25,000 to incarcerate one inmate, the educational programs need have only a minimal success rate at deterring future crimes and incarcerations to justify their modest funding. At \$500 per inmate served, the \$1 million cost of running the educational programs at the House and Jail would be covered if just forty of the two thousand students enrolled annually are deterred from returning to the facility. Studies have shown that effective correctional education programs have significantly reduced recidivism rates by 66 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Five hundred dollars also goes a long way toward assisting correctional officers to better manage and control inmates. At a very basic level, the educational program helps purposefully fill almost half the time of the inmates. Students attending educational programs present fewer disciplinary problems than nonparticipants; not only are they focused on positive goals, but they understand that disciplinary action may lead to the revocation of their education privileges. Also, the Mandatory Literacy Law allows the education department to tap into an inmate-generated fund to cover some basic material and instruction expenses for the literacy program. Representing just 2 percent of the Sheriff's Department \$50 million annual budget, the education program provides multiple benefits to inmates, correctional staff, and the public.

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## Education Program

### *Setting and Organization*

Barely one mile from Boston's financial district, the Suffolk County House of Correction and Jail provide dramatic departures from the rat-infested mid-nineteenth-century buildings they replaced. Featured in the May 25, 1991, edition of *Time* magazine, these facilities incorporate the new "direct supervision" philosophy of inmate management and were designed for maximize safety, order, rehabilitative programming, and staff working conditions. Among the largest correctional facilities in

the state, the Jail and House provide for the care, custody, and control of 453 pretrial detainees and more than twelve hundred county-sentenced inmates, respectively.

Tight security makes it impossible for inmates to forget that they are behind bars; nevertheless, both facilities provide educational settings conducive to learning. At the House, the larger of the two facilities, the education program utilizes a modern three-thousand-square-foot library and nineteen classrooms — four with attached labs — and offers vocational and industry programs in a large shop area. The Jail program space, while smaller, is similarly laid out.

With a dedicated staff of more than twenty teachers, two administrators, and dozens of committed volunteers from the community and area universities, the Sheriff's Department offers in excess of fifty education classes weekdays and evenings in the House of Correction and the Jail. As detailed below, these classes include several levels of basic literacy instruction, including English as a second language, GED preparatory classes, and a vocational program in drafting, computers, printing, carpentry, and manicuring. A new and promising development, in collaboration with Roxbury Community College, is the House of Correction's evening college program taught by RCC faculty members who offer courses in business management.

### ***The Mandatory Literacy Law in Action***

Implementation of the Mandatory Literacy Law goes to the very heart of the Sheriff's Department's education program. In Suffolk County, as well as nationally, no fewer than 75 percent of incarcerated adult males are functionally illiterate. Studies have shown that the rate of recidivism drops dramatically from 50 percent for those released directly to the street from penal institutions to 16 to 18 percent for those who have participated in structured work-release programs prior to release. Unfortunately, most inmates lack the literacy skills necessary to truly qualify for work-release positions.

The Mandatory Literacy Law addresses this problem head-on. Modeled after Virginia's highly touted No Read, No Parole program, the law requires inmates to demonstrate a mastery of basic literacy skills as a primary factor for parole consideration. All inmates entering the House of Correction are given an orientation tour of the facility's educational programs and an explanation of the participatory requirements of the literacy law. They are then administered a standardized test, and if assessed as functionally illiterate — as measured by a reading score below eighth-grade level — they fall under the scope of the law and must participate in one of several literacy programs. Inmates refusing to test or to participate in programming are immediately placed in disciplinary units and acquire negative institutional reports that are filed with the parole board.

Once enrolled in class, students receive comprehensive instruction tailored to their individual needs. Non-native English speakers may enroll in an ESL class; learning disabled or delayed students may take advantage of outside-funded special education and Chapter I programs; other programs are also available. Exercises are tailored to the level of the students and range from their learning to sound out the letters of the alphabet to reading newspapers.

Instructors use both a competency-based curriculum — a step-by-step skill-building approach — or a whole-life curriculum — an approach in which students are encouraged to put aside their inhibitions and work on their skill deficits after



attempting to complete whole assignments. There is heavy dependence on inmate tutors who work one on one with other inmates under the supervision of the instructor.

As mentioned above, the law also allows county institutions to tap an inmate-funded account called the General Welfare Fund to expand their literacy programs. Prior to the law, this fund — generated through inmate telephone surcharges and restricted in use to items and services directly benefiting inmates — was largely spent on weight and strength-building machines. The literacy law has changed the focus of this fund to improve the mind rather than the body, providing literacy programs with a steady stream of supplies, materials, and instructional services.

By linking literacy to parole and institutional privileges, the literacy law prevents the early release of inmates who fail to make a good-faith effort to change and address their educational deficits while in prison.

### ***GED Preparatory Program***

“My ambition is to earn money the righteous way and to help move my mother and sister out of the city.”

“My ambition is to get my GED and to go to college and to make my mother proud of me — I would be the first in my family to attend.”

“My ambition is to be a cook . . . to own my own business . . . to be a hair stylist . . . to help young people avoid my mistakes.”

These are just a few examples of inmate responses on the essay section of a general education development test, known more familiarly as the GED, administered at the House of Correction. In these essays and in their discussions with staff, many inmates point to education, and to the GED in particular, as an escape ladder out of their circumstances, as compared to the greased pole of crime, substance abuse, and lack of opportunity that keeps them sliding back into jail. The writing samples are a stirring reminder that prisoners, perhaps the lowest and most despised class of individuals in our society, can cherish values and ambitions not too different from those of society's mainstream.

Developed to assist returning World War II veterans enter college after their high school careers were interrupted by the war, the GED test provides high school drop-outs with an equivalency diploma that enables them to enroll in college, qualify for jobs, and enlist in the military. In urban areas with high drop-out rates from the public school system, the GED is often the last chance for some to earn a diploma and to advance professionally and academically.

Upward of two hundred inmates are enrolled in the GED preparatory programs offered by the Sheriff's Department at any one time, and close to three hundred GED tests are administered yearly, making the House of Correction one of the largest test sites in the state. The classes, taught one on one and in small groups, prepare inmates for all five sections of the test, and particularly in writing and math, which tend to be inmates' weakest skill areas. An annual passing rate of 50 to 70 percent holds promise for a larger number of inmates to earn money the “righteous way” on their release.

### ***The College Program***

In the hectic pace of the world today, there is no time for meditation, or for deep thought. A prisoner has time that he can put to good use. I'd put prison second to

college as the best place for a man to go if he needs to do some thinking. If he's motivated, in prison he can change his life.

— Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

While many places are far preferable to prison for "deep thought," the House of Correction's newly developed college program is indeed an opportunity for prisoners to change their lives. Launched in January 1993 in collaboration with Roxbury Community College, the program provides inmates with the opportunity to earn college credits and to enter a degree-granting program.

Since the average sentence at the House of Correction is ten months, the college program is designed to assist inmates to begin their college career in prison and to complete their degree outside. The program takes inmates through the complete application and registration process; taught by RCC faculty members, they attend courses four nights a week for three hours each night. In response to student interest and the needs of the surrounding community, the college program offers courses aimed at fulfilling an associate in science degree in business management. Courses are offered in management theory, small business management, sociology, and speech.

Rather than being a stand-alone program, the college curriculum complements and extends the existing correctional adult basic education program by motivating inmates to earn the GED. As an example, the first class in the college program included inmates who entered the facility as high school drop-outs and have now earned twelve credits toward a college degree. Their pride in this achievement has done much to bolster their self-confidence, and they speak of their plans to enter college after serving their sentences.

A final innovative twist to the college program is the education department's plan to develop an on-site college program for Sheriff's Department employees in conjunction with the training department. The potential benefits extend beyond the investment in staffs' career development and include mitigating the natural resentment that arises from convicted criminals' enjoying the benefit of higher education while correctional staff lack college degrees. A quality college program for employees serves to convert correctional staff into stakeholders in the success of the education program.

### ***Vocational Education and Industries Program***

The Vocational Education and Industries program offers inmates skills, training, and experience helpful in developing career goals and landing entry-level jobs on release. Since 1991 the department has offered courses in microcomputer applications, including word processing, spreadsheet analysis, and data entry, and a drafting program. Both these programs are being updated through new equipment and material purchases.

The department has brought on line a state-of-the-art printing program that teaches all aspects of the trade, including new developments in desktop publishing and photocopying technology. Also, a brand-new carpentry program teaches basic woodworking and construction techniques. Finally, a manicuring program has graduated more than twenty-five female inmates and helped them obtain a state license in cosmetology. For most of these programs, a related "industry" component provides students with the opportunity and experience to apply their new skills to fulfill the institutional needs of the Sheriff's Department. For example, the carpentry class had the opportunity to demonstrate construction skills by building a small structure to shelter



the Sheriff’s Department’s canine unit. Future vocational offerings under consideration include culinary arts, recycling, and janitorial programs.

***Library Program***

The Suffolk County Jail and House of Correction both contain modern libraries that circulate thousands of donated books and materials throughout the facilities. At the House, the education department has begun library programs to encourage reading and to assist inmates in developing personal achievement plans to use their time in prison constructively. One of the library courses, “The Jail That Changed My Life,” offers inmates inspirational readings from autobiographies of ex-convicts who transformed themselves while in prison. Another course, “African World and Culture,” teaches African-American inmates about their rich cultural and philosophical traditions.

***Substance Abuse***

Considering that nearly 80 percent of inmates have drug and alcohol addictions, these programs might very well be exercises in futility were it not for the institution’s unwavering commitment to an extensive substance abuse program. Students enrolled in daytime educational classes often attend Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and other twelve-step programs in the evenings, or participate in a nationally recognized substance abuse treatment/recovery living unit. Social service department caseworkers also lead counseling programs in AIDS awareness, violence prevention, with a focus on domestic violence, parenting, life skills, and job readiness.

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**Lessons for the Boston Public Schools**

Despite the vast and obvious differences between the two institutions, the Sheriff’s Department can teach important lessons to the Boston public school system about effectively managing disruptive and at-risk students. These lessons are especially important in stemming the tide of high school drop-outs “graduating” into the state’s prison system rather than into college.

While the correctional education program enjoys the unique benefit of a student body that is well fed, well rested, sober, drug-free, and undistracted by street life, not to mention the benefit of supervision provided by more than one thousand correctional officers, most of the fundamental attributes of the program are replicable within the city schools. The success of the Jail and House correctional programs vividly demonstrates the importance for all educational institutions of developing a clear educational mission tailored to varying academic levels. Other critical factors necessary to reaching students with deficient academic backgrounds include innovative management, unwavering institutional support, a safe and orderly learning environment, a dedicated and flexible faculty, a small teacher-to-student ratio, and a lean and supportive administrative staff.

Enhancing public safety by assisting inmates to acquire the necessary education and skills to lead independent, productive, and law-abiding lives serves as the main mission of the Sheriff’s Department educational program. As previously noted, the program goals complement the department’s larger public safety role in providing for



the care, custody, and control of inmates. With regard to institutional support, the educational program enjoys a far higher level of support and commitment than most similar programs in other correctional facilities. This is further evidenced by the emphasis on training programs for both correctional and educational staff, and the visible leadership role of the sheriff in drafting the state's Mandatory Literacy Law.

Concerning the learning environment, the educational and administrative staff play a principal role in creating a safe and controlled atmosphere in concert with the visible presence of correctional officers. Teachers have wide authority to dismiss lackadaisical and disruptive students. While inmates earn "good-time credit" — time off their sentences — for attending school, the education department's strict guidelines require inmates to attend all scheduled classes and complete homework assignments in order to receive even one day's credit. The strict policy has had the effect of ferreting out nonserious students from the program, which is important to wait-listed inmates who wish to take the classes. Furthermore, in a 1993 survey, practically 100 percent of the students enrolled in the program reported that the desire to improve themselves was the principal motivating factor behind their participation in the school.

Fortunately, the department faculty spends very little time on disciplinary matters and is able to devote its efforts to instructing inmates and shaping the educational program. The teachers, most of whom are certified in K-12, are highly dedicated to their work. One grateful student confided to his teacher days before his discharge that she "made being in prison bearable." The credit for the success of the program belongs in large part to these teachers, who are encouraged to experiment and introduce new curricula and programs into their classrooms to meet the needs of their students. These needs are constantly changing in an open-cycle, as opposed to a semester-based, program in which new students are continually entering classes throughout the year. In classes ranging from eight to fourteen students, the teachers are able to provide valuable one-on-one tutoring as well as group instruction.

Finally, the teachers are major stakeholders in the development of new programs. They write grant proposals, organize conferences, and assist in the hiring of new staff. Working in concert with the small and supportive administrative staff, the teachers share much of the responsibility for charting the direction of the entire correctional education program.

Doing time does not have to mean wasting time. In the highly structured and regimented program at the House of Correction and the Jail, where education is considered a privilege and not an entitlement to abuse, inmates are learning to learn. And just as important for the neighborhoods these inmates will call home when they are released, they are learning to plan for employment or even continuing their education.

The success of the Suffolk County Sheriff's Correctional Education Program refutes the belief that these prisoners, in many cases the worst the Boston public schools have to offer, are uneducable. The city's school system can emulate the prison school system in far more positive ways than barring windows and locking doors. With strong and creative leadership, firm institutional support, and a dedicated and flexible teaching and administrative staff, effective educational programs can thrive even in the most adverse environments — whether in prison or in the most difficult public school setting. ■

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## Notes

1. This law was written and ushered through the legislative process by Suffolk County Sheriff Robert C. Rufo in 1991.
2. "Correlating Higher Education with Reduced Recidivism," *Journal of Correctional Education*, May 1990.

*“Public education is not perceived by elected officials as having a “constituency.” It is easy [for politicians] to talk about it; but, in fact, in the inner sanctums of making decisions and setting priorities, education is not perceived as having a strong constituency. Our attempt is to bring business leaders together with educators to form a joint constituency.”*

— Jack Rennie