



Alternative Placements for the Correctional Education Program Would Be More Costly

at a glance

There is no compelling reason to change Florida's model for providing correctional education, which has been shown to have positive effects on inmates and appears to cost less than other options.

Scope

Chapter 2007-72, *Laws of Florida*, directed OPPAGA to assess whether Department of Corrections' educational programs could be more appropriately administered by another entity. This report explores alternative correctional education models and their advantages and disadvantages.

Background

The Department of Corrections is charged with protecting the public by incarcerating and supervising offenders and offering rehabilitative work, education, and treatment services. As of January 1, 2008, the department housed 94,928 inmates in 137 correctional facilities throughout the state.

Most inmates entering Florida's correctional system lack basic educational and employment skills. Ninety percent of these offenders eventually will leave prison and return to the community. Given the high economic and social costs of incarceration and supervision, the Legislature has determined that strategic investment in rehabilitative programs, such as education, can protect the public by

reducing the likelihood of repeat offending and decreasing inmate idleness and promoting institutional security.¹ The department offers two main types of correctional education programs.

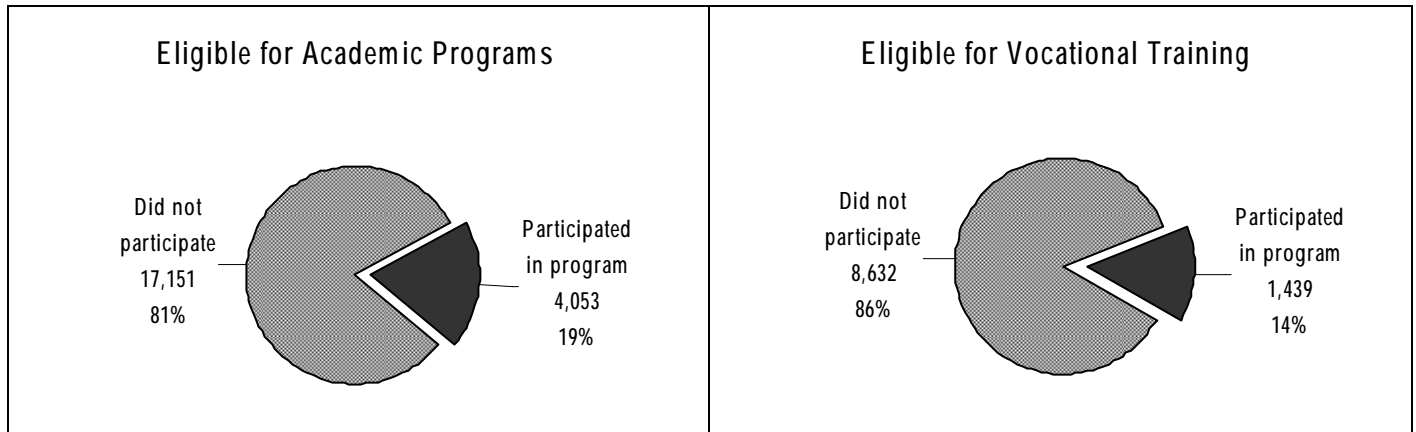
- Academic education is provided at 51 facilities and includes Mandatory Literacy, Adult Basic Education, General Education Development, and special education. The Mandatory Literacy Program is a 150-hour literacy training program required for all inmates with two or more years remaining on their sentence and who score below a sixth grade reading level. The remaining academic programs are not mandatory and provided based on availability. Adult Basic Education provides basic reading, writing, and math skills through the eighth grade level. General Education Development (GED) is a high school equivalency degree program for inmates who score at the ninth grade level or higher. Special education services are provided to inmates with disabilities who are eligible to receive special services required by state and federal law.
- Vocational education is offered in 37 institutions and provides training leading to certification in many occupations, such as construction, computer programming, and architectural drafting.

The department reports that approximately 59% of the inmates test below the ninth grade literacy level.

¹ *Corrections Rehabilitative Programs Effective, But Serve Only a Portion of the Eligible Population*, [Report No. 07-14](#), February 2007.

Exhibit 1

Most Eligible Inmates Released in Fiscal Year 2006-07 Did Not Participate in Academic and Vocational Training



Source: Department of Corrections.

Due to limited number of teachers and program slots, only 17,809 inmates participated in education courses during Fiscal Year 2006-07.² As shown in Exhibit 1, the department reports that most inmates released in Fiscal Year 2006-07, who qualified for educational programs and/or vocational training, did not receive these programs prior to their release (81% and 86%, respectively).

Prior OPPAGA reports have also found that while few inmates complete their basic education, those who complete other programs such as GED have better post-release outcomes.³

For Fiscal Year 2007-08, the Legislature appropriated \$27.5 million for correctional education programs.

Correctional Education Options

Organizational models for providing education in the state prison systems include correctional education bureaus and correctional school districts. States that use an education bureau model provide educational services through a department of corrections bureau or division that generally has no independent personnel and budget authority, and limited curriculum authority. Florida currently uses this bureau model.

In a correctional school district model, an entity independent from the corrections agency

administers and has responsibility for inmate education services. This entity makes decisions on curriculum, personnel and budget. The line of authority extends from a superintendent of schools through prison principals to teaching staff. Seventeen states use a school district model for correctional education.

We evaluated four alternatives for providing correctional educational services and concluded that there is no compelling reason to change Florida’s current model, which has been shown to have positive educational performance and appears to have lower costs than other options.

Option 1: Continue the current education bureau within the Department of Corrections

Currently, the Department of Corrections’ Office of Institutional Programs manages correctional education in Florida’s prisons. The office establishes curriculum, which is certified by the Department of Education, and assists the Department of Corrections’ budget office in preparing the program’s legislative budget request, which is approved by the Secretary. The warden or an educational supervisor assigned to the prison hires and supervises the teachers.

The Office of Institutional Programs has had reasonable success delivering services to inmates. OPPAGA’s 2007 report found that inmates who completed a GED or vocational program had lower recidivism rates and were more likely to be employed than those who did not complete these

² On June 30, 2007, the department had 117 academic, 50 special education and 97 vocational teacher positions.

³ *Corrections Rehabilitative Programs Effective, But Serve Only a Portion of the Eligible Population*, Report No. 07-14, February 2007.

programs.⁴ This model holds the Department of Corrections accountable for educational outcomes and gives the department control over education personnel, space, and equipment and the flexibility to coordinate education with other inmate services such as transition assistance and substance abuse treatment.

A potential disadvantage of this option is that it enables the department to redirect education resources to other program areas, which can have a negative effect on inmate education. For example, during the past two fiscal years (2005-06 and 2006-07), the department transferred \$3 million from the Education and Programs budget to other department operations, primarily health services and administration. These funds mainly accrue from salary lapse generated by teacher vacancies.

One significant feature of the current model is that teachers are Department of Corrections' employees and have, on average, lower salaries than their counterparts in public schools. During Fiscal Year 2006-07, the average department teacher salary was \$34,725 for a 12-month schedule, compared to the \$45,296 statewide average salary for public school teachers who work a 9-month school year and \$59,867 for 11-month employment teaching adult education in school districts.⁵ While the lower salaries reduce the cost of providing inmate education, it contributes to a relatively high (30%) turnover rate in correctional teachers, compared to an 8.7% turnover rate for public school teachers. Prolonged department teacher vacancies can result in cancelled classes and disruptions to inmate education.

Option 2: Re-establish the Correctional Education School Authority

Florida previously used a quasi-school district model. In 1986, the Legislature transferred inmate education services to the newly created Correctional Education School Authority (CESA), governed by the Board of Correctional Education. The transfer was intended to address the Department of Corrections' low priority on

rehabilitative programs, inadequate inmate participation, and teacher salaries lower than those in public schools. CESA was administratively housed within the department, but was a separate budget entity and its funds could only be used for educational purposes. In addition, the CESA board was an independent advocate for inmate education needs and funding.

CESA, however, was not successful. Legislative oversight studies found that the number of inmates participating in correctional education had declined under CESA and that it lacked data to assess the effectiveness of its educational services.^{6,7} The oversight reviews also identified numerous administrative and operational deficiencies. For example, Department of Corrections' officials report that CESA staff duplicated, rather than relied on some department functions, specifically in personnel and information technology. The Legislature abolished CESA in 1995 and returned control of education services to the department.

If the Legislature wished to revisit this model it could create an improved CESA that addresses past deficiencies, such as placing limitations on CESA administrative functions and establishing performance measures and data collection requirements. The Legislature could also require the Department of Education to monitor CESA's educational services to ensure that inmates received effective educational services, course curriculums met state guidelines, and performance data were accurately collected and reported. The disadvantage of this option is that it would likely increase correctional inmate costs by creating additional administrators and program monitors.

An alternative suggested by a 1993 House of Representatives report would be to create a Correctional Education Advisory Board, similar to the Correctional Medical Authority, to monitor correctional education services and report directly to the Legislature and the Governor. This option also would incur additional costs; the Correctional Medical Authority budget for Fiscal Year 2007-08

⁴ *Corrections Rehabilitative Programs Effective, But Serve Only a Portion of the Eligible Population*, Report No. 07-14, February 2007.

⁵ Department of Education reports, that 80% of adult education teachers are employed on a part-time basis.

⁶ *Oversight Report on the Correctional Education School Authority*, Florida House of Representatives, Committee of Corrections, February 1993.

⁷ *Performance Audit of Correctional Education*, Auditor General Report No. 11334, December, 1989.

was \$938,460 to monitor inmate health care at all department facilities.

Option 3: Create a correctional school district

In this option, Florida would create a 68th school district, overseen by an appointed board, to provide educational services in state prisons. The board would delegate authority to administer and supervise the district’s daily operations to a superintendent, who would be responsible for program activities at all prisons and hiring and supervising educational personnel. Local prison educational services would be overseen by principals who could manage services in multiple prisons. The correctional school district would have sole responsibility for educational decisions, including budget requests.

The potential advantage of this option is that it would have a sole focus on delivering educational services. If the correctional school district received a separate line item appropriation, or was funded through the Florida Education Finance Program, educational funds could not be diverted to other department activities.

The disadvantage of this option is that it would likely result in higher state costs as the school district would have its own administrative structure. Teacher costs could also be higher if the correctional school district chose to provide salaries comparable to public schools in order to address turnover.⁸ Finally, the model would also require the department to coordinate its activities and property with another entity.

Option 4: Assign correctional education services to the state’s 67 school districts

In this model, Florida’s 67 county school districts would be given responsibility to administer correctional education similar to the manner in which they are responsible for providing educational services in juvenile justice facilities.

Correctional educational programs would be funded through the Florida Education Finance Program student count. To ensure that inmates receive appropriate education services, Legislature could task the Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program, which evaluates education in juvenile justice facilities, to also evaluate education in adult correctional facilities.

The advantage of this option is that it would place responsibility for correctional educational programs with an entity that has expertise and a focus on delivering educational services. As the school districts would receive independent funding for correctional education, appropriated resources could not be diverted to other department activities. This option could also prompt school districts to work to strengthen inmate transition and workforce placement efforts as they could partner with the community college currently offering transition classes and job referral services to inmates.⁹

However, this model would likely increase costs, as the school districts would probably provide the same salary and benefit levels to correctional teachers as other district personnel. Costs also could be increased if the Legislature assigned responsibility to the Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program to evaluate correctional education. In Fiscal Year 2007-08, the program received \$1,485,737 in federal grants to monitor juvenile justice education services.

 OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

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⁸ Review of the Department of Corrections, [Report No. 00-23](#), December 2000.

⁹ Department of Corrections’ transition classes are currently conducted by instructors who are contracted through Tallahassee Community College.