

Community High School of Vermont Faculty Work Group

A Proposal to Strengthen Education Within the Vermont Department of Corrections and Reduce Recidivism



"Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world." Nelson Mandela

February 18, 2016

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Summary Recommendations: This proposal addresses the current low enrollment in Community High School of Vermont campuses both within correctional facilities and at the classrooms located in probation offices and makes the following recommendations:

1. Assess educational and vocational need for all people sentenced to facility or field supervision. DOC does not collect this data. Faculty know that there is tremendous unmet need, that nearly every inmate would benefit from both basic education, whether they had previously obtained a high school diploma or not.
2. Establish Field Campuses as “Day Reporting Stations” where all people under supervision without employment for more than 30 days participate in coordinated vocational and work search activities.
3. Provide incentives for education and vocational program participation both within facilities and at field campuses.
4. Change the RBA metrics on recidivism and education to measure a larger sample of CHSVT students rather than solely diploma recipients, to include those who participate in the Workforce Readiness Certificate and those who participated in at least 100 in-class days of CHSVT studies.
5. Establish educational achievement metrics for all of DOC management to prevent the formation of silos of responsibility and to foster greater collaboration between security, case work and educational sectors of DOC.

Introduction: Community High School of Vermont (CHSVT) provides education to people incarcerated and under field supervision by the Department of Corrections. It was created in 1987 to meet the educational and vocational needs of people under correctional supervision who have left public educational systems without the skills and credentials to enter employment, post-secondary education or everyday life. Since its inception, it has been a central component of the Department's rehabilitative programs. This year the Governor's budget recommendations include severely cutting CHSVT funding and closing nine campuses. This document attempts to broaden the conversation

During the past decade, a number of issues have caused many to question the return on investment and to ask if CHSVT produces results sufficient to justify the expense. Appropriately, our legislators have questioned the low number of high school diplomas earned through the program, and whether the DOC should consider alternate models. The following proposal attempts to answer these questions and to make specific recommendations that legislation could support.

Teacher Narrative: Basic Education is a Necessity

It surprises me to find adults who do not understand basic science. How could one not understand the physical world given the amount of available information easily available in our digital world? I have students who do not recognize the word "molecule" nor have any concept of how the cells within their own bodies function. Many of my students are parents. They have complex and nuanced understandings of popular culture and the criminal justice system but suffer from lack of basic knowledge, and they tend to shy away from information that is unfamiliar. In part, their poverty of information comes from multiple societal messages that told them they were stupid, unworthy, incapable and hopeless. In my science class we dig deep for understanding. Understanding DNA means literally unravelling the double helix as a metaphor for all information and the tools to unpack its meaning. The structure of inquiry permeates the culture of my classroom and students enter the real world capable of learning how to learn.

What kind of information can we, teachers, provide? It is our understanding that various Committees within the Legislature asked for, but did not receive, information to demonstrate whether or not CHSVT programs are linked to reduced recidivism. Our role is to teach and collect data but schoolwide analysis is the responsibility of management. We understand the disappointment of Legislative Committees and we too share your frustration with the shortage of critical information. Unfortunately, we do not have access to detailed information that the Department of Labor, the Department of Corrections and the Department of Education have stored in their databases.

In defense of CHSVT Administrators, however, the question of linking CHSVT graduation with recidivism may be the wrong question. Two better questions are: **1) Is there a relationship between employment and recidivism? 2) Is there a relationship between CHSVT enrollment and employment regardless of diploma completion?** These are the “results based accountability” questions that should have been asked, especially in light of the small sample size of diplomas granted by CHSVT since tightening of education standards in 2014.

These two questions are much closer to what is actually happening in our CHSVT classrooms. We intuit that there are strong correlations because we receive strong anecdotal evidence from our former students. Yes, many of the students who were in our classes, some of whom came in initially under great resistance, are now working and have turned their lives around. Others who came in just a few times and gave up prior to finding any level of engagement, are often the same people in and out of Corrections supervision.

What are some of the problems at CHSVT?

- Low enrollment, in both facility and field campuses, resulting in underutilization of educational programs.
- Slow progress toward meeting proficiency standards in order to complete diplomas.
- Incomplete information to determine return on investment.
- Lack of institutional support for education as an equal partner in the rehabilitation.
- Lack of adequate educational and vocational assessment of all people under Correctional supervision.
- Institutional categorization of inmates and people under field supervision that create a self-fulfilling cycle of low achievement and criminality.
- An over-reliance on counseling interventions without addressing the low literacy levels that hamper using language to mitigate criminal thinking.

What are some of the root causes of those problems at CHSVT?

1. **Low Enrollment:** As teachers, we believe that students vote with their feet and therefore it is our responsibility to make our classrooms stimulating and exciting. We believe that real learning only takes place when students are engaged and self-motivated. But for most people under Correctional supervision the desire to learn has been suppressed by the same factors that have resulted in their incarceration. Most people under supervision need multiple structural supports to encourage and support school participation. In both the facility and field campuses, support for education has eroded in recent years. Many Correctional Professionals, both within the facilities and outside, openly dismiss the value of education and that perspective is not lost on the men and women they supervise.

2. **Slow Progress toward proficiency completion:** There are many interruptions to education within facilities. Chief among these are mid-morning and mid-afternoon head counts. Many facility campuses must stop classes at 10:30 AM and cannot resume for several hours. There are also difficulties caused by forced choices between recreation and

education, and then there are lock-downs during security alerts. These create discontinuity of the educational delivery and experience.

3. **Lack of data:** The mandate of CHSVT is to educate for successful employment and/or to progress to post-secondary degrees. It is our opinion that recidivism should be a RBA standard for the entire DOC and not the only RBA metric of CHSVT. Only within this context is it a relevant for CHSVT. Better RBA metrics would measure improvements in reading and math on standardized tests, and through the acquisition of Industry Recognized Certificates (IRCs). These metrics provide clearer indications of the degree to which CHSVT is helping individuals and the population.

What can be done to address these problems?

1. Enhance vocational training in all facilities by more fully integrating facility jobs with direct classroom instruction.
2. Provide incentives for education participation. People under Correctional supervision often benefit from various incentives for participation. Within facilities educational participation and advancement should be equal with participation in work crews to earn “day for day” to reduce time of incarceration. In field campuses there should be comparatively strong incentives for educational participation, either by offering reduced time in furlough or through support from parole boards for educational achievement.
3. Require that all sentenced inmates are assessed by a licensed educator for educational and vocational need. All people, regardless of diploma completion, with less than a 9th grade reading or math level should participate in CHSVT. Each inmate with these needs should have an educational and vocational plan (called in CHSVT the “Living, Learning Work” Plan) with specific educational goals.
4. All field campuses operate as hybrid versions of “Day Reporting Stations.”

<https://www.fdle.state.fl.us/cms/FCJEI/Programs1/SLP/Documents/Full-Text/Diggs.aspx> Any “abled bodied” person under Corrections supervision without a job for more than four consecutive weeks must automatically be referred to CHSVT for assessment and educational planning and participation. The Field campuses become a hub for

Workforce Readiness preparation and a method for daily supervision of people in the community.

Teacher Narrative: Field Campuses as Best Practice Field Supervision

My site began a Day Reporting Center (DRC) targeting unemployed men in transitional housing. The team, which included myself, the District Manager, and community partners, felt the DRC could provide the skills necessary to obtain employment, and also motivate students to seek employment. The DRC combined the expectations of CHSVT's Workforce Readiness Certificate with Risk Reduction Programming, as well as providing industry certifications. It was wildly successful. Between the regular diploma-seeking students (taught by my co-teacher) and my DRC students, the classroom was full to the brim, with upwards of 14 students. Despite the success of the program, I was forced to discontinue it because my co-teacher resigned and due to budget cuts could not be replaced. I therefore, had to focus solely on the diploma-seeking students. Unfortunately, not one week after DRC was forced to close, every student in that program tested positive for drugs and subsequently went back to jail. I strongly believe the lack of accountability that required students to be either gainfully employed or at the field site for 4 hours, 4 days a week working on job skills and addressing criminal thinking contributed to this return in criminal behavior.

5. Eliminate barriers to full day educational participation. Allow for in-class head counts and bag lunches in facility classrooms.
6. Hold DOC management accountable for educational advancement. It is important to collect data comparing educational and vocational progress of all inmates across all facilities. In some facilities, the rules and culture restrict the ability of students to attend CHSVT to the degree that classrooms are nearly empty. Superintendents are held accountable for disciplinary problems in the inmate population, for any harm done to inmates while in our custody and for completion of contracted programs but not for measureable academic and vocational standards of education. Unless this is a measure that DOC management are held accountable for there will be little incentive for them to address the barriers to education. Education will continue to be viewed as an "add-on" program and not fundamental to rehabilitation.

Teacher Narrative: What happens when we release people into community without addressing literacy?

I have been approached multiple times by risk reduction staff and probation officers asking for my assistance in helping their clients complete groups that rely on literacy skills to participate in the program. Several people in these groups were either extremely limited or completely illiterate. Due to our current model that does not require older students in such positions to work on these necessary skills prior to, or in conjunction with, their groups, I have been unable to be of much help. Essentially, I've been asked to scribe for these clients, which as a teacher I have been both instructed by management not to do, but also felt ill-at-ease in doing because scribing is so unhelpful. If we are put in a position to better collaborate with RRP, I believe such issues can be successfully addressed for the betterment of both programs, but most importantly those we are meant to serve.

The problems of competing fixes to CHSVT:

Since last year there have been proposals to “consolidate” CHSVT to three or four facility campuses and closing work camp, regional and field campuses. There have been efforts to remove CHSVT from the Education Fund and make it a General Fund expenditure. There have been vocal critics from other correctional employees and, ironically, VSEA members calling for eliminating the funding for CHSVT because they perceived it as a “waste of money.” There have been suggestions to make CHSVT a “vocational school” as if CHSVT is not already preparing inmate-students for work.

The rehabilitation of people in Corrections is more complex than simply educational achievement. There are many other factors that influence recidivism these include lack of livable wage jobs, the job market dominated by national employers who categorically ban hiring people with criminal backgrounds, the epidemic of drugs and alcohol in our communities and the lack of housing, to list just a few.

Conclusions:

The RBA metrics for Community High School were not developed by a social scientist but rather by an accountant. As legislators it is your responsibility to make distinctions that are moral and just. We suggest that at the very least you maintain the infrastructure of CHSVT with level funding for 2017. We believe in protecting and expanding the statutory role of CHSVT to educate all people under correctional supervision to meet basic literacy and numeracy levels. Further we suggest that you instruct DOC to work closely with a qualified social scientist to review a number of institutional reforms, some of them suggested in this report, and include teachers in all levels of discussion and analysis. Teachers actually know and care about their students not just as aggregate data points but as complex individuals; and this may actually be the single most important factor in rehabilitation.

Teacher Narrative: The Challenge of Low Literacy

Too often we hear, as educators in Corrections, that teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills is a waste of time; that all we need to do is to show inmates how to do a manual job, that facility jobs and jobs in Vermont Correctional Industries are sufficient. There seems to be a widespread and unexamined assumption that reading and math is irrelevant to finding and holding jobs. This ignores the fact that our students can not read a job application, balance a checking account or follow an employer's written instructions. I have assessed students with reading levels we associate with first or second grade, who use their fingers for adding. Yet I have seen them grow, learn to read, learn to compute, learn to compensate with their difficulties. I have seen this make the difference between success in employment and continuing as clients of human services and returning to incarceration. They would not have been in my classroom had it not been for the close collaboration I have with probation officers and the structure of integrated education and community supervision, that CHSVT, at its best provides.