

# Corrections Education: How We Do It

by *Twila S. Evans*

## Who Are We?

*County of Northampton, Department of Corrections, County Prison, 666 Walnut Street, Easton, PA 18042. Cynthia A. Marakovits, Director of Corrections; Todd L. Buskirk, Warden; Scott Hoke, Deputy Warden of Treatment.*

**W**e are a county facility originally built by the Quakers and currently housing an average of 625 residents. Females account for less than 10 percent of our residents. Our system allows inmates to complete their sentencing with terms of five years minus one day. The average sentence is approximately nine months. The average age of our residents is 26 years, and records indicate that the residents range in educational levels from illiterate to college graduates, with the average self-reported grade level being the tenth grade.

Our educational unit is located in the main prison and is accessible by all residents except those in high-security sections. There are silent emergency alarms in each of the three connecting rooms which will summon immediate help should a situation occur when this is necessary. Appropriate behavior and language are expected and generally are the norm. Even though some language expressions might be “traditional” language of a street workplace, it is not acceptable in the classroom. All students are expected to treat other students and instructors respectfully.

## What Do We Do?

For the grant year 1999-2000, we have Section 231 funding for a total of 1,350 hours of institutional programming. We are funded through Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and one of its consolidation partners, Easton Area School District. This year we assigned 300 hours of instruction to ESL, 600 hours for ABE levels (which is divided into three classes), 200 hours for GED instruction, and two 50-hour cycles of family literacy called “When Bonds Are Broken” (originally a Barbara Bush Family Literacy Grant eight years ago). The 231 grant also funds 150 hours for a family liaison worker to facilitate the communications and needs of the fathers, their children, and the caretakers of those children.

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These programs are held in two adjoining rooms that have been furnished by the prison with seven Macintosh computers (two with CD-ROMs), two Apple computers, two printers, a copy machine, and tables and chairs. A limited variety of tutorial software and a large selection of printed materials are available for curriculum instruction.

Additionally, we have 605 hours of vocational training, which is funded by Northampton County Prison. Currently there are three 135-hour cycles of automotive workshop, which allows the completing residents to obtain their inspection licenses, and four 50-hour classes of computer workshop, which introduces basic computer skills in word processing, database, and spreadsheet applications. The auto program is held in a separate space in the prison, but the computer class is within our regular classroom.

With the new law, Act 30 of 1997, we have a separate classroom and alternative education program funded by IU 20 through the Easton Area School District for inmates who are less than 21 years old. They attend classes five days a week for six hours a day. The initial testing process for these students is completed by the basic educational unit, which is staffed with a full-time instructor. This classroom is furnished by the funding unit and includes a VCR and TV, three computers, and the usual texts and materials.

We are also an official GED testing site. We offer the GED approximately four times per year. We generally obtain a 90 percent pass rate.

It should also be noted that our Treatment Department solicits community volunteers who provide a variety of class programs for our residents such as nutrition, job resume writing, creative writing, art, and personal decision-making (PDM). This last course offering is a one-on-one professionally trained group of volunteers who use copyrighted materials offered by VITA (Volunteers in Teaching Alternatives) of Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

## **How Do We Do It?**

Through the general classification system of our Treatment Department, residents may choose treatment programming that includes education, drug and alcohol programming, life skill classes, and spiritual selections. This classification process occurs after the resident has been incarcerated for approximately 60 days. Even though residents who choose this level of programming may be high school graduates, educational testing for reading skills is done so that we can assess their capacity to handle the written materials in treatment programming. However, all residents who are younger than 21 years old are called to the educational unit for intake interviews and educational testing except those in high-security housing. (These residents must be served in their cells if there are educational needs to be met.) This process is accomplished



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during the second week of commitment, and they are immediately served in the appropriate classes. Occasionally, during sentencing, a judge may order educational programming. Frequently, other residents suggest that they “get into” classes.

Our intake interview includes all of the data that needs to be obtained to complete the state form information. The individual’s personal goals are discussed and testing takes place during the subsequent week. We use the BEST test for English as a Second Language students. Those students who pre-test at the 7th Student Performance Level may also be tested for placement in our ABE classes. The TABE Complete Battery, Form 7 or 8, Levels E, M, D, or A as indicated by the locator test for the TABE are given. We use the diagnostic profile to determine inmates’ educational strengths and weaknesses. A learning-style inventory is also completed and the educational as well as occupational implications are discussed with the student. These factors, not the scores, are discussed individually with the student. Students are then asked to write a couple of paragraphs regarding their short- and long-term goals. They will then be introduced to the computer and will type their goals and print them out on the printer. The instructor and student work together to start an individual plan.

Our educational unit maintains its own database in Microsoft Excel, which contains demographic data as well as pre- and post-test scores. This also allows us to track our students’ progress in meeting the state’s performance standards for enrollment, retention, attendance, reason for leaving the program, and learning gains. This information is also available to the Treatment Department for parole recommendations and programming. We are now in the process of inputting educational information into the Jail Management System.

Instruction is provided to small groups and individually and is dependent on individual goals. All classes are open enrollment except for the family literacy program and the vocational training modules. Since many of our residents have pursued a lifestyle that lacked structure and accountability, we attempt to make up for that deficit by structuring classes as a workplace setting. Students are called to class and are expected to get to class in a timely manner with their “tools” of paper, pencil, books, and completed assignments. Group assignment work is posted on the blackboard and as students enter class they are expected to start the assignment. This is generally a writing assignment. Each class is three hours long and, if necessary, a student may leave the classroom to use the bathroom facilities on a “break.” They must “sign out” as they would “punch out” for a break in the workplace. This practice also helps us keep track of where inmates are in the prison. Upon their return, they sign back into the “workplace” class. We encourage students to form small work groups if they are doing similar work and to assist each other as they would on



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the job. Students are encouraged to ask questions and to seek assistance. Neither “just sitting in class” (on the job) nor disruptive behavior is acceptable. We attempt to talk with the students regarding their positive or negative performance on a daily basis. If disruptive behavior and/or unexcused absenteeism from class occurs they are given a written warning and ultimately dismissed if they do not change their behavior.

At the completion of 50 instructional hours students are post-tested with the alternate form of their pre-test. They are then given a certificate on parchment paper (their paycheck) which is produced on the computer and signed by the instructor and the Treatment Department’s Case Manager. For many students this certificate is their first tangible recognition of accomplishment and students seek to include certificates in their “case” resume folder. A copy of every certificate is also placed in the primary treatment file.

The classrooms always seem to have a low “hum” of activity and generally appropriate conversation. There are times when we wonder, “Are they learning?”, “Are they making changes in their attitudes?”, “Are we enabling them to prepare for their exit from the justice system and into the community?”. Our post-test scores indicate that learning is happening. Attitude changes are more difficult to quantify, but the low rate of “write-ups” for misconduct indicates that students are aware of the need to change and are attempting to do so. At this point in time in Pennsylvania, it is difficult to track recidivism in a county system. However, many former inmates are seen on the street and we witness changes that occur as a result of the “seeds” that we planted. This occurs frequently enough to sustain our commitment to create an environment that allows for educational/vocational progress and attitudinal change.

During this past year, we have created “work modules” which include not only “how to do” but a life skill application problem to be completed. The majority of these “lesson” modules are based on *the Adult Learner Skills Competencies, A Framework for Developing Curricula in Adult Contexts and Linking Instruction to Assessment*. This document was a special project produced by the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy and is available from AdvancE and in the Resources section of ABLEsite ([paadulted.org](http://paadulted.org)). Many of our work modules are closely aligned to competencies that were earlier delineated in the *Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills* (SCANS, U.S. Department of Labor, 1993) and *Equipped for the Future* (EFF), a framework of competencies identified by the National Institute for Literacy in Washington, DC. We had an opportunity to be a part of the original piloting group for EFF through Northampton Community College.

We also review our average gains in reading, math, and language as a method of curriculum improvement. As teachers we all recognize that we have “favorite” subject areas as strengths, but we are challenged to improve on our weaker



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areas also. We have regular targeted reviews of one of these primary areas for curriculum improvement. The instructor chooses the area of her concern and we work together to find ways to improve, using information from our database to review the issues. Evaluations that are done by our students also offer suggestions for consideration. This lifelong learning process for instructors is supported by the Northampton Community College, which mandates professional development hours as part of our improvement plan in EQUAL (Educational Quality for Adult Literacy).

## **Why Do We Do What We Do?**

It goes beyond the issue of having a job. It is more similar to a mission. CHANGE for improvement is the order for the times. The justice system we work in is constantly changing with the overcrowded conditions so prevalent in these times. The performance standards that are required to meet the state standards challenge us to review our delivery systems for improvement. We are challenged daily to change instructional approaches and materials to enable change within the students. Yes, there are those days in which we have missed the mark and feel discouraged. We can share this with each other and many times with our students. There have been times when students have offered suggestions that have worked more effectively than we, with our background and experience, could have offered. In caring about doing our best we have encouraged many of them to offer their best.

## **Lessons to Be Shared**

**1. Learn the institutional system.** Seek out the administration to learn the rules. The institution's primary goal is to provide security—for the community, the institutional staff, and the residents. Learn their security rules and follow them. There are sound reasons for most of them. If you have questions and lack the understanding for the reasoning for the rule, talk with the administration. Respect their positions and you will earn respect for your position. It can be teamwork, if you listen and learn. Remember that this takes time and effort. You be the initiator.

**2. Provide written communication to the institutional staff.** Every month a report is written for our Treatment Warden that provides him with information such as: students that have been tested and enrolled in class, certificates that have been issued, GED testing, professional development programs, conferences, etc. that have been attended, outsiders that have visited the classes, summaries of vocational training modules, copies of newspaper articles that have been written about the programs, etc. He then provides this information to the supervisors, the Director of Corrections, and the Prison



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Advisory Board. Appropriate communication increases awareness of needs and allows for participation in meeting the residents' need for change. The majority of security staff appreciates knowing that they have made a positive difference.

**3. Be discreet in the handling of confidential information.** Remember that in a closed environment system, information is power. Our students are told that what they say to us or put in writing will not be shared with institutional staff *unless* it contains something that threatens the security of the institution or is a threat to themselves or another individual. Every written assignment should be scanned quickly for any indication of these matters before you leave the institution. There have been many instances in which residents have suggested in their writings that they were considering suicide. Always take this seriously and report it to proper authorities. The institution has personnel who can handle these situations. Remember also to share with the block officer a sudden change in attitude or performance. Again, there have been many times when this awareness has enabled intervention and prevented an incident. You will also find that, in time, officers will advise you that a particular student seems upset so that you might discern the cause and support appropriate behavior. Communication is essential and benefits the entire program for all that are involved.

**4. Institutionalized students have many of the same concerns and problems as students attending community classes.** Additionally, they have been separated from their support systems. Even though these support systems may have been negative situations, separation causes anxiety. Frequently, immediate families are in crisis situations. Communication with the outside is limited and, in the case of telephone calls, costly. Far too few have known the support and respect of appropriate and culturally accepted models. Encourage and support your students' efforts to focus on those things that they can change now.

**5. Read, discuss, and learn about addiction problems.** With approximately 80% of our offenders incurring addiction problems, it is important to understand the issues. Their problems come with them to the classroom, and withdrawal behaviors can inhibit their ability to concentrate. Seek out other professionals in the field who can provide insights and suggestions. Your ability to enable change will create a more positive and empowering classroom environment.

**6. Keep in mind that your students have, more than likely, failed to learn in the school system they were enrolled in at the community level.** Our job is not to blame the educational system or the student but to provide a holistic approach that is not reminiscent of past failures. We have learned that delivering our instruction in an integrated application module is more positive



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for the student. An isolated reading, writing, social studies, science, or math lesson can encounter resistance because of past experiences in those classes. The need to know certain knowledge should be connected with their self-reported goals and vocational interests.

Set the standard and model the learning that we ask of the students. Use the resources that are available. Talk with and listen to your students about their learning needs. Contact other professionals in your field and share concerns, issues, and experiences. Attend appropriate conferences and other professional development opportunities. Contact AdvancE for research reports, Special Project reports, and curriculum samples. Use the Internet to explore current issues and research. Search ABLEsite at [paadulted.org](http://paadulted.org) for resources. Contact the National Institute of Corrections Information Center Web site at [www.nicic.org](http://www.nicic.org). for a wide variety of program information and curriculum.

Bottom line: Take a risk! Listen and learn! Share the successes and learn from the failures. Empowerment for all learners is the reward for planting seeds of knowledge.

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*Twila Evans holds a Master of Education with Reading Specialist Certificate. She has been Educational Coordinator at Northampton County Prison since 1984. She has taught ESL and ABE, developed curriculum for Workplace Literacy Skills (1992), served as project coordinator for “When Bonds are Broken” (PDE 353 Project #98-404) and “ELM Branches Out” (PDE 353 Project #98-3044), participated in “ELM – An Integrated Language and Life Skill Competency Based Curriculum (PDE 353 Project #66-004) and Project EQUAL since 1995. Currently a trainer for Core and Data Analysis and Sharing groups. Her background also includes BA in Psychology (independent study in “Holistic Aspects of Workers’ Management”) with 13 years of experience in psychological testing and personnel management for an industrial firm with allied research in psychosomatic medicine in the industrial environment.*