

# OBSTACLES TO EDUCATING PRISON INMATES: OBSERVATIONS OF A THIRTY-SEVEN YEAR CAREER PRISON SCHOOL TEACHER

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## ABSTRACT

A retired corrections education instructor, with 38 years of experience teaching college level, ABE instruction, and GED® test preparation, reflects on what he has observed in a California men's corrections institution. He details the various obstacles that face prison-school educators in delivering effective academic instruction that benefits their students in meaningful ways. He explains challenges arising from the nature of the school system; the student population; the instructional staff; the school administration; and the influence of other prison officials, departments, and institution policies and procedures. He recommends various strategies to make corrections education more effective.

*Keywords:* corrections education, prison-school educators, adult basic education; school administration, California corrections, inmates' needs, prison, learning differences; disabilities, eye care, teacher qualifications.

## INTRODUCTION

The Central Coast Adult School (CCAS), located inside the California Men's Colony (CMC) state prison, consists of two separate facilities, CMC East and CMC West, situated approximately 500 yards apart on the northern outskirts of San Luis Obispo, California.

My career as an academic instructor at both CMC East and CMC West began in 1979 and ended upon my retirement in 2017. In the process, I taught college level U. S. history and political science, primary and secondary level multiple-subject classes, and a General Education Development (GED®) Test preparation program. During my career, I have observed many difficulties that prison-school educators face in delivering effective academic instruction that benefits their students in meaningful ways. This commentary will elaborate upon issues I experienced first-hand and will emphasize the following themes:

- the nature of the school system;
- the student population;
- the instructional staff;
- the school administration; and
- the influence of other prison officials, departments, and institution policies and procedures.

## THE NATURE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Although many vocational courses are offered at CMC and throughout the 31 male and two female prisons within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) system, this examination focuses upon issues with the academic learning programs at CMC East and West, which provide instruction from the first-grade through high-school level, as well as college. The K-12 classes are divided into three academic basic education (ABE) levels: ABE I (first through third grade), ABE II (fourth through sixth grade), ABE III (seventh through ninth grade), and the GED Test preparation program. Although individual subject high school classes were offered throughout the 1980s, CMC and most other CDCR institutions abandoned the course work leading to a high school diploma and adopted the GED certificate exam instead. The GED class is the highest level of academic education offered at the secondary level. In addition, English as a second language (ESL) classes primarily serve the large population of Spanish-speaking prisoners from Mexico and various Latin American countries. Class enrollment quotas in academic classes are set at 27 students per teacher, assisted by one or two inmate-teacher-aides. In the ABE and GED Test preparation classes, students attend class three hours per day in either of two morning or afternoon sessions.

Students are assigned to classes in an open-enrollment, open-exit format throughout the school year based upon the average grade-point-level (GPL) score they achieve on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), which assesses English language, mathematics, and reading skills through the 12th grade level. One major concern is that students with a high score in mathematics and a low score in language or reading are often placed in a class with students with the opposite test results, but the same GPL average. At the same time, some inmates will randomly fill in the bubbles on Scantron test answer sheets without paying much attention to the questions, which results in their being placed in the wrong class level.

Exacerbating the problem, the Inmate Assignment Office assigns inmates to classes to fill class quotas. As a result, students are too often enrolled in inappropriate classes, and the Inmate Assignment staff often do not make the necessary corrections in a timely manner. Additionally, students can be assigned to a particular class for as few as one or two days to more than a year and then be removed for various reasons such as completing a particular program or education level, being paroled, being transferred to another institution, or being placed in disciplinary detention housing after committing serious institution rules violations. Thus, during a given month in a class, as much as one third of the students leave, and others replace them. This open-enrollment-open-exit system significantly impedes a teacher's ability to maintain continuity in lesson delivery and progression, especially when teaching mathematics.

At the time I retired, to supplement the conventional classrooms, 10 Voluntary Education Program (VEP) classes (five at CMC East and five at CMC West) provided individualized computer program instruction and operated similarly to study halls. Additionally, CMC East has two classrooms, where special education teachers provide one-on-one instruction to students with acute learning difficulties. Libraries at both CMC East and West operate under the jurisdiction of the education department and are accessible to the general inmate population.

CMC East first offered direct instruction college classes taught by instructors recruited from the local community college (Cuesta College) and the California Polytechnic State University during the latter 1970s through the mid-1980s, after which the state government eliminated funding for inmates to attend college while incarcerated. California began reinstating college programs within its state prisons in the early 2000s with online computer correspondence courses in collaboration with Palos Verde and Coastline Community Colleges. Eventually, in the fall of 2015, CMC reestablished direct college level instruction when it resumed its partnership with Cuesta College.

## THE STUDENT POPULATION

A Literacy Project Foundation study determined that as many as three out of five adults incarcerated in U.S. prisons cannot read, and 85% of juvenile offenders have reading difficulties. Nonetheless, only 6% of inmates attend academic classes while in prison (Saniato, 2017).

According to statistics compiled by the CMC education faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) 2011 report, of the 3,668 inmates at CMC East, over 60% had less than a high school diploma. Yet only 8.7% of the whole population enrolled in either academic or vocational education programs. Of the 2,446 inmates at CMC West, about 66% had less than a high school diploma. Yet only 11% of the whole population were taking either academic or vocational program classes. See Table 1.

Both the general population and the students attending classes at CMC East and CMC West also had diverse backgrounds with the majority being Black, Hispanic, or other. See Table 2 and Table 3.

The most recent WASC report (Central Coast Adult School Staff, 2018) indicated that 356 students were enrolled in direct-instruction academic programs at CMC East and 324 at CMC West. The five VEP classes at each institution (120-student quota per class) have a potential of 1,200 participants, which is a bit deceiving since the minimum participation requirement to remain enrolled is three hours per week. See Table 4.

Most of my students were willing and capable learners. However, many confided about unpleasant experiences with teachers and other school officials that negatively affected their attitudes while in the public-school system. Others admitted to a lack of interest and the influence of habitual drug use upon their willingness and ability to perform assigned schoolwork. Regarding additional learning disorders, the CCAS administration made no consistent effort to identify students who might have disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, auditory processing disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—although such debilitating neurological conditions no doubt existed within the student population. Whenever a teacher suspected that a student might have a neurological based condition, indications could be gleaned through medical and psychiatric staff documentation, and those with the most severe conditions were facilitated by credentialed special education instructors. However, regular classroom teachers received almost no training in how to address such learning difficulties.

## THE INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

Understandably, most people would not immediately consider, as a career choice, working daily with an average of 54 convicted felons, who exhibit various personality and psychological disorders and have a history of violence. Other than one person, who worked in a different capacity at CMC prior to seeking a teaching credential, I am unaware of any colleagues who set out to become an educator inside a penal institution when they originally chose teaching as a profession. As a result, the teachers at the Central Coast Adult School are mostly those who were unable to secure a job in the public school system; had a temporary job as a public school teacher, but were not hired permanently; retired as public school teachers and administrators and decided to return to teaching; or chose to take a job as a teacher at CMC to reside in San Luis Obispo County.

When the 2011 WASC study was conducted, the CCAS staff consisted of 29 certificated (teachers) and 11 classified employees, of which 17 were male and 22 were female. As a whole, the 2011 WASC study show that the teaching staff was not as diverse as the students and often had less than nine years of experience in teaching. See Table 5 and Table 6.

The 2018 WASC report did not identify the ethnicity of the teaching staff, but according to my knowledge of the faculty members, the composition was comparable to 2012. As a further demographic, in 2014, only one member of the teaching staff was younger than 40 years of age, and most were in their 50s and 60s. Furthermore, when asked about recent interviews with 25 candidates for three academic teaching positions, a CCAS vice-principal estimated that no more than three were under the age of 35.

The need to fill teaching positions has resulted in the hiring of instructors lacking the proper credentials for the subjects they are assigned to teach. Many teachers with whom I taught held only single-subject secondary level credentials but were teaching multiple-subject classes. As a result, some teachers routinely used inmate teaching-assistants to teach subjects in which the instructors were not competent. This was especially the case in the ESL classes, which were almost universally taught by Anglo-Americans. Some teachers could not speak Spanish and often used Spanish-speaking inmate-aides to interpret and to present lessons.

Strict institution rules prohibit over-familiarization between prisoners and staff, which can cause problems when the inmate and staff association lasts for a lengthy period. Unfortunately, at different times while I worked at CMC, at least five female ABE instructors and one college teacher were dismissed due to forming close relationships with their teacher-aides, and three later married the inmate after his release from prison. Additionally, two academic teachers caught smuggling cellular telephones into the prison and a vocational education instructor discovered to be transporting tobacco for sale to inmates were either fired or forced to retire.

## THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

The Office of Correctional Education (OCE) in Sacramento oversees the CDCR education division's governing authority. The Superintendent of Correctional Education is at the top with three Associate Superintendents managing the general operations of institutional schools

throughout CDCR, which are divided into the Northern, Central, and Southern regions. At the local level, the Supervisor of Education Programs (SCEP) governs the CCAS as the principal of the school with two Supervisors of Academic Instruction and one Supervisor of Vocational Education, who are analogous to vice-principals.

Seldom during my tenure did a Central Region Associate Superintendent or an upper OCE administrator visit our school, and almost never did they spend much time speaking to individual teachers or touring the classrooms. Additionally, the OCE made two decisions that negatively impacted students.

The first decision was to change the student-to-teacher ratio and student classroom seat-time. Citing a “best practices” model—the source of which was never precisely identified—the OCE increased student-to-teacher enrollment ratios for ABE classes to 120 to 1 for more than a year. In this learning format, instructors taught 10 separate three-hour classes weekly, split between morning and afternoon sessions, each with an enrollment of 12 students attending class three hours per week. The students were then expected to complete 12 hours of homework, either in their two-man cells at CMC East or 90-man dormitories at CMC West, to fulfill their fifteen-hour weekly education program requirement. This approach proved extremely ineffective, and the school returned to the 27 to 1 teacher-student class ratio with students spending 15 hours a week in the classroom.

A second short-sighted decision the OCE made while standardizing the curriculum throughout the CDCR education system and aligning it more closely with public school guidelines, was to select reading materials for low-level and beginning readers intended for first through third grade public school children. In response to teacher complaints, the department eventually adopted reading instruction materials designed for adults.

One controversial policy the SCEP maintained during my final years of teaching the GED Test preparation class at CMC West was allowing students who claimed to be high school graduates or to have achieved a GED certificate to enroll in the program, even though they were ineligible to take the GED Test prior to checking their graduation status. In addition, the SCEP refused to allocate the 5-to-10-dollar fee for the needed transcripts to verify the inmates’ claims. Typically, due to limited financial resources, inmates are unable or unwilling to pay for transcripts. The result was that normally as many as five or six inmates sat in class unmotivated to learn—sometimes for weeks at a time—while awaiting proof of their graduation status. In one extreme case, a student was assigned to the GED class for five months before being officially confirmed as a high school graduate. As I recall, almost students who claimed to have graduated from high school or a GED program were telling the truth. I want to note that my suggestion to put those who claimed to be graduates on a waiting list pending verification before assigning them to the class was completely ignored.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER PRISON OFFICIALS, DEPARTMENTS, AND INSTITUTION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

Although technically at the top of the CDCR education division’s organizational hierarchy and in control of its operations, OCE is subject to some oversight and control by the Secretary of



CDCR as the top executive officer, and several undersecretaries and assistant secretaries. The budget management division of the California state government produced the OCE annual budget. In 2018-2019, the Adult Education division of the CDCR budgetary allotment for both academic and vocational inmate education programs was \$221,141,000, or approximately 1.82% of the entire CDCR budget of \$12,149,288,000, a significant reduction from what was provided for the education of prisoners 10 years earlier, approximately 2.7% of the overall budget (CDCR Budget, 2018). In 2009 during the Great Recession, CDCR upper management showed their control over OCE when top CDCR officials eliminated 800 academic and vocational teacher positions to cut \$250 million from the overall CDCR budget for that fiscal year.

At the local level, various CMC officials, departments, and institutional regulations and routines impact the CCAS. For example, until the early 2000s, when OCE finally gained full control, the education budget was subject to the prison warden's scrutiny, who often repurposed a

significant percentage of the education allotment for other institution needs. Furthermore, upper level administrators decided at one point to confiscate five classrooms from the education department for the custody staff and the medical department to use. In compensation, the administration agreed to construct a two-story building inside the prison exclusively for education classrooms and office space. However, funding for the project was lost when the CDCR budget was reduced during the economic downturn of the early 2000s. To my knowledge, the concept has never been revisited.

The prison custody division also influences inmate education through the control of modern technology and computer usage. CDCR inmates are strictly prohibited from any form of direct electronic communication with mainstream society via the internet, including the use of such search engines as Google and Yahoo. All computer-assisted learning-programs in the form of compact discs and flash-drives must be thoroughly analyzed by the institution technology (IT) department before use in classrooms. Once the programs have been screened, the IT department downloads them onto classroom computers when requested by the education department administration. Instructors may access the internet only on "Red Zone" computers inside a secured space such as an office.

Without question, the greatest impediment to the school's operation is student absences and class closures. Causes include disruptions in the operation of the entire prison due to fights, assaults against staff, disputes between rival prison gangs, large-scale disturbances, and suspected escape attempts. All these disruptions result in prisoners being placed on "lock-down" status for periods of a few hours, several days, or even weeks at a time. Although not common at either CMC East or West, such occurrences happen much more regularly at other institutions housing more violent criminal. For example, when I toured the education program at Soledad State Prison, one instructor informed me that his class had been closed for three entire months as a result of a long-running conflict between Northern and Southern California Hispanic prison gang members.

Along with scheduled school vacation periods, classes are closed when teachers are sick,

using discretionary days-off, attending education related meetings, or fulfilling mandatory prison-related in-service-training requirements. Students also miss class to attend medical appointments or to meet with custody or psychiatric case workers, which amount to significant periods of student absence time. For instance, according to statistics I kept from January through May 2012 on the 54 students in my two GED Test preparation classes, students missed 3,626 class hours (approximately 33%) out of the 10,935 hours that classes were in session due to a combination of custody, medical, and education issues.

The CMC medical department's optometry division should share some of the responsibility for the trouble inmates have in seeking a formal education. Students in my classes often complained of difficulty in completing reading skills assignments due to poor eyesight and the long time it took to acquire reading glasses. An investigation of the matter revealed that when a prisoner made a formal request for an eye exam, the medical department sent him an official written response stating that he could expect an appointment in approximately 120 days. Furthermore, only one optometrist was available to treat student eyesight impairment for both CMC East and West combined, and he was only available for two hours each day, two days a week. During his limited time, he scheduled appointments for an average of sixteen inmates per day—meaning that each appointment lasted approximately eight minutes. In addition, once the inmate was prescribed corrective eyewear, he would wait as long as eight months before receiving eyeglasses (Thomas, 2012).

A 2011 survey conducted among 273 inmates enrolled in academic and vocational education programs at CMC West disclosed that 172 had not received an eye exam since arriving at the prison. Of those, 86 indicated that they believed they had a visual disability. Additionally, a petition by 10 teachers requesting that their students receive priority optometric service was basically ignored by the prison's medical department. The CCAS administration's only solutions to the dilemma were to provide approximately 10 pairs of reading glasses of different magnification levels for the entire student population to check out from the education office and return the same day, and to issue credit-card-size plastic magnifiers for students to use in the classroom.

## CONCLUSIONS

The CCAS has traditionally received recognition as being one of the best in the CDCR education system. Classes are in session a greater percentage of time than those in most other California state prisons. Nonetheless, my observations in this report highlight various

serious obstacles to the school fulfilling its mission, due both to influences within its direct control as well as those of the prison and CDCR as a whole. The same issues likely impact prisoner education programs throughout California and the U.S.

With the CCAS teaching staff being more than 85% White, CCAS should actively recruit Black and Hispanic teachers, who would understand much better the cultural and language difference factors inherent in most of the student population. At the same time, CCAS should recruit more recent teacher-education-program graduates with up-to-date knowledge of learning theories and approaches. Recruitment efforts could include promoting correctional

education teaching opportunities through advertising and encouraging colleges and universities to include teacher education programs, such as the one that California State University San Bernardino specifically developed to address correctional education through course-work leading to a teaching credential. Furthermore, teachers who work inside prisons should be tested on their basic mathematics, English language, and reading comprehension skills periodically to ensure that they possess and maintain the required expertise to teach their classes. For example, the TABE and the GED Test could serve as assessment tools, and those lacking the necessary knowledge could be required to take refresher courses or specially designed in-service-training workshops.

In addition to the teaching staff issues, the CCAS administration should reevaluate the need for the Voluntary Education Programs at CMC East and West and consider expanding the number of direct-instruction classrooms. Prison inmates are some of the most educationally challenged members of American society and often require a considerable amount of assistance in understanding and absorbing aspects of the curriculum they are expected to learn. Instead, the VEP classes are designed for voluntary-participation independent-study, and in my experience, they hardly ever have more than 10 students—often fewer—attending at any point during the school day. Given that only 12 direct-instruction classes at CCAS existed at the time I retired, it means that almost half of the teaching staff did little more than record attendance and monitor classroom activities while providing little or no teaching. Also, once the economy has strengthened and more money is available, following through with the construction of the education building referred to earlier would be sensible.

Furthermore, prioritizing student access to optometric assessment before they enroll in an education program and providing economical corrective eyeglasses when needed through education department budgetary allocation would enhance students' capability to complete their academic assignments. As well, the administration should place inmates who claim to be either GED or high school graduates on a waiting list until their credential can be verified before assigning them to an education program.

Although very little research regarding the effectiveness of prison schools exist prior to the 2000s, more recent studies have demonstrated the true value of prisoner education. Two of the most cited: (1) The Three States Study, by the Correctional Education Association (CEA) published in 2009, determined that those who participated in education programs while in prison were 29% less likely to return to prison. (2) The Rand Corporation, in conjunction with CEA investigation published in 2014, reviewed 22 separate studies concerning prison education effectiveness and concluded that those who participated in school while in prison were 43% less likely to return to prison. In addition, the report estimated that for every dollar spent on prison education programs, five dollars are saved.

Since 2009, the state of California has reduced its investment in state prison education programs by approximately 0.9% and now represents a miniscule 1.82% of the entire CDCR operational budget, which demonstrates that little progress has been made towards recognizing the importance of educating prison inmates. Even though a large percentage of prisoners lack basic academic skills, research has shown that very few receive the needed education to have any reasonable opportunity of successfully reintegrating into mainstream



society once they have completed their time in prison. As noted decades ago by Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Berger, “We must accept the reality that to confine offenders behind walls without trying to change them is an expensive folly with short term benefits—winning battles while losing the war”(Taylor, 2006). To emphasize the point, data included in a 2018 special report by the U.S. Department of Justice ascertained that approximately 82% of state prisoners released in 2005 across 30 states were arrested within the first three years following their discharge from prison (Alper & Durose, 2018). Clearly, the notion that simply releasing prisoners into society after years and even decades of imprisonment, without providing them with any basic academic or occupational skills, is an absurd concept and contributes significantly to the constantly revolving door through which convicts pass in-and-out that is the reality of the American prison system.

**Robert G. Thomas** worked as an academic instructor at the Central Coast Adult School located inside the California Men’s Colony (CMC) prison in San Luis Obispo, California from September 1979 through February 2017. During his career, he instructed adult male felons in college level history and political science courses, an adaptive health education program. He also taught ABE II, ABE III, and GED® Test preparation classes. In addition, he many journal articles and co-authored the book *Effective Teaching in Correctional Settings*, published in August 2008.

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**Table 1. Educational Background of CMC East and CMC West Inmates in 2011**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>High School Diploma or GED Credential</b>	<b>Taking Academic or Vocation Program Classes</b>
CMC East	3,668	1,362 (37%)	320 (8.7%)
CMC West	2,446	749 (33%)	269 (11%)

**Table 2. Demographic Background of Students at CMC East in 2011**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>CMC East Overall Population</b>	<b>CMC East Students</b>
Black	52%	35%
White	22%	21%
Hispanic	5%	34% (Central and South American)
Other	21%	10% (largest subgroup Mexican nationals and Americans of Mexican descent, American Indian, Filipino, Pacific Islander, Asian, Croatian, and Russian)

**Table 3. Demographic Background of Students at CMC West in 2011**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>CMC West Overall Population</b>	<b>CMC West Students</b>
Black	34%	36%
White	22%	9%
Hispanic	23%	13% (Central and South American)
Other	21%	42% (largest subgroup Mexican nationals and Americans of Mexican descent, American Indian, Filipino, Pacific Islander, Asian, Croatian, and Russian)

**Table 4. Ethnicity of the 356 Students at CMC East and CMC West in 2018**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2018 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Black	53%
White	11%
Hispanic	31% (in this WASC report version including Mexican nationals and Americans of Mexican descent)
Other	7% (Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American)

**Table 5. Demographic Background of Faculty and Staff at CMC East and CMC West in 2011**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>
Black	1
White	34
Hispanic	2
Other	2

**Table 6. Tenure of Faculty and Staff Faculty and Staff at CMC East and CMC West in 2011**

From the Statistics Compiled by the CMC Education Faculty for the CCAS 2012 Western Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report

<b>Years at Position</b>	<b>Number</b>
Fewer than 9 years	21
10-14 years	8
20-24 years	4
25-29 years	2
30 years	1