

# Policy Report



## How to Unlock the Power of Prison Education

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THE ETS CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON HUMAN CAPITAL AND EDUCATION





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## Preface

A recent U.S. Department of Justice study shows that roughly two-thirds of those released from prison are re-arrested within three years.<sup>1</sup> Research on recidivism demonstrates an array of adverse impacts on the individuals who are re-arrested, their families, and the communities in which they live. High rates of recidivism are also shown to be a financial burden for governments and U.S. tax payers. It makes sense, then, that actions shown to reduce recidivism rates be adopted and fully supported across U.S. prison systems. In this new report commissioned by the ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education, author Stephen Steurer, a nationally recognized expert in prison education, argues that these actions are not happening.

Using data from two of the most recognized studies on the incarcerated population, the *U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults*<sup>2</sup> and a comprehensive evaluation by the RAND Corporation for the Bureau of Justice Assistance,<sup>3</sup> as well as insights from interviews with leading experts in the U.S. penal system and his own observations made over four decades working in prison education, Steurer explores the role of education in reentry planning and recidivism and presents a compelling case for why we need to take immediate steps to improve the education and skills of the incarcerated population.

Many incarcerated adults will face challenges upon reentry but doing so with a skills and education deficit presents a nearly insurmountable barrier in today's labor market. To demonstrate the significance of this challenge, Steurer turns to data from the *U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults* and highlights large educational deficits across this population. Thirty (30) percent of the incarcerated population in 2014 had not obtained a high school credential, which was more than twice the percentage of those not incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> Steurer digs deeper into this issue to demonstrate that even where educational attainment might be expected to signal a significant achievement, there were vast skill deficits. For example, while 64 percent of the incarcerated population in 2014 reported earning a high school credential,<sup>5</sup> two-thirds had PIAAC literacy skills that fell below what experts deem necessary for success in today's labor market.<sup>6</sup> Of additional concern is the fact that nearly one-quarter lacked the most rudimentary literacy skills.<sup>7</sup> What's more, PIAAC data revealed that those with low skills also were less likely to be engaged in employment, creating a disastrous set of circumstances for a population that already faces great obstacles upon reentry.

Equally important, research conducted by RAND® concluded that participation in educational programs while incarcerated not only reduces recidivism, this investment is cost effective in that it pays for itself in future dollars by reducing crime and reincarceration.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the findings from these two studies, no systematic plan for prison education is in place. Steurer explores some of the reasons for this in order to offer a road map for action. These include insufficient funding, lack of quality data required for educational planning, and little coherent structure for delivering these programs. In the final part of the paper, a series of pragmatic and actionable recommendations are presented across three key domains: improvements in training to emphasize the critical role of education in rehabilitation efforts, advancements in policy supportive of correctional education and skill development, and a call for an expansion of a national research agenda to inform continuous improvements for prison educational programming.

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With this paper, Steurer presents a cogent argument, which is based both on recent research and many years of experience that should underlie a well-defined set of policies required to improve correctional education nationally. What's needed next is a commitment from all levels of government, and within the systems themselves, to enact those policies.

*Irwin Kirsch, Director*

*ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education*

## Acknowledgments

There are many people who have encouraged and motivated me over the years to care about all human beings and to become a teacher. Above all, they include my parents, Leone and Stefan Steurer, who were not able to complete high school due to the Depression, for motivating me to value and pursue higher education. Next, my best friend and loving wife, Judith Friedman, who has always supported my prison work, and our wonderful loving children, Aliza, Erin, and Stephen Steurer, who pursued their own education and now encourage their own children; the many teachers over the years who motivated me to excel and to teach others, especially Fr. Thomas Tallarida and James Androff, my Notre Dame High School history and science teachers; First Lady Barbara Bush for supporting correctional education in the Barbara Bush Foundation; James Duffy, president of ABC Television and cofounder of Project Literacy U.S., for his support of correctional education and his long personal friendship; Charlie and Pauline Sullivan, the founders of CURE National, who advocate endlessly for prison reform including correctional education and the expert consultants; and colleagues and friends Lois Davis, Jon Galley, John Linton, Stefan LoBuglio, John Nally, and Michelle Tolbert.

A special thanks to Irwin Kirsch, ETS, who invited me to write this paper and for sage advice all along the way; Anita Sands, ETS, for her kind manner and encouragement with great ideas for my first drafts; Larry Hanover and Kim Fryer, ETS, for their thoughtful editing of the paper; and Donald Powers, Catherine Millett, and Kevin Williams, ETS, for their excellent review and suggestions that made the paper so much better. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Abramowitz, the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, for his very positive review and suggestions.

Finally, thank you to the many incarcerated men and women I met behind bars who motivate me because they personify the truth that *education changes lives*.

## In Memoriam

During the development of this paper, two of the experts interviewed tragically died of cancer — Jon P. Galley and John Linton. Both were very close friends who were instrumental in my choice of correctional education as a career. They will be missed dearly, and this paper is dedicated to their lasting memory.



*"... when society places a person behind walls and bars, it has an obligation — a moral obligation — to do whatever reasonably can be done to change that person before he or she goes back into the stream of society."*

*— Chief Justice Warren Burger, 1981, speech at University of Nebraska-Lincoln*



## Introduction

There were 875,000 adults paroled from federal and state institutions at the end of 2016, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. In addition, several million more individuals are released from local jails each year.<sup>9</sup>

More often than not for these populations receiving the chance at a fresh start, release is simply part of a cycle of being arrested and imprisoned again. Almost two-thirds are arrested again within three years, and they face numerous barriers to reentering society successfully.<sup>10</sup> These barriers include, but are not limited to, poor access to education and job opportunities during imprisonment.

Compounding these problems have been a trend of budgetary cutbacks that started in 2000 and a failure to provide adequate incentives for inmates to participate in education and work programs. Furthermore, sentences have been getting longer for the last few decades, meaning more and more individuals are affected. Such obstacles have immeasurable negative consequences not only for those who have been through the correctional system but their families ... and society itself.

Society says it wants those who were incarcerated to be responsible citizens after release. However, it is extraordinarily difficult for many to achieve this. While a number of American leaders have echoed the sentiment of Chief Justice Warren Burger for a moral imperative to provide educational programs to the incarcerated population in an effort to improve reentry outcomes, delivering those programs has never been a political priority. Instead, our nation has concentrated more on the public-safety side of the equation. Federal and state governments, for example, have spent exorbitant sums in recent decades to arrest, prosecute, and sentence criminals. Would those expenses be lower if even a fraction of the funds were redirected toward quality prison education programs that focus on building critical skills? After spending nearly four decades in prison education, I believe they would.

I began my career as a correctional education teacher and program administrator, eventually rising to be executive director of the Correctional Education Association (CEA) from 1986 to 2015 and serving as a consultant for correctional education after retirement. Over those years, people familiar with the prison system would regularly ask me why we can't do a better job of providing education and job programs to help improve outcomes. They saw anecdotally what the available data show empirically: More education and stronger skills are associated with better reentry outcomes, including reduced recidivism, which is a boon to public safety and budgets. So, why, as a society, don't we invest more — politically and financially — in prison educational programming?

I believe part of the answer is that we — researchers, educators, and other members of the field — have fallen short in our efforts to argue the case. Sound investments in educational programs that seek to improve the skills of the incarcerated population would be more

broadly supported by the public if they knew that, in the end, those programs would not only save taxpayer dollars now directed toward public safety, but that these investments might actually make them *more* safe.

In fact, what has struck me over the years is that although our nation has not shown a willingness to back prison education, it has supported other critical efforts to improve outcomes for the incarcerated population. For example, the government has backed evidence-based research into substance abuse programs, resulting in increased funding for programs in state and federal prison systems. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to juvenile and adult justice systems to reduce addiction and related activities, providing significant services for inmates.<sup>11</sup> A report by the Council of Economic Advisers shows that spending a dollar on such programs reduces future crime costs by as much as \$3.<sup>12</sup> However, a seminal study by the RAND Corporation indicates the return to be as much as \$5 for education programs, so it is puzzling why there has not been more federal support.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this paper, given the government's willingness to provide these other types of services for inmates, is to seek to have it take the next step and give quality, comprehensive educational programming the support it deserves. To do this, I rely on insights from previous research, including information from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)<sup>14</sup> and the aforementioned RAND study,<sup>15</sup> interviews with leading experts in the U.S. penal system,<sup>16</sup> as well as my own observations. My argument opens with a brief discussion on why the incarcerated population needs investments that improve their education and skill levels and then turns to key issues and barriers that confound a national commitment to, and expansion of, educational programming in the prisons. In the final section of the paper, I set forth a series of practical policy recommendations aimed at improving the scope and effectiveness of correctional educational programs at all levels – federal, state, and local. The report is mainly focused on incarcerated adults, but it addresses some issues related to juveniles as well since the problem is not limited to one population or the other.

## The Current Backdrop: Skills and the Incarcerated Population

For the incarcerated population, it's impossible to overstate the need to attain skills given the rapid changes in recent decades in our society and labor market. Much has been written about the ascendance of robots and artificial intelligence and the vast impact these technologies are having on the labor force of today and tomorrow.<sup>17</sup> These vast developments have profoundly changed what skills, training, and education are necessary for successful reentry.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1990s and again in the early 2000s, two large-scale assessments of adult literacy in America were conducted that proved of great assistance to researchers studying these issues. The National Adult Literacy Survey (1992) and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003) included data not just on adults in general but on those who were incarcerated. Educational Testing Service (ETS) followed up each release with reports using that data: *Captive Students: Education and Training in America's Prisons* (1996) and *Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population* (2006).<sup>19</sup> Both reports highlighted the need for increased educational programming in the prisons — work that I seek to build on here. The first report pointed out that even though two-thirds of the

formerly incarcerated population in the United States could not perform basic tasks such as writing a letter to explain a billing error or calculating miles per gallon, only 30 percent of them had been to education classes offered behind bars.<sup>20</sup> The second described how the surging rate of incarceration meant large numbers of the formerly incarcerated population would reenter society with three strikes against them: difficulty finding a job with a living wage, lack of the kind of experience that employers value, and employer reluctance to hire formerly incarcerated individuals.<sup>21</sup> So, while the data across these large-scale assessments are not statistically comparable, they nevertheless paint a similar picture that deficiencies in education and skills among America's incarcerated adults are severe. This paper uses analysis of PIAAC data to demonstrate with much greater specificity the kinds of educational and workplace skill deficiencies identified in the previous two ETS studies that need to be addressed in the correctional population in order for incarcerated individuals to be successful after release.

In the same year, RAND Corporation released a key report that provided another critical component of the story, illustrating the payoff when we focus on the education of those people in prison. *How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation* presented evidence that when the incarcerated population participates in educational programs, there are significant reductions in recidivism.<sup>22</sup> Even more importantly, for those correctional and political leaders who do not generally support correctional education programs, RAND concluded that the investment paid for itself several times over in future dollars saved by reducing crime and reincarceration.<sup>23</sup>

## The Limited Federal Role in Correctional Education

To help the incarcerated population attain the necessary skills, funding is a critical element, as is a good structure for delivering educational programs. Most correctional education funding comes from state and county budgets. This situation comes with the advantage of local control for correctional education. However, it comes at the price of having little of a broad national effort behind quality educational programming.<sup>24</sup> It also creates a fragmented structure for delivering that education across the 50 states.

Foremost among the handful of federal programs is the U.S. Department of Justice's investment toward emphasizing literacy as well as a high school equivalency credential or career education. These efforts are overseen by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, where career education programs are often linked to jobs in its prison industries program.

States also are able to access certain federal grant funds for education programs for the incarcerated population. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds can be used for special education programs for incarcerated youth in juvenile facilities, as well as youth and young adults up to the age of 22 in adult facilities — although, ironically, the bureau was exempted from IDEA educational requirements for students with learning disabilities. The funding for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) and the Vocational and Technical Education Act (better known as the Perkins Act) come through other federal departments and allow states to invest a small percentage of dedicated funds in state and county correctional education programs.

Previously, the federal government had provided general support for postsecondary education for the incarcerated population in federal and state prisons. However, in 1994, during the "get tough on crime" period under the Clinton administration,

eligibility for federal Pell grants for postsecondary education was eliminated for the incarcerated population. In 2015, during the Obama administration, a Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative was initiated that brought the program back to an extent, allowing the Federal Bureau of Prisons and states to apply for Pell grants. A total of 65 colleges in 27 states received awards. The program has continued and been expanded under the Trump administration.

## Definition of Correctional Education

Since federal funding in corrections is relatively small, one consequence of those limited dollars should not be a surprise: the absence of an overall federal definition of correctional education or what such a program entails. In fact, each state has its own program, and there are a variety of different administrative models.<sup>25</sup> These circumstances prevent arriving at a definition of correctional education that is uniform and would fit the various state programs.

Although summarizing program structures into a general model may not be possible, there nevertheless is some commonality. These elements can be found across most prison systems:

- adult skills in reading, mathematics, and writing in English (including English as a second language for nonnative speakers), as measured by commercially available skills and grade-level tests leading to high school program placement
- adult secondary education, including a regular high school diploma or a high school equivalency completion, as certified by passing the nationally accepted high school equivalency exams (the GED® test, the *HiSET*® exam,<sup>26</sup> or the TASC™ test), as well vocational or career education courses certified by locally developed tests
- computer skills used in society and the workplace, as certified by software program completion
- training in general employment skills and specific job or industry skills, as certified by nationally accepted industry exams
- postsecondary education, including college-level instruction provided by local or state colleges and community colleges, leading to certificates of completion or associate or bachelor's degrees

On the surface, this might seem like the broad outlines of an effective program to provide skills and education. But it's just that, an outline — one that is full of holes. Not the least of them is a lack of data on the education and skill levels of the incarcerated population, as well as a systemwide commitment to ensure programs are of sufficient scope to improve skills and quality.

Looking at educational data, information on the *level* of education of the incarcerated population is typically gathered at the time of entry into the prison system. However, it is usually general in nature and frequently insufficient, exemplified by blanket statements in official records such as "high school dropout," "finished high school," or "passed a high school equivalency test." This leads to situations where prison educators have limited information from which to work and plan educational and workforce programs.

**Anthony** is a very likable, hard-working 30-year-old man who badly wanted to get his high school equivalency degree.<sup>27</sup> He had presented no behavioral problems since entering prison but said he had a rocky career as a young troublemaker who was taken out of regular high school, enrolled in an alternative high school, dropped out, got into legal trouble, and ended up in a juvenile facility. Since then, he had been working very diligently on his English, science, and social studies high school equivalency subtests, yet he had not been able to pass the mathematics subtest. He said this was because he needed more time to work through the questions. Anthony had an individualized education plan when he attended public school because of a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The GED Testing Service, an agency that administers high school equivalency exams, allows extended time for students who provide proof of a disability, but public school special education records are often sealed, and many are destroyed after seven years, so it is difficult to prove the existence of a learning disability. As a result, this lack of data prevented him, like many others, from getting needed services and accommodations.

Nevertheless, general educational attainment data provides some basic insights into the background of those who are imprisoned.

In 2014, as a supplement to the U.S. PIAAC assessment, which was a survey of skills of the overall adult population, a new set of data on the incarcerated population was collected via the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults.<sup>28</sup> While the study focused on the levels of skills in key domains, including literacy and numeracy, among the incarcerated population, it also provided a rich collection of background data, including educational attainment information.

According to PIAAC data,<sup>29</sup> nearly two-thirds of the incarcerated population nationally in 2014 entered prison having graduated high school (or equivalent), and roughly 6 percent had obtained some level of postsecondary education (4 percent earning an associate degree, 2 percent earning a bachelor's or above.) In comparison, 9 percent of the general population had earned an associate degree, and 28 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or higher (see Table 1). These are stark differences in degree attainment.

When the percentage of the incarcerated population is compared to the household populations who had not completed high school (or earned an equivalent degree), the differences are dramatic: 30 percent of the incarcerated population had not obtained a high school degree or equivalent, according to PIAAC, compared to 14 percent of the general population, for a greater than 2-to-1 ratio.

**Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Adults by Educational Attainment for Prison and Household Populations: 2014**

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	U.S. PRISON	U.S. HOUSEHOLD
<b>Below high school</b>	30*	14
<b>High school credential</b>	64*	50
<b>Associate's degree</b>	4*	9
<b>Bachelor's degree</b>	1*	17
<b>Graduate or professional degree</b>	1*	11

\* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the comparison category, U.S. Household.

Source: Bobby D. Rampey, Shelley Keiper, Leyla Mohadjer, Tom Krenzke, Jianzhu Li, Nina Thornton, Jacquie Hogan, Holly Xie, and Stephen Provasnik, *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: 2014*, NCES 2016-040 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), Table 1.1, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

Viewing the educational needs of the incarcerated population through the lens of educational attainment alone fails to capture the deeper challenges faced by many who are incarcerated, a fact that becomes clear in the next section where I explore the level of skills for the incarcerated population by degree attainment using data from PIAAC.<sup>30</sup>

## Insights from PIAAC

PIAAC is designed to measure the distribution and level of ability on a series of tasks across three key skill domains — literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology rich environments.<sup>31</sup> Higher levels of skills in these domains have been shown across numerous studies to be correlated with better education, health, social and labor-market outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

Responses on the PIAAC assessment are represented on a 500-point scale. In addition to providing average scores, PIAAC presents the percentages of the population across five levels of proficiency, from a high of level 5 to a low of "below level 1" (see Appendix B for more detail on PIAAC literacy and numeracy proficiency levels). Besides providing means and percentages at proficiency levels, PIAAC permits an analysis of the skills of the incarcerated population by an array of background variables including level of education and work experience.

The mean PIAAC literacy score for the U.S. incarcerated population, at 249, was 21 points lower than that for the general population (270).<sup>33</sup> The distribution of skills among the incarcerated population versus the U.S. household population shows there is a much larger share of the prison population with what experts deem to be very low literacy — skills that fall at or below level 1 on the PIAAC literacy scale. Nearly 30 percent of the incarcerated population had very low literacy skills compared to 19 percent of the U.S. household population.<sup>34</sup> Those who perform in this category are thought to lack the "most basic information-processing skills considered necessary to succeed in today's world."<sup>35</sup>

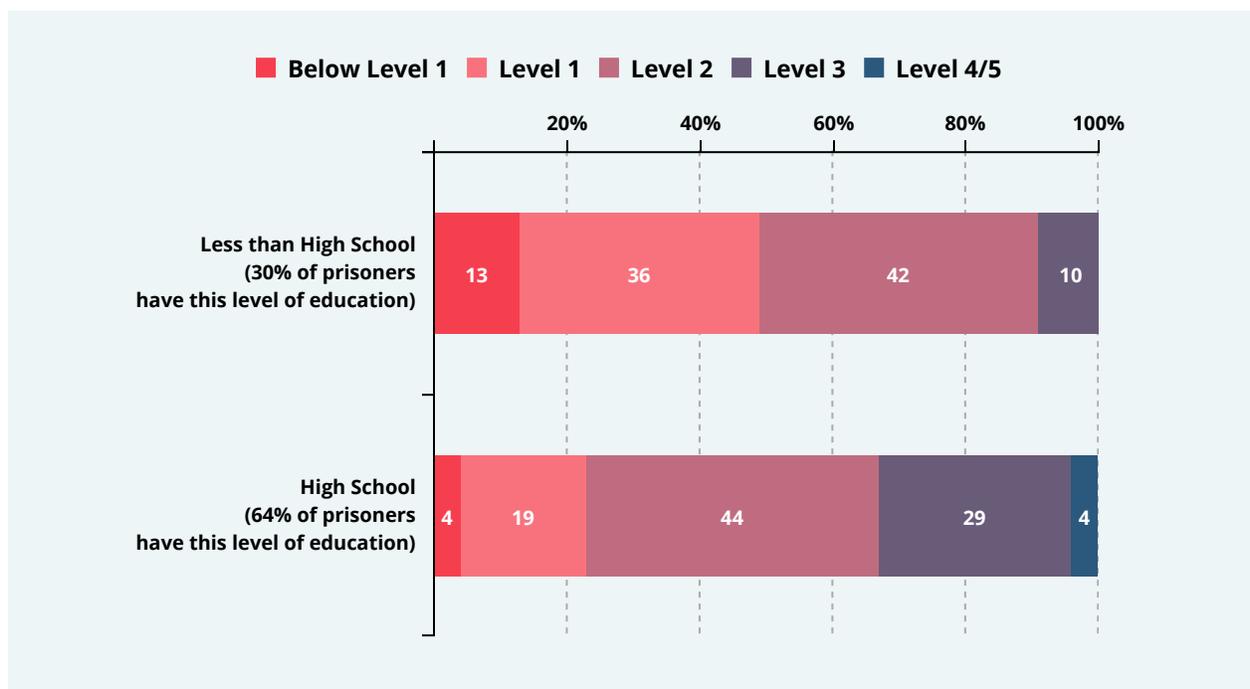
## The Education and Skills of America's Incarcerated Population

Digging deeper, there are even more troubling results for the incarcerated population when the relationship of skills to educational attainment is considered. Figure 1 presents the distribution by PIAAC literacy proficiency level for the incarcerated population for those whose highest level of education is a high school degree (or equivalent) and for those who did not complete a high school degree. As noted earlier, 94 percent of the U.S. prison population fall into these two educational levels.

According to PIAAC, two-thirds of the incarcerated population with a high school degree (or equivalent) scored at or below level 2 in literacy — which experts consider below the minimum level necessary for success in today's workplace.<sup>36</sup> And, worse, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) performed at levels deemed to be *very low* — despite having a diploma.<sup>37</sup>

The data also showed that 90 percent of those without a high school credential performed at level 2 or below on the PIAAC literacy scale; half of this group had very low literacy skills (level 1 or below).

**Figure 1: Percentage of Incarcerated Adults at Each Proficiency on the PIAAC Literacy Scale by Select Educational Attainment Status: 2014**



Note: Totals for "Less than High School" do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014.

These findings beg a deeper understanding of the distribution of not just educational attainment, but skill levels, across the incarcerated population. I believe — and the PIAAC data support — that meeting incarcerated individuals where they are in terms of their current levels of skills, independent of their educational degrees or certificates, and

developing strategic programs and interventions to build their skill capacity would be immensely valuable toward their reentry efforts. Such efforts could potentially reduce overall recidivism rates as well.

## Work Experience and Skills of America's Incarcerated Population

In addition to information on educational level, PIAAC collects data on the work experience and skills of the incarcerated population prior to and during incarceration.<sup>38</sup>

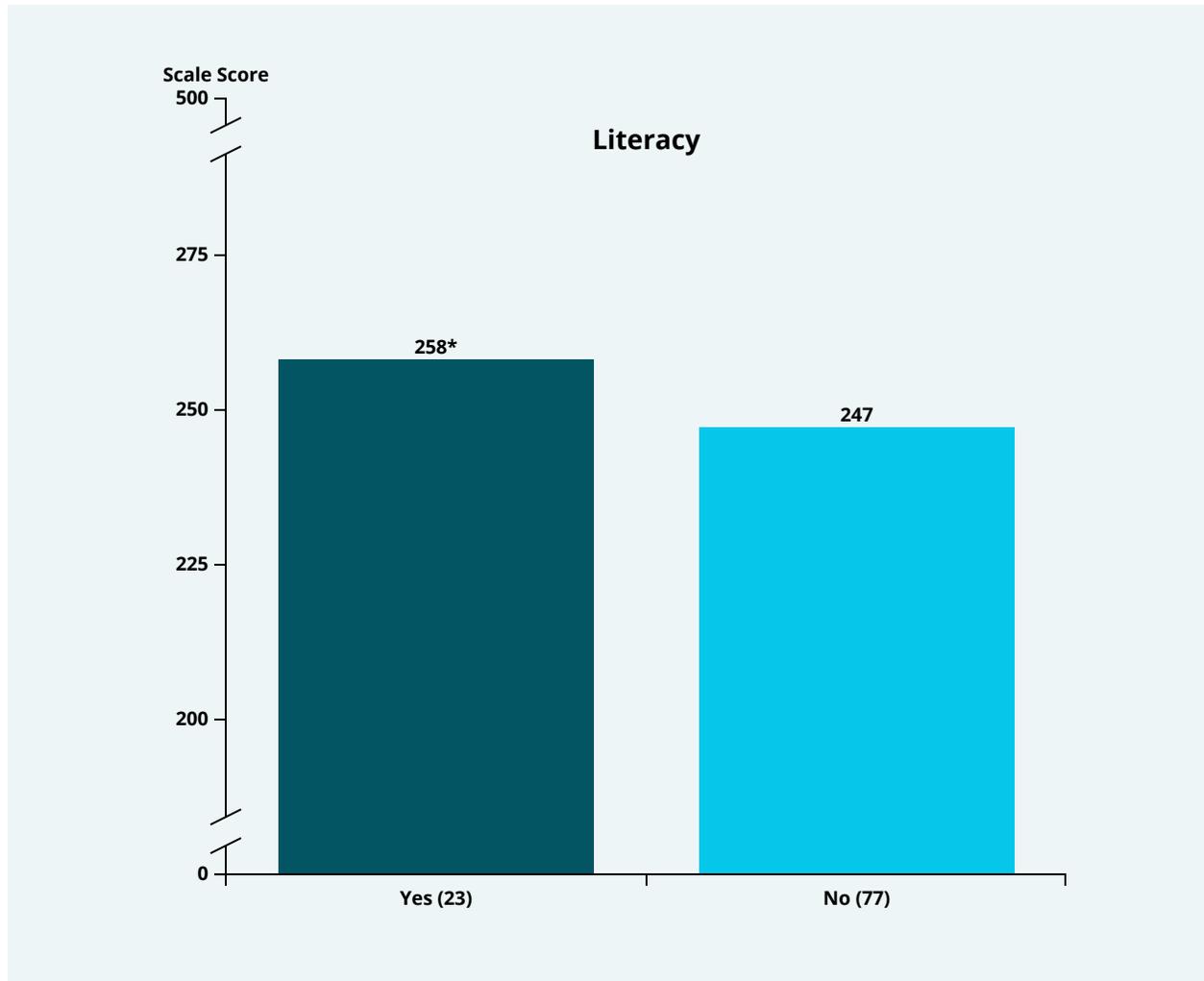
Before being incarcerated, PIAAC shows a majority of inmates had some work experience. In fact, two-thirds (65 percent) worked full or part time in the year prior to incarceration (49 percent full time, 16 percent part time), while 19 percent were unemployed.<sup>39</sup> Sixty-eight percent of those with a high school credential and 60 percent of those who did not earn a high school credential reported having been employed full or part time prior to incarceration.<sup>40</sup>

The pattern of overall employment prior to incarceration largely continued while in prison. Overall, 61 percent of the incarcerated population held a prison job at the time of the PIAAC assessment. When examined by level of education, PIAAC showed that over two-thirds (67 percent) of those with a high school credential had a prison job, while less than half (48 percent) of those who did not have a high school credential were employed in prison.<sup>41</sup>

Research using PIAAC data for the general population suggests that those with low literacy and numeracy skills are much less engaged in employment over their potential working lives than those with higher ones.<sup>42</sup> This finding holds true for the incarcerated population as well. Those who reported currently having a job while in prison had, on average, stronger PIAAC literacy skills than their peers without jobs.<sup>43</sup>

Also, of interest are the data on job training programs for the incarcerated population. Here PIAAC findings show about one-quarter (23 percent) participated in job training programs during their current prison term.<sup>44</sup> As Figure 2 shows, participants who had engaged in job training scored higher on average in literacy than those who had not.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 2: Average Scores of Incarcerated Adults on the PIAAC Literacy Scale, by Whether They Have Participated in a Job Skills or Job Training Program During their Current Incarceration: 2014**



\* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the comparison category, incarcerated adults responding "No."

Note: In the figure, percentages of incarcerated adults in each response category are shown in parentheses beneath the applicable bar.

Source: Adapted from Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*. Data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014.

Ultimately, data from PIAAC reveal a series of critical findings regarding skills, education, and work experience. First, a large percentage of the incarcerated population has very low literacy skills. Prison systems that rely exclusively on educational attainment indicators to measure what inmates have in terms of training and skills run the risk of vastly underestimating and misunderstanding this population's needs.<sup>46</sup> In addition, while all can benefit from training and education during their time in prison, it's those with higher level skills who tend to pursue those opportunities — a situation that can be seen in terms of both educational opportunities as well as in employment. In other words, skills beget skills.

In the next section, the discussion focuses on how inroads must be made for all groups of incarcerated adults while recognizing that the needs of those with higher skill levels differ from those without. To do this, however, better data on skills and education are essential to match these individuals with the types of educational and training opportunities geared to their needs.

## Benefits of Focusing on Education and Work Skills

### Enhancing Reentry Planning

It is logical to think that targeting educational programming to the needs of incarcerated individuals would not only vastly improve their educational and job skills, but reentry planning and outcomes. The very term "reentry job-preparation program," as covered under The Second Chance Act of 2007, implies that a high school education and adequate skills are needed to engage in training for a job.

Unfortunately, most correctional staff are not trained to understand the educational and skill gaps that could — and should — be addressed during imprisonment. Correctional staff who administer prison programs instead are usually trained in the areas of criminology, social work, or counseling. Because of the general movement to reduce recidivism by improving job acquisition after release, some enlightened correctional administrators tend to think of education as an integral piece of the entire rehabilitation program, which also includes mental health services and substance-abuse and reentry programs, all of which target the inmate's personal growth and development in hopes they will stay out of prison after release.

Stefan LoBuglio, a nationally recognized reentry specialist and former chief of prerelease in Montgomery County, Maryland, as well as the former head of the Council of State Governments Reentry Program, was interviewed for this paper. He believes that most correctional institutions fail not only to identify the educational needs of incarcerated individuals in a timely and comprehensive manner at intake but to take advantage of the opportunity to provide educational programming throughout an individual's incarceration. Said LoBuglio: "Over the past 20 years, interest and innovation in reentry services for incarcerated individuals has risen dramatically in this country, yet ironically, correctional education — the mainstay of correctional rehabilitation since the founding of jails in this country in the late 1700s — has not ridden this increased wave of support."

LoBuglio also argued that there is a "mistaken perception that correctional education is mainly a long-term strategy," while "reentry requires shorter term interventions focused on more immediate concerns of housing, employment, drug treatment, mental health care, family engagement, and programs to address 'criminal thinking' — often called cognitive behavioral programs." Education, stated LoBuglio, is perceived as more expensive than other programs because of the space, credentialed personnel, materials, and technology involved. In other words, he argued, it seems that short-term budget difficulties, not long-term program savings from the impact on lower recidivism, often determine how correctional administrators make program choices.

Given the PIAAC data, though, it's clear that more attention needs to be paid to helping prison and jail administrators and staff understand educational needs more deeply, particularly the skill deficits among inmates. That information, in turn, can be used to develop programs that will help improve the skills needed for successful reentry. Thus, it is critical to collect better educational and skill background information in correctional databases. To

facilitate this, LoBuglio recommended "that correctional institutions screen and assess all individuals for their educational needs at intake and immediately place them in appropriate educational programs. This screening and assessment process would align with screenings and assessments for criminogenic risk and needs, mental health, and substance-use disorders that have been implemented as the cornerstone of all effective reentry strategies."

LoBuglio recommended use of a brief, targeted 10-question education and skill reentry screening tool included in the reentry planning process, one that is much like the widely used Brief Jail Mental Health Screen.<sup>47</sup> Such a tool would provide crucial information about an inmate's school experience, employment history, skill level, and educational needs. He said it could be given as part of the initial classification and orientation given when individuals enter a correctional institution.

LoBuglio also urged the development of a workforce "preparedness index" to rate an individual's preparation to enter the workforce. He recommended that the new federal First Step Act screening requirement specifically include education/skills and career information.<sup>48</sup> From my viewpoint, an "educational preparedness index" should include information about completion or dropout history; learning disability history; current math, reading, and computer-skill levels; previous part-time or full-time jobs; job or career interests; and so on. Educational skill assessment should not be done right at the beginning of incarceration because those test scores are not reliable. I believe it best to wait to conduct formal assessments after the initial traumatization of an individual from incarceration has receded.

To be successful, information gathered by these tools, along with service plans, progress reports, and performance metrics, must be shared appropriately and electronically among correctional agencies and service providers involved in carrying out reentry plans.<sup>49</sup>

## Barriers to Educational Reform in U.S. Prisons

The payoff in terms of reduced recidivism for the initiatives discussed here are potentially large. By reviewing the primary empirical studies over the past couple of decades and ranking them by statistical rigor, RAND was able to show that inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of going back to prison than inmates who did not.<sup>50</sup> RAND's conclusion was based on a review of the best studies of recidivism and employment success. On the downside, it found only 8 of 68 studies met the highest quality research standards used in criminal justice to qualify as evidence-based research.

Significant barriers to implementing a systemic approach to prison education remain, and from a professional vantage point, each is rooted in a lack of understanding of the nature of the problem. Below, based on the RAND research and PIAAC data, as well as discussions with the experts interviewed for this study, are several key barriers that must be overcome to improve educational and skill levels for the incarcerated population. Doing so would be beneficial not only for those in our prison systems as they return to civilian life but to society in general because lower recidivism means less crime; reduced burdens for police, courts and prisons; and safer communities.

## Bureaucratic and Associated Obstacles

Overall, based on the PIAAC and RAND research, the correctional population is among the least equipped group for success in the market for jobs requiring good literacy skills. However, funding such programs is a bigger obstacle than ever. As discussed in the 2014 RAND study, substantial cutbacks in state and federal funding for correctional education have been widely adopted, triggered in large measure by the 2008 recession. This, I believe, is in stark contrast to what we should be doing. Instead of cutbacks, we should be making meaningful, strategic investments in remedial programming that raises the levels of skills among the incarcerated population and can, in turn, improve reentry success and reduce recidivism.

Unfortunately, there are additional obstacles as well. Due to the lack of standardization among the various empirical studies reviewed by RAND, the researchers were not able to identify the most effective educational programs, only that educational programs were effective in the aggregate.<sup>51</sup> The PIAAC study does, however, offer insights on how to address and develop sensible solutions for improving outcomes. By providing information on the key skill domains of literacy and numeracy, PIAAC data can provide valuable guidance for correctional organizations wanting to develop robust and relevant programming that addresses deficits where they exist.<sup>52</sup>

The two stories provided here are examples of the kinds of obstacles that play out in prisons today. In both instances, there are individuals who are blocked from developing the skills they need.

**Joel** is like many incarcerated individuals with very low skills. No one would have known that Joel, who came into jail with a high school diploma, had low-level reading and mathematics skills if it weren't for his failing a simple in-house reading screen needed to qualify for the nationally recognized ServSafe culinary course. Passage is required to work in a prison kitchen or any restaurant in the community.

Commonly used standardized measures of readability indicate the ServSafe textbook was written at a 9<sup>th</sup>- to 10<sup>th</sup>-grade reading level. Many, if not most, incarcerated individuals do not read at a 12<sup>th</sup>-grade level, let alone 10<sup>th</sup>. Yet these individuals often spend their time in prison without the educational remediation that could potentially qualify them for career education that leads to decent paying jobs outside the walls.

Joel is an example of offenders with a high school diploma who need remediation to even qualify for job training. However, since he has a verified high school diploma, he is unlikely to be placed in such a program. As a result, if he is placed in reentry programs that require good reading and mathematics skills, his struggles upon release likely will continue.

**Emily** is a 23-year-old bilingual woman (English and Spanish) with a high school equivalency credential, plus a year and a half of community college credits. She has been in and out of juvenile and adult facilities.

She was interested in retaking the the high school equivalency mathematics exam, which she had barely passed on her first attempt, because of the difficulty she had in trying to pass college-level mathematics-related courses for jobs she would like. However, the case manager told her and me that high school equivalency classes were only open to those who did not have an equivalent credential. In other words, an institutional policy prohibited her placement in the class. It did not matter that there was room in the class and Emily had time after her job to attend.

In many facilities, there are no education classes beyond high school equivalency courses, and certainly no remedial classes for students who barely pass high school equivalency tests.

Emily typifies a large percentage of people who are not yet ready for success in academic or technical college courses because of their low skills, even when they have passed a high school equivalency exam.

## Correctional Prison Standards

Another issue affecting efforts to improve education for the imprisoned are the inadequately enforced standards for such programs. The correctional accreditation process is managed by the American Correctional Association (ACA), endorsed by the U.S. Department of Justice and many state public safety and justice departments, and regularly cited by an array of state and federal courts in legal decisions. Basically, most state and federal correctional systems attempt to adhere to these performance-based standards for adult correctional and juvenile institutions as well as community corrections. In practice, adherence varies widely.

Generally, the only mandatory ACA standards relate to health and safety.<sup>53</sup> Among the many nonmandatory ACA standards are 14 that govern academic and vocational education programs. While any institution with an inmate education program will have to undergo an ACA audit, it is possible to become ACA accredited without meeting any of these education standards. The most that can happen is for an auditing team to issue a recommendation for an institution to improve its education program.

Within the ACA standards, there are essentially two important ones for education: teacher certification and state certification of the educational programs, according to Jon Galley, a former Maryland commissioner of corrections and a lifelong ACA auditor and trainer (who was interviewed for this paper). In both Galley's experience and my own, however, many teachers in American prisons are not certified in the state where they teach. In other words, they would not be qualified to teach in public or private school systems but can teach in a prison.

The subset of teachers certified in special education is even smaller, which is a particular problem when considering the large number of correctional education students with learning disabilities. By law, under IDEA, the federal requirement must provide inmates in juvenile institutions (through age 21) with special education services. In practice, with so few certified special education teachers, this legal requirement is not met. As far as it relates to the ACA, it's yet another nonmandatory standard. For adult facilities, there is no ACA standard for special education services even though these facilities hold many youths who should be covered. Youth who were tried as adults and incarcerated in adult facilities are still eligible for special education services as if they had been identified under IDEA before going to prison. There has been a great deal of litigation over the years in many states on special education services.<sup>54</sup>

The Correctional Education Association (CEA), a national group of teachers, created education standards about 40 years ago that were subsequently endorsed by ACA around 1995 (I was the executive director of CEA then). This meant that if a correctional institution had been audited and accredited by CEA, ACA would accept the more extensive CEA certification in lieu of having to meet the 14 ACA standards for education. Unfortunately, few states endorse these more stringent CEA standards.

## Failure to Incentivize Education Participation

While there are obstacles toward improving correctional education, a movement to offer incentives to incarcerated students to participate in education programs has gained some momentum. This is reflected in statistics published by the National Conference of State Legislatures, which has published a chart summarizing the "good time" earned that has been established by law in all 50 states.<sup>55</sup> John Nally, who is the director of education for the

Indiana Department of Correction and was interviewed for this paper, has worked diligently to encourage educational participation in Indiana, a state with a strong system of incentives for those participating in and completing education programs.

Nally believes his state's low rate of recidivism is clearly tied to its award of 1 to 6 months off a sentence for completing a vocational educational program, with a high school equivalency degree cutting 6 months off a sentence, and an associate or bachelor's degree reducing a sentence by a full year. There are 17 other states with similar incentives. "All the research shows that as education (completion) goes up, recidivism goes down," said Nally, referring to the 2014 RAND study. "So why not guide them with incentives to get into school? When they do pass their program, they are starting to think differently. Our low recidivism rate (34 percent) probably has to do with incentivizing education. ... We can recruit people more easily."

However — and this is a key caveat — although these incentives may result in a degree or certificate, without a systematic understanding and collection of the education and skills acquired along with recidivism data, the overall reentry payoff from participation of incarcerated students cannot be clearly measured.

Even in the absence of federal requirements, many correctional systems do offer adult basic and high school equivalency education as well as a number of career technology programs. However, there are usually more inmates than program slots available. "Most systems say they need more programs, but others complain of low enrollment," Nally said. "The reasons vary, but the lack of self-motivation and system incentives have been cited by a number of systems. A final thought: For many, even before winding up in prison, confidence about finding a good job was low. They lacked credentials, skills, or both, so the only jobs open to them were in less desirable positions where they earned little money. Training behind bars that leads to higher paying jobs might encourage enrollment. Unfortunately, many lack the mathematics, reading, and computer skills needed to succeed in these career-level classes.

## Reentry and Job Acquisition

As the studies show, many people will leave prison as they entered it: with low mathematics, reading, and writing skills, and little or no computer skills.

These individuals will struggle to find a living wage and employment after release, said Michelle Tolbert, an expert on correctional education from RTI International who was interviewed for this paper and is the author of an RTI study on reentry that provides guidelines for education.<sup>56</sup> Many, if not most, employers will not even consider hiring a formerly incarcerated individual, but especially one who cannot read well, do basic mathematics, or apply basic computer skills.

Many of those who were able to obtain a high school equivalency while incarcerated still will likely face other impediments to obtaining gainful employment and therefore face a higher risk of recidivism.<sup>57</sup> Often, state and federal laws include "punitive blocks"—restrictions that keep inmates from receiving essential social services, housing support, medical aid, and job services after release. Frequently, these laws block exoffenders from even applying for a job despite having all the other essential skills and qualifications; professional and business practices toward exoffenders frequently have the same effect. This situation persists despite a strong national effort to eliminate these blocks. For example, the federal Second Chance Act has gone a long way toward revealing how unfairly exoffenders are treated in the job market and other areas; it provides new resources to expand opportunities.<sup>58</sup>

There is an effort at most prisons to provide at least minimal prerelease information to help formerly incarcerated individuals find financial resources and job opportunities as well as ways to deal with their criminal record in the face of these multiple roadblocks and general prejudice. Normally, however, this vital information never gets to many of those being released. Furthermore, all too often, parole authorities do not follow up with support services for former inmates in the community trying to get by, a time when these exoffenders most need the help that could be the difference between them committing another crime or not. While there is a strong state and federal effort to create better reentry programs, most are weak or nonexistent. For example, only a handful of local jails offer one-stop career centers sponsored by state departments of labor throughout the United States.

Lois Davis and Michelle Tolbert, coauthors of the RAND report *Evaluation of North Carolina's Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program*, indicate that North Carolina has seen success in reducing recidivism. In an interview for this paper, Tolbert stated that success has come "through more coordinated support from reentry staff and enhanced community resources. This resulted from the state providing local reentry council with funding and other support to work directly with incarcerated students six months prior to release and for up to two years post-release." Housing, employment, and transportation had been the three pillars of North Carolina's reentry program, but now education is the fourth.<sup>59</sup> This model may hold valuable insights for prison systems across the country.

## Educational Technology

In addition to correctional departments not investing enough in traditional classroom instruction, another barrier for the success of incarcerated individuals is a lack of up-to-date instruction on the use and application of technology. Most are prohibited from using the internet to communicate with the outside world and, as a result, cannot keep up with the rapid changes in technology that affect the lives of everyone in the free world. Many correctional administrators are afraid of how those in prison will use technology, including to communicate with gang members or view pornography. This paper's opening quote from Justice Burger clearly implied that there was a strong public belief that incarcerated individuals did not deserve the same education as others. The lack of insufficient funding and technology in recent decades indicates that this attitude is still strong. The unfortunate result is that when they are released from prison, they are at an even greater disadvantage when searching for jobs, most of which now require high levels of technology skills.<sup>60</sup>

Davis and Tolbert highlight the North Carolina Pathways program as one example of technology in education that can be a catalyst for change. With technology an integral piece of postsecondary education in general, North Carolina has made the internet an integral piece of college programs. In fact, North Carolina staff developed their own intranet platform (called i-Net) to support education in prison and provide limited but crucial internet access.<sup>61</sup>

There are other successful programs and projects that provide examples of the great potential of educational technology as well. The Center for the Application of Instructional Technologies at Western Illinois University developed i-Pathways to provide adult basic and high school equivalency education for the free adult education community.<sup>62</sup> Many community college systems adopted this internet-based program for their college computer laboratories. Also, the Illinois Department of Corrections made use of the program upon initiating a statewide secure intranet connection in its correctional facilities. The i-Pathways program contains its own instructional management system with individual assessment, progress reports, and tracking so each student can save and continue work as he or she progresses from one facility to the next through the Illinois correctional system. The lack of

security issues and i-Pathways' long-term educational success have made it a model for other states to develop secure instructional and record-keeping systems. The i-Pathways program has also been deployed in some other state and local facilities.

But there are issues related to i-Pathways that remain. For example, the Howard County Detention Center in Maryland created its own firewalled connection to i-Pathways four years ago for its educational computer lab.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, neither i-Pathways or the data generated by Howard Community College, which has a teacher on site four days a week for a high school equivalency program, were connected directly to the reentry planning process. These barriers are typical of most prisons and jails across the country.

Outside of correctional systems, there is an unlimited digital treasure of high quality and free open-source books, educational materials, and software. The installation of such digital educational materials in prison computer labs, tablets, and secure laptops could provide an excellent cost-free opportunity for correctional education programs. For example, for many years, a large number of private companies have been contracting with correctional agencies to provide recreational and educational technology directly to inmates for MP3 music players and tablets. Unfortunately, these resources usually have to be downloaded by inmates from proprietary kiosks onto their portable devices for a fee usually borne by the inmate or family.<sup>64</sup> The costs include telephone calls, secure emails, and banking services. State correctional education directors indicate that private contractors are beginning to charge inmates a fee for otherwise free, open-source education materials and books.

One example of how these fees could be eliminated comes from World Possible,<sup>65</sup> which has developed laptops stripped of internet capability and provides secure plug-and-play servers that have been deployed in correctional settings. The program provides access to free open-source software programs and digital materials. World Possible charges a reasonably low rate for the laptops and servers but does not charge for the materials. However, state correctional education directors like John Nally of Indiana point out that many correctional systems have exclusive contracts with private technology companies to run their secure technology service and charge significant user fees for the books and materials.<sup>66</sup> In addition, some contracts restrict the content of stand-alone computer labs not connected to the internet and also prohibit secure internet connections to conduct online exams for high school equivalency assessment, career credentials, and college courses.

Fortunately, the increased awareness of the integrity of firewalls and other security application is helping to reduce the fear and reluctance of correctional agencies to provide secure technology and internet access to incarcerated students (and, hopefully, these fees will start to go by the wayside).

Finally, just prior to publication, internet connectivity and online courses became even more crucial due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to reports from most states, correctional systems have temporarily closed down nonessential programs, particularly those that require inmates to meet with institutional staff and outside program providers, while K-12 and college programs in the general community are adding online instruction at almost all levels. Without a change in attitude and the introduction of secure online instruction, federal and state prisons will fall even further behind students in the free community.

## Postsecondary Education Issues

There is a bright spot in correctional education. In fact, John Linton, who was director of the Office of Correctional Education at the U.S. Department of Education and was interviewed for this paper, called new support for increased postsecondary education funding for college a promising development. Since the elimination of Pell grants for inmates in 1994, only a small number of states had continued limited support for postsecondary education. In the last few years, however, there has been a noticeable shift in attitude about providing college education for offenders. Experimental Pell grant projects (so-called X-grants) started during the second Obama administration and were due to expire at the end of three years. But they have continued under the Trump administration and are being expanded by the U.S. Department of Education.

As a result of this explicit support, these "Second Chance Pell grants" have been increasing, with more money being given to current college programs and some new ones. At the same time, U.S. Senator Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) has been building bipartisan support for the Restoring Education And Learning (REAL) Act, which would fully restore Pell grants for inmates.

Meantime, Congress has been talking about the proposed Job Opportunity and Business Services (JOBS) Act, which could make Pell grants available to a host of new and short-term career-oriented postsecondary educational programs. Such programs would be helpful for inmates preparing to leave and join the workforce.<sup>67</sup> Expanding Pell grants to short-term job training is supported by community colleges and business groups, but controversial in the larger college community. Correctional institutions, however, would benefit if such programs were funded.<sup>68</sup>

Whatever the outcome of these legislative efforts, the fact that Pell grants for incarcerated individuals are under consideration and that there is growing support for postsecondary education in prisons overall indicates an important positive shift in public attitudes toward correctional education. As with educational technology, however, any efforts to improve outcomes for the incarcerated population must be rooted in improving skills. The PIAAC studies have demonstrated that most incarcerated people have serious deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills required for success at the college level. In order for these potential students to enroll in and be successful in postsecondary education, more programs must be available at the adult basic and secondary level to remediate and bring these skills up to adequate levels.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the decades of experience of the experts interviewed, as well as my own experiences working in various U.S. prison systems. They also reflect findings from key sources such as PIAAC data and RAND's study. Taken together, I believe these recommendations can help lead the United States toward providing the means and access for more of the incarcerated populations to gain the education and skills they need for successful reentry and lives beyond the prison walls.

## Training and Programs

The correctional profession needs to expand its own standards to include education and job training as crucial elements in the rehabilitation effort. Unfortunately, educational professionals and their program standards have not been widely recognized and need to become more involved with the development of national education standards in the accreditation process.

1. **Improve the quality and quantity of educational services available to the incarcerated population.** The percentage of the incarcerated population participating in educational programs has dropped in most states and in the federal system over the last 20 or more years. As a result, many of them are never able to obtain a high school equivalency, a job training program, or basic computer skills, let alone a postsecondary education, required in order to survive in society.
2. **Advocate for mandatory standards for special education to be created by the Commission on Accreditation for Corrections for rehabilitative programs such as education and career preparation.** Currently, this commission deals with life-and-safety issues only. But it is the best suited option to handle the job regarding special education, and having discussion at this level would highlight the importance of having mandatory standards for longer term goals in addition to the current standards for the immediate health and safety of the incarcerated population. A first step would be to require special education programs for those who fall under the federal legal mandate for education. The federal IDEA law is mandatory for correctional institutions as well as public and private schools. Court decisions have enforced special education laws in juvenile facilities and have done the same for a number of adult facilities.
3. **Strengthen professional correctional standards to increase the importance of evidence-based practices such as correctional education.** The current Commission on Accreditation for Corrections education standards were developed by correctional professionals, not educators. Professional standards in most fields lead to changes in policy and practice. Research on the effectiveness of substance abuse and mental health programs has led to the growth of these programs and their inclusion in reentry planning. Why haven't the professional standards for correctional education influenced the professional standards of corrections as a whole? If corrections collected and published more and better data on the education history and current levels of incarcerated students, educational deficits would become more evident and useful in justifying education program improvement. In making changes, the Commission should consider requiring a minimum number of educational standards be met.
4. **Update digital and computer skills instruction in all academic and career programs for the incarcerated population in order for them to compete when they are released.** Correctional educational programs lag far behind community education programs in the quality and quantity of digital resources. By the time incarcerated citizens are released, the gap in their knowledge and skills has widened much further and handicaps their ability to apply and compete for jobs that are becoming increasingly digitized. The lack of instructional computer technology overall indicates a need for additional

assistive technology used widely in public school settings.

- 5. Improve the training of teachers, with a focus on the unique educational history and needs of the offender population.** At the very least, correctional teachers need more instructional strategies and skills to individualize instruction for the many students who do not easily benefit from large-class-centered instruction. Optimally, correctional teachers, in addition to being certified as secondary teachers in the state where they teach, would receive additional training in special education and working with students with learning disorders. Most correctional teachers are trained in a public school model that does not necessarily prepare them to work in a prison setting. Most states provide training for teachers who work in adult education and community colleges for adults with learning deficits and correctional teachers would benefit greatly from inclusion.

## Correctional-Education Legislative/Policy Recommendations

Many of the recommendations on correctional-education legislative and policy recommendations have been, or are being, implemented in a number of states where leaders are finding ways to assist the incarcerated population to rejoin society as productive citizens, workers, and parents. Hopefully, Congress and other states will follow that trend.

- 1. Amend federal and state laws, or propose new ones, to increase funding to improve the number of academic, career education, and work preparation programs, with particular emphasis on skills development that leads to employment.** For example, I recommend at least doubling the amount of funds in the WIOA and Perkins Acts for the incarcerated population by either increasing the total budget or by doubling the percentage of funds allowed for prisons and jail.

Rationale: Correctional education is clearly an evidence-based practice that is associated with reductions in recidivism and the cost of incarceration as well as future crime.

Discussion: National correctional professional organizations representing leadership in the correctional community have hosted numerous presentations of the RAND studies, and correctional leaders have accepted the findings as valid and have begun to develop political support for correctional education program improvement. A number of politicians now openly endorse the RAND conclusions, and some have actually cited them to justify support for more funding for correctional education in existing legislation, including WIOA and the Perkins Act, as well as the Second Chance Act and the full restoration of Pell grants as proposed in the bipartisan REAL Act bill. PIAAC data cautions us to focus carefully on the skills of inmates. Getting more politicians, both state and national, to see prison education and skill development as a priority for funding is a major issue for advocacy.

## 2. **Restore Pell grant eligibility for the incarcerated population.**

Rationale: To survive and thrive in today's world, individuals need job training and education beyond the high school level, which in today's society is no longer the minimum benchmark for educational achievement and does not guarantee that an individual has the skills to succeed in the labor market. The RAND study and PIAAC data support the need to increase education and skills for the incarcerated population, including advanced computer literacy skills.

Discussion: There are many education and job barriers that hinder formerly incarcerated individuals from enrolling in education programs or applying for jobs. The loss of Pell grants for inmates is the most obvious educational restriction that needs to be eliminated. There are many other barriers, including those from some colleges themselves, which use criminal history as a criterion in the application process. If Pell grants become available for the shorter term, postsecondary nondegree career programs become a possibility. The restoration of Pell grants should be considered along with addressing some of the technological educational barriers like computer access and the availability of textbooks and other resources.

These nondegree certificate skills programs are a controversial issue for the use of Pell grants. In all cases, care must be taken that incarcerated students are able to choose careers and courses for which there are real jobs with few barriers and that these programs are shown to impart skills.

## 3. **Reduce barriers and restrictions keeping formerly incarcerated individuals from applying for education and career training programs.**

Rationale: In addition to the restrictions and exclusions imposed by some colleges, there are many more workplace and societal issues regarding hiring formerly incarcerated individuals. Many are blocked from applying for training, a job, or financial support. Frequently, businesses and professional careers exclude formerly incarcerated people for reasons that have nothing to do with their crime.

Discussion: There are efforts nationally in many states to "ban the box," which refers to the checkbox on hiring applications where applicants are asked if they have a criminal record, as well as similar questions that disqualify someone for housing or education opportunities. There are many other laws, policies, or practices that exclude formerly incarcerated individuals from even beginning the application process, not to mention the attitudes of many who simply don't believe in offering opportunities to exoffenders.

## 4. **Add robust education and career information to the reentry databases used by corrections to help individuals set their future personal goals during incarceration and parole.**

Rationale: Information on education, skill levels and proficiencies, and work history of people is as important as their criminal, drug, and social history in reentry planning. Currently most reentry programs do not include sufficient

educational and job history, constraining both educational planning and individualized reentry plans. Better intake data is needed, including data on skill proficiency.

Discussion: Previous public school records and even current correctional education records are usually kept in separate databases, so they cannot be integrated into reentry plans. Reentry success depends on adequate diagnostic screening and the use of historical education and job data integrated into a reentry plan assembled by a team of program professionals. More information on education and training must be integrated into plans for the returning citizen, which typically contain only substance abuse, mental and physical health, and community resources for the returning citizen. There is a need for an "education preparedness index" to include more education and career information. The Council of State Governments also is developing a reentry tool kit and should be part of a national effort to ensure such databases are created and connected to correctional databases used for reentry planning. Finally, many inmates have a disability and/or special education history that is a major reason for noncompletion of school and for their social-criminal problems. Unfortunately, most public school special education records are sealed or archived and not accessible to corrections. The incarcerated population also has a higher than normal proportion of individuals with visual and hearing problems, which are easily overlooked. All of these issues need to be considered in the reentry plans for individuals. In the 1990s, many states like Maryland made cooperative agreements with public schools to share past records as long as the student gives written permission.

**5. Improve the motivation of incarcerated individuals to participate in quality education by offering incentives to reduce their sentences for reaching educational milestones.**

Rationale: The emphasis in corrections has changed over the years from punishment more toward rehabilitation. Yet there are historically high numbers of individuals behind bars, with insufficient programs to rehabilitate them. The incarcerated population often feel discouraged and lack motivation for self-improvement. Getting them into programs in the first place is an important step. Mandatory education has been helpful to many, but in the long run they need a reason to stay and continue to improve. Incentives to enroll often lead to program completion and success which, in turn, becomes a strong motivator.

Discussion: The success of mandatory education is limited, and even when coursework is mandatory, there's no guarantee that such programs impart skills. However, over the last several decades, the federal system and many states have made education-program participation a requirement in order to access other programs. For example, many states require high school completion in order to enroll in career education or work in prison industries. Furthermore, reductions of sentence for successful program completion is now being given in many states, resulting in higher rates of program

completion while lowering the cost of incarceration and reducing recidivism. In the end, this means more people are leaving prison prepared to lead positive lives by working and taking care of their families.

6. **Convene a consortium of corrections and education experts to develop a set of national guidelines to expand secure access to free, quality open-source digital educational resources.**

Rationale: Technology is no longer a luxury since it is now a part of everyday life at home, in the community, at work, and in school. Corrections has traditionally shied away from giving inmates access to computers and internet for security reasons, but private correctional companies have found viable ways to allow educational access while guarding against gang communication. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for technology in the face of massive shutdowns where prison educators can no longer provide traditional instruction based on face-to-face instruction.

Discussion: Some states, partially as a result of lawsuits, are adopting their own guidelines to reduce the high cost for telephone, commissary, banking, and digital services for the incarcerated population that have resulted in excessive profit making. Most of the companies providing these services have created proprietary "free" inmate tablets to download their approved books and videos. At the same time, some states are resisting these restrictions by buying higher quality, secure Chromebooks™ and tablets and working with education providers to load them with high-quality resources, many of which are free for educational purposes.

## National Research Recommendations

Lastly, significant strides must be made in research about education programs if there is to be any significant chance to draw attention to the issue.

1. **Conduct additional research to determine the effectiveness of various education programs and strategies in the reduction of future crime and recidivism.** The current level of research has been relatively sparse and not specific enough to measure the impact of such common programs as basic literacy, high school equivalency, career/vocational education, postsecondary, and reentry education. Additionally, more studies like the ones from RAND and PIAAC are needed to demonstrate more precisely the power of education and its cost effectiveness. The RAND recidivism research has changed the way the corrections profession values education. Most professionals now understand that education more than pays for itself in terms of reduced recidivism. However, additional studies would not only reinforce this conclusion but also begin to clarify the extent of the impact and the relative value of various education programs. This would lead to more effective programs. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) just received a federal grant to conduct a study of the research that has been done on correctional education. At the time of this

writing, NIC indicated it had not yet been given specific guidance by the Senate on conduct and development of this study. The RAND study on the effectiveness of correctional education provides a good framework for improving research. In order "to improve the evidence base, state and federal policymakers and foundations should invest in well-designed evaluation for correctional education programs. ... Funding grants and guidelines can help further the field by requiring the use of more-rigorous research designs. ... A study registry of correctional education evaluations would further aid in developing the evidence base."<sup>69</sup>

2. **Create a list of critical research topics for correctional education.** Many programs have been implemented with little research or data. Currently, there has been great interest in postsecondary education because of the debate about restoring Pell grants for those in prisons. At the same time, it is known from PIAAC data that a large majority of the incarcerated population does not have sufficient skills to do postsecondary school work. Data are needed to determine what programs are most important and effective. Additionally, there are other important research areas such as ascertaining the impact of the revised 2014 GED exam and the new HiSET and TASC high school equivalency exams on correctional education and the impact on job skills. What is the relative value of the various types of educational programs such as basic literacy, computer literacy, high school equivalency, vocational, and career courses and postsecondary education? What are the important elements and processes to assess the education history and needs of each individual? What questions are needed to collect important data in an interview tool and protocol as part of the overall correctional database and reentry process? These are some of the questions that need answers.

## Conclusion

As a result of the "get tough on crime" movement in the 1990s and severe national budget problems that began with the 2008 recession, correctional education opportunities and resources have been drastically reduced despite research clearly showing the payoff to a bigger and better investment in prison education programs at the local, state, and federal levels.

There are, however, some positive signs. Education is now firmly recognized as one of the most important factors in reducing future crime and recidivism. There are also some positive program improvements in some states that are using educational technology, improving reentry planning, and developing academic and career postsecondary programs. Pell grants have been available on an experimental basis for several years, and new legislation has been proposed to improve reentry and fully restore those grants. Overall progress, however, is slow and the obstacles are many. Much more work needs to be done.

Since the professional correctional field and society in general do not seem ready to recognize the social or moral imperative for correctional education, it is incumbent upon correctional educators — as I seek to do here — to promote educational research and publicize the critical value of education to change the lives of offenders and reduce crime. This research-based argument should underlie a well-defined set of policies as the rationale for the improvement of correctional education nationally.

In advocating for prison education, it is important to remember that citizens who break the law tend to have a cluster of personal, emotional, and social problems. Many come into the criminal justice system with a history of poverty and substance abuse, live in dangerous neighborhoods, and are from single-parent families. They usually have lower education levels and frequently have special learning needs. As adults, their problems are complicated by significant skill and career deficits. Many artificial barriers impede their effort to find employment and keep them from becoming successful. Although, for many, these problems started when they were children and were not adequately addressed, there is an opportunity to try again during their time in our federal, state, and local institutions.

Despite some small steps, as shown in this review of correctional education, Justice Burger's exhortation to improve lives has generally not been heeded. We are not committing the resources to meet the "moral obligation" to provide an adequate and reasonable amount of educational services to the incarcerated population as well as a mechanism to help the incarcerated individuals to begin planning for their release the day they enter prison. Education has been proven to be a cost-effective and research-based tool in the effort to positively change behavior in those who have committed crimes. The benefits of correctional education accrue to society as well as to incarcerated individuals themselves.

We have the research on our side to support more and better education programs. Now, we have to act on it. In short, as one saying in the correctional industry goes, "Doing time does not have to be a waste of time."

## Experts Interviewed

**Lois M. Davis** is a senior policy researcher at RAND with more than 25 years research experience in the areas of public safety and public health with expertise in health disparities, justice-involved populations, and health care and social services delivery and implementation. Davis currently is leading an outcomes evaluation of the "Pathways from Prison to Post-Secondary Education" demonstration project in Michigan and North Carolina funded by Arnold Ventures. She also is leading a process and outcomes evaluation of the Minnesota Department of Corrections' Career Navigators Program that provides employment and reentry supports to career technical education students funded by Ascendium. She led the national evaluation, funded under the Second Chance Act, of the effectiveness of educational and vocational training programs for incarcerated adults and juveniles in the United States.

Past research includes development of the national evaluation framework for implementing the National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services Standards, a multiyear study on the public health implications of reentry in California; and a National Institute of Justice-funded study on prisons closures. Davis has a Ph.D. in public health from UCLA. She is a professor of the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Davis is a former Bureau of Justice Statistics fellow, National Institute of Mental Health Postdoctoral fellow, and a former Pew Health Policy fellow.

**Jon P. Galley** served as the Maryland Western regional commissioner of corrections as well as the warden of the Montgomery County Diagnostic and Reception Center. Previously, he was a teacher, having risen through the ranks of the Maryland Department of Corrections in the late 1960s to become the assistant warden, warden, and commissioner of corrections. His major passion was the development of professional standards for corrections. He was involved in the start of the accreditation movement nationwide, serving on the first team to audit an adult correctional facility, the Vienna Correctional Center in Illinois, in 1979, and

auditing more than 100 facilities throughout the United States and Canada. Galley received his master's degree from Southern Illinois University and his bachelor's from Frostburg State. He passed away in July 2019 at age 75.

**John Peter Linton** was the director of the Office of Correctional Education in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, where he provided leadership for the department's work involving educational services for the U.S. corrections population from 2000–2015. He represented the department on the work group supporting the federal Reentry Council and worked to reestablish postsecondary educational opportunities funded by Pell grants in adult federal and state prisons. Previously, he was the director of the Office of Correctional Education at the Maryland State Department of Education, a program that enrolled nearly 2,000 students at the time of his departure. He was recently commended by the 10th U.S. Secretary of Education, Dr. John B. King Jr., as having displayed "tireless and determined leadership." Following his retirement from the department, he continued to have a nationwide presence through professional writing, participation in professional organizations, and involvement with prison reform and advocacy programs.

Linton received his bachelor's degree from Kalamazoo College, where he majored in philosophy and his master's from Harvard University. He passed away in September 2019 at age 72.

**Stefan LoBuglio** has worked in corrections for nearly three decades as a practitioner, policy advocate, and consultant. Currently, his firm Justice Innovations LLC provides assistance to jurisdictions in the United States and internationally to strengthen their justice systems through the implementation of innovative and evidenced-based practices. Before that, Stefan was the director of reentry and corrections for the Council of State Governments Justice Center, where he oversaw federally funded efforts to promote successful adult reentry and improve correctional practices inside and outside of local, state, and federal institutions. At the Justice Center, he led the National Reentry Resource Center, which is a project of the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance.

From 2005–2015, Stefan served as chief of the Pre-Release and Reentry Services Division for the Montgomery County (Maryland) Department of Correction and Rehabilitation. In this position, he oversaw the Montgomery County Pre-Release Center (PRC) — a 171-bed, fully accredited correctional facility — which provides comprehensive reentry programs for people incarcerated in the county jails, Maryland state prisons, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons and who are within six months of release. During his tenure, he developed and tracked performance metrics which showed that 90 percent of individuals were released from the PRC with jobs, savings, homes, and family connections and recidivated at a rate of 25 percent less than state and federal rates. He began his correctional career in 1992, developing education, reentry, and community correctional programs at the 2,000-bed House of Correction in Boston for more than 12 years, eventually rising to the position of deputy superintendent of community corrections for the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department. In addition to his operational experience, he has served on statewide correctional reform task forces in Maryland and Massachusetts, participated as an expert adviser on a number of reentry projects, testified before Congress, assisted in changing state legislation, and coauthored publications on reentry and recidivism.

In 2007, LoBuglio received his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he focused his studies on the evaluation of correctional reentry programs. He earned a master's degree in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a bachelor's in mechanical engineering from Duke University.

**John Nally** is the director of education for the Indiana Department of Correction. He is a past president of the Council of State and Federal Directors of Correctional Education and has served on the Executive Board of the Correctional Education Association (CEA). He received the CEA Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019. He has a bachelor of science and master of science degree from Indiana State University and a doctorate from Oakland City University.

**Michelle C. Tolbert, M.Ed.**, is the director of workforce development at RTI International. She specializes in correctional education and reentry, adult education, college and career readiness, career pathways, and educational policy. Currently, Tolbert is overseeing a training and technical assistance (TTA) project supporting 16 state and local partnerships that are providing justice-involved young adults with education and workforce development alternatives to incarceration. She is also providing TTA to two sets of Second Chance Act grantees to support their adult reentry, education, and employment strategies and serving as the coevaluator of the Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education initiative and Minnesota's Career Navigator initiative. Her experience also includes developing various toolkits and resources for the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., Reentry Education Tool Kit and Take Charge of Your Future: Get the Education and Training You Need) and providing TTA to a range of stakeholders such as correctional education programs implementing the reentry education framework, adult education state agencies and programs implementing new requirements under Title II of WIOA, and regional partnerships and community colleges developing career pathway programs.

## Appendix A: About the Profiles in This Report

Three individuals were selected for profiles in this report. Pseudonyms have been used to protect privacy. However, even though I could not include their actual names, I felt the stories they tell were important to provide as they put a face to understanding the issues and obstacles related to prison education. I have personally worked with all three individuals—Anthony, Joel, and Emily—in correctional education programs that I taught.

## Appendix B: PIAAC Proficiency Levels

**Table B-1: Score Boundaries and Task Descriptions for PIAAC Proficiency Levels on the Literacy Scale**

LITERACY PROFICIENCY LEVELS AND SCORE BOUNDARIES	LITERACY TASK DESCRIPTIONS
<b>BELOW LEVEL 1</b> <b>(0 to 175)</b>	The tasks at this level require the respondent to read brief texts on familiar topics to locate a single piece of specific information. Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features. There is seldom any competing information in the text and the requested information is identical in form to information in the question or directive. While the texts can be continuous, the information can be located as if the text were noncontinuous. Tasks below Level 1 do not make use of any features specific to digital texts.
<b>LEVEL 1</b> <b>(176 to 225)</b>	Most of the tasks at this level require the respondent to read relatively short digital or print continuous, noncontinuous, or mixed texts to locate a single piece of information which is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. Some tasks may require the respondent to enter personal information into a document, in the case of some noncontinuous texts. Little, if any, competing information is present. Some tasks may require simple cycling through more than one piece of information. Knowledge and skill in recognizing basic vocabulary, evaluating the meaning of sentences, and reading of paragraph text is expected.
<b>LEVEL 2</b> <b>(226 to 275)</b>	At this level, the complexity of text increases. The medium of texts may be digital or printed, and texts may comprise continuous, noncontinuous, or mixed types. Tasks in this level require respondents to make matches between the text and information and may require paraphrase or low-level inferences. Some competing pieces of information may be present. Some tasks require the respondent to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cycle through or integrate two or more pieces of information based on criteria,</li> <li>• compare and contrast or reason about information requested in the question, or</li> <li>• navigate within digital texts to access and identify information from various parts of a document.</li> </ul>
<b>LEVEL 3</b> <b>(276 to 325)</b>	Texts at this level are often dense or lengthy, including continuous, noncontinuous, mixed, or multiple pages. Understanding text and rhetorical structures become more central to successfully completing tasks, especially in navigation of complex digital texts. Tasks require the respondent to identify, interpret, or evaluate one or more pieces of information and often require varying levels of inferencing. Many tasks require the respondent construct meaning across larger chunks of text or perform multistep operations in order to identify and formulate responses. Often tasks also demand that the respondent disregard irrelevant or inappropriate text content to answer accurately. Competing information is often present, but it is not more prominent than the correct information.
<b>LEVEL 4</b> <b>(326 to 375)</b>	Tasks at this level often require respondents to perform multiple-step operations to integrate, interpret, or synthesize information from complex or lengthy continuous, noncontinuous, mixed, or multiple type texts. Complex inferences and application of background knowledge may be needed to perform successfully. Many tasks require identifying and understanding one or more specific, noncentral ideas in the text in order to interpret or evaluate subtle evidence claim or persuasive discourse relationships. Conditional information is frequently present in tasks at this level and must be taken into consideration by the respondent. Competing information is present and sometimes seemingly as prominent as correct information.
<b>LEVEL 5</b> <b>(376 to 500)</b>	At this level, tasks may require the respondent to search for and integrate information across multiple, dense texts; construct syntheses of similar and contrasting ideas or points of view; or evaluate evidence-based arguments. Application and evaluation of logical and conceptual models of ideas may be required to accomplish tasks. Evaluating reliability of evidentiary sources and selecting key information is frequently a key requirement. Tasks often require respondents to be aware of subtle, rhetorical cues and to make high-level inferences or use specialized background knowledge.

Source: Claudia Tamassia and Mary Louise Lennon, "PIAAC Proficiency Scales (Chapter 21)," *Technical Report of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013), [http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/technical%20report\\_17oct13.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/technical%20report_17oct13.pdf).

**Table B-2: Score Boundaries and Task Descriptions for PIAAC Proficiency Levels on the Numeracy Scale**

NUMERACY PROFICIENCY LEVELS AND SCORE BOUNDARIES	NUMERACY TASK DESCRIPTIONS
<b>BELOW LEVEL 1</b> <b>(0 to 175)</b>	Tasks at this level are set in concrete, familiar contexts where the mathematical content is explicit with little or no text or distractors and that require only simple processes such as counting, sorting, performing basic arithmetic operations with whole numbers or money, or recognizing common spatial representations.
<b>LEVEL 1</b> <b>(176 to 225)</b>	Tasks in this level require the respondent to carry out basic mathematical processes in common, concrete contexts where the mathematical content is explicit with little text and minimal distractors. Tasks usually require simple one-step or two-step processes involving, for example, performing basic arithmetic operations; understanding simple percents such as 50 percent; or locating, identifying, and using elements of simple or common graphical or spatial representations.
<b>LEVEL 2</b> <b>(226 to 275)</b>	Tasks in this level require the respondent to identify and act upon mathematical information and ideas embedded in a range of common contexts where the mathematical content is fairly explicit or visual with relatively few distractors. Tasks tend to require the application of two or more steps or processes involving, for example, calculation with whole numbers and common decimals, percents, and fractions; simple measurement and spatial representation; estimation; and interpretation of relatively simple data and statistics in texts, tables, and graphs.
<b>LEVEL 3</b> <b>(276 to 325)</b>	Tasks in this level require the respondent to understand mathematical information which may be less explicit, embedded in contexts that are not always familiar, and represented in more complex ways. Tasks require several steps and may involve the choice of problem-solving strategies and relevant processes. Tasks tend to require the application of, for example, number sense and spatial sense; recognizing and working with mathematical relationships, patterns, and proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form; and interpretation and basic analysis of data and statistics in texts, tables, and graphs.
<b>LEVEL 4</b> <b>(326 to 375)</b>	Tasks in this level require the respondent to understand a broad range of mathematical information that may be complex, abstract, or embedded in unfamiliar contexts. These tasks involve undertaking multiple steps and choosing relevant problem-solving strategies and processes. Tasks tend to require analysis and more complex reasoning about, for example, quantities and data; statistics and chance; spatial relationships; change; proportions; and formulas. Tasks in this level may also require comprehending arguments or communicating well-reasoned explanations for answers or choices.
<b>LEVEL 5</b> <b>(376 to 500)</b>	Tasks in this level require the respondent to understand complex representations and abstract and formal mathematical and statistical ideas, possibly embedded in complex texts. Respondents may have to integrate multiple types of mathematical information where considerable translation or interpretation is required; draw inferences; develop or work with mathematical arguments or models; and justify, evaluate and critically reflect upon solutions or choices.

Source: Claudia Tamassia and Mary Louise Lennon, "PIAAC Proficiency Scales (Chapter 21)," *Technical Report of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013), [http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/technical%20report\\_17oct13.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/technical%20report_17oct13.pdf).

## About the Author



**Stephen Steurer** was the executive director of the Correctional Education Association, a national teacher organization advocating for the education of incarcerated youth and adults in the United States, from 1986–2015. He was coordinator of correctional academic programs (literacy through high school) from 1973–2004 for all adult prison education programs and juvenile justice education under the authority of the Maryland State Department of Education.

He has written extensively in correctional and educational journals and consulted on many federal- and state-funded projects, including the 2014 RAND Corporation correctional education recidivism studies. He worked as a consultant to the RAND Corporation for best practices research funded by the U.S. departments of Justice and Education, the Council of State Governments Reentry Resource Center, and the Vera Foundation for Pathways postsecondary education project in New Jersey, North Carolina, and Michigan. He was also a professor of criminology at the University of Maryland from 2010–2015. Additionally, Steurer is an education/reentry advocate for CURE National, associate advocate for Maryland Correctional Education Enhancement Associates, chairperson of the Criminal Justice Education Working Group for the Barbara Bush Foundation, and a correctional education consultant evaluating and creating education programs for the incarcerated population. He was an original founding member of the Barbara Bush Foundation in 1990.

Steurer's career began as a teacher in middle and high schools in Chicago and Washington in reading, history, English, and Italian. Steurer received his bachelor's degree from Loyola University of Chicago, his master's from Georgetown University, and his doctorate from the University of Maryland in Secondary Education, Reading Disabilities.

## Endnotes

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- 3 Lois M. Davis, Jennifer L. Steele, Robert Bozick, Malcolm V. Williams, Susan Turner, Jeremy N. V. Miles, Jessica Saunders, and Paul S. Steinberg, *How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here? The Results of a Comprehensive Evaluation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR564.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR564.html).
- 4 Rampey et al., Survey of Incarcerated Adults, Table 1.1.
- 5 Rampey et al., Survey of Incarcerated Adults, Table 1.1.
- 6 Rampey et al., Survey of Incarcerated Adults, Table 1.2.
- 7 Rampey et al., Survey of Incarcerated Adults, Table 1.2.
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- 9 Danielle Kaeble, *Probation and Parole in the United States, 2016*, Report No. NCJ 251148 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ppus16.pdf>.
- 10 Kaeble, *Probation and Parole*.
- 11 U.S. Department of Education, "12,000 Incarceration Students to Enroll in Postsecondary Educational and Training Programs Through Education Department's New Second Chance Pell Pilot Program," press release (June 24, 2016), <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/12000-incarcerated-students-enroll-postsecondary-educational-and-training-programs-through-education-departments-new-second-chance-pell-pilot-program>.
- 12 Council of Economic Advisers, *Returns on Investments in Recidivism-Reducing Programs* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, 2018), 1, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Returns-on-Investments-in-Recidivism-Reducing-Programs.pdf>.
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- 14 Bobby D. Rampey, Shelly Kelper, Leyla Mohadjer, Tom Krenzke, Jianzhu Li, Nina Thornton, Jacquie Hogan, Holly Xie, and Stephen Provasnik, *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training: Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: 2014* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.
- 15 Davis et al., *How Effective*.
- 16 For more, see the [Experts Interviewed](#) section of the report.
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- 18 Irwin Kirsch, Henry Braun, Mary Louise Lennon, and Anita Sands, *Choosing our Future: A Story of Opportunity in America* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2016). <https://www.ets.org/research/report/opportunity/choosing-our-future>.
- 19 Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley, *Captive Students: Education and Training in America's Prisons* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1996), [https://www.ets.org/research/policy\\_research\\_reports/publications/report/1996/bvqv](https://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/1996/bvqv); Richard J. Coley and Paul E. Barton, *Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2006), <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PIC-LOCKEDUP.pdf>.
- 20 Barton and Coley, *Captive Students*, 5.
- 21 Coley and Barton, *Locked Up*, 30.
- 22 Davis et al., *How Effective*.
- 23 In an interview, Michelle Tolbert of RTI International, who works closely with Lois Davis of RAND on correctional education studies, underlined the need to continue to do more impact studies to demonstrate and clarify the cost-benefit of education to the public, correctional leadership, and legislators.
- 24 Davis et al., *How Effective*.
- 25 In some states, the correctional education director is a high-level position at the assistant commissioner level. California and Georgia are two examples of this structure. In others, there might be no central education authority, leaving each prison to decide how education is provided in its facility. Delaware, Massachusetts, and Washington states are decentralized in this manner. In some instances (again including Washington), states contract with local community colleges to provide some or all educational services and focus almost entirely on academic and career education. In a few states, a state agency provides prison education under the authority of an independent director or superintendent, much like a public school system. The Ohio Central School System and the Windham School District in Texas are the two largest models.
- 26 As a disclaimer, this is an ETS product.
- 27 See Appendix A for information on the individuals profiled in this and two other vignettes in this report.
- 28 See U.S. Prison Study Data Collection at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/prison.asp>.
- 29 See the U.S. Prison Study Data collection: 2014 at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/prison.asp>.
- 30 Overall results for PIAAC are at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/household.asp>. For the PIAAC U.S. Background Questionnaires, see <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/questionnaires.asp>.
- 31 See the U.S. Prison Study Data Collection at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/prison.asp>. In this report, I focus primarily on the results in the literacy domain.
- 32 OECD, *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>; OECD, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?: What the Survey of Adult Skills Says* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204904-en>; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, *Making Skills Everyone's Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States* (Washington, DC: Author, 2015); Kirsch et al., *Choosing our Future*, 39.
- 33 Bobby D. Rampey, Shelley Keiper, Leyla Mohadjer, Tom Krenzke, Jianzhu Li, Nina Thornton, Jacquie Hogan, Holly Xie, and Stephen Provasnik, *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies: 2014*, NCES 2016-040 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), Table 1.2, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>. Difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.
- 34 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 1.2.
- 35 OECD, *OECD Skills Outlook 2013*, 28.
- 36 Madeline Goodman, Robert Finnegan, Leyla Mohadjer, Tom Krenzke, Jacquie Hogan, Eugene Owen, and Stephen Provasnik, *Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments Among U.S. Adults: Results from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies 2012: First Look*, NCES 2014-008 (Washington,

- DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics), B-3, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014008.pdf>. For more description of the levels, see Appendix B of this paper or refer to the NCES website at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/litproficiencylevel.asp>.
- 37 Outcomes on the PIAAC numeracy domain are even worse. Forty-three (43) percent of the incarcerated population with a high school degree or equivalent score at or below level 1 on the PIAAC numeracy scale, which measures basic mathematical and computational skills that are considered fundamental for functioning in everyday work and social life. See Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 1.3. Also, refer to Appendix B for a description of PIAAC proficiency levels by domain.
- 38 For more information on this topic, refer to Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*.
- 39 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 2.1.
- 40 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 2.2.
- 41 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 2.5.
- 42 Neeta Fogg, Paul Harrington, and Ishwar Khatiwada, *Skills and Earnings in the Full-Time Labor Market* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2018), <https://www.ets.org/s/research/pdf/skills-and-earnings-in-the-full-time-labor-market.pdf>.
- 43 Average scores for incarcerated adults on the PIAAC literacy scale by whether they currently have a prison job were 252 versus 245 for those without a prison job. This is a statistically significant difference of 8 points. See Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Table 2.6.
- 44 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, 30.
- 45 Rampey et al., *Survey of Incarcerated Adults*, Figure 3.3.
- 46 While almost all of the prison population who do not have a high school credential lack the level of skills deemed critical for today's labor market, nearly two-thirds of those who have obtained a high school credential are similarly positioned. This is a significant challenge for these individuals upon reentry and for our society overall. For a thoughtful discussion of the paradox between educational attainment and skills in the household population, see Neeta Fogg, Paul Harrington, Ishwar Khatiwada, Irwin Kirsch, Anita Sands, and Larry Hanover, *If You Can't Be With the Data You Love: And the Risks of Loving the Data You're With* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2019), <https://www.ets.org/research/report/love-the-data>.
- 47 See the Brief Jail Mental Health Screen at <https://www.prainc.com/?product=brief-jail--mental-health-screen>.
- 48 The assessment can be found at <https://apps.nd.gov/dhs/owra/faces/faces/About.htm>.
- 49 More jurisdictions, such as California, are attempting to build such reentry sharing systems that would have safeguards built into the sharing of medical records.
- 50 Davis et al., *How Effective*, 14.
- 51 Davis et al., *How Effective*, 11.
- 52 In order to measure the difficulty of reading materials, common formulas are used to calculate grade levels such as the Fry Graph, Spache Formula, New Dale-Chall Formula, and Flesch Reading Ease Formula, all available for free on the internet. See Lois M. Davis and Michelle C. Tolbert, *Evaluation of North Carolina's Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2957.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2957.html).
- 53 The only broad exception for mandatory education requiring educational programs is by federal special education law for youthful offenders, although some states do have regulations that require educational participation for those who have not graduated from high school. The ACA auditors do not conduct an examination of the programs against quality standards, but simply attest to whether the programs exist. I was one of the first correctional educators to become an ACA auditor. After being recommended as an auditor by Jon Galley, an ACA auditor and trainer, Galley and I worked closely with ACA's standards commission and advocated to have more educators included in the evaluation process. However, the vast majority of auditors remain higher level correctional administrators, not educators.

- 54 I have served as an expert witness in juvenile and adult lawsuits in Washington, DC, New Mexico, and Maryland related to this issue.
- 55 National Conference of State Legislatures, *Good Time and Earned Time Policies for State Prison Inmates (as Established by Law)* (Washington: Author, February 2019).
- 56 Michelle Tolbert and Laura Rasmussen Foster, *Reentry Education Framework: Guidelines for Providing High-Quality Education for Adults Involved in the Criminal Justice System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2016), [https://learner.lincs.ed.gov/reentryed/files/tools\\_pdf/Reentry-Ed-Framework-Report.pdf](https://learner.lincs.ed.gov/reentryed/files/tools_pdf/Reentry-Ed-Framework-Report.pdf).
- 57 Nancy G. La Vigne, Tracey L. Schollenberger, and Sara A. Debus, *One Year Out; Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2009), [https://www.urban.org/research/publication/one-year-out-tracking-experiences-male-prisoners-returning-houston-texas/view/full\\_report](https://www.urban.org/research/publication/one-year-out-tracking-experiences-male-prisoners-returning-houston-texas/view/full_report).
- 58 Rebecca Beitsch, *To Reduce Recidivism, States Scrap Barriers for Ex-Offenders* (Pew Trusts, July 27, 2017), <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2017/07/27/to-reduce-recidivism-states-scrap-barriers-for-ex-offenders>.
- 59 Davis and Tolbert, *North Carolina's Pathways*.
- 60 Emily Mooney and Arthur Rizer, "Let's Train Inmates for Success in the High-Tech Economy," *The Crime Report* (February 1, 2019), <https://thecrimereport.org/2019/02/01/lets-train-inmates-for-success-in-the-high-tech-economy/>; Justice in Action, *Computers in Cells: Maintaining Ties and Reducing Recidivism* (Sydney: Author, 2011), <http://justiceaction.org.au/cms/images/stories/CmpgnPDFs/computersincells.pdf>.
- 61 Davis and Tolbert, *North Carolina's Pathways*.
- 62 See the Center for the Application of Instructional Technologies at Western Illinois University's website at <https://www.i-pathways.org/public/ourStory.jsp>. Also, for a discussion of i-Pathways in the Illinois Department of Corrections, see <https://www.i-pathways.org/public/correctional.jsp>.
- 63 I ran a volunteer tutoring program utilizing the i-Pathways program at Howard County for four years. More than 70 students had used the program successfully with no security issues upon my departure in March 2019.
- 64 Nicole Lewis and Beatrix Lockwood, "How Families Cope with the Hidden Costs of Incarceration for the Holidays," *New York Times* (December 17, 2019); Stephanie Clifford and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, "In Prisons, Sky-High Phone Rates and Money Transfer Fees," *New York Times* (June 26, 2014).
- 65 See <https://worldpossible.org>.
- 66 These officials have requested anonymity due to political reasons within their own agencies.
- 67 Bureau of Justice Statistics, "U.S. Correctional Population Declined for the Ninth Consecutive Year," press release (April 26, 2018), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/cpus16pr.cfm>.
- 68 Andrew Kreighbaum, "Brewing Battle Over Pell Grants," *Inside Higher Ed* (July 8, 2019), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/07/08/debate-over-proposed-expansion-pell-grants-short-term-job-training>.
- 69 Davis et al., *How Effective*, 87.





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