

Testimony for House Appropriations Bill Storz – CHSVT - 2/17/15

I am a licensed Special Educator and before coming to Community High School nine years ago I taught in a public Middle School and an independent High School, both in Vermont. I have seen, literally, some of *my same students* from those Vermont schools become my students within the Correctional Facilities that I have taught at with Community High School. The students that we see (in CHSVT) are often the ones who have special needs or other family/life struggles that create barriers to their success in school. Many of them have been in foster care, day or residential treatment programs, and still they have not had success in school. Community High School is the School that works for many of these Vermont students, those who have not succeeded elsewhere. Success in school, in academics, vocational and life skills, is so important, and we are there to make this happen for our students, who, for whatever reason, have not succeeded in their other Vermont Schools. I believe in providing the service that CHSVT provides, and in giving these Vermont students a chance to finish what they could not finish in their previous Vermont schools. I believe that we owe it to these students, to give them an opportunity to finish their High School Education, and I believe that it's also good public policy to support Community High School. I urge the Appropriations committee to reject these proposed cuts to Community High School, cuts that will cost the state far more, and in many ways, in the future.

It's important to have the correct information before you while you are considering the proposed cuts to Community High School. The statements by the Commissioner of DOC and the Governor have left out the bulk of our story, and have misrepresented our work, and how it helps offenders immeasurably in many ways. The greater preponderance of all DOC inmates in Vermont would benefit from engagement with Community High School. As we are a research supported recidivism reducing program, it stands to reason that the upper limit of what we can do to make a dent in Vermont's recidivism is to work with each and every Vermont inmate. By DOC's own new risk reduction policies, which evaluate various needs, including Education, in order to attempt to reduce recidivism, more inmates are designated with having an Education Need than not. That's a lot of people. At the facility that I work at I asked an administrator what percentage of the 400 inmates did he think would have a designated education need. He answered, "About 80 percent". That adds up to 320 inmates, with a variety of educational needs. Who is going to address these needs if Community High School is not in place in each facility? DOC already cannot mix detainees and sentenced populations. How are the hundreds of inmates in Regional facilities needs going to be met? They are probably going to have to wait, and not have access until they are sentenced. A huge waste of months, and in some cases, years of their lives. And, contrary to implications and statements of the Governor and the Commissioner, most of the Ed. Needs inmates, as designated by the DOC, are not under 23, and are indeed of all ages. The "aging population" mantra being repeatedly spoken is irrelevant to the new DOC policy and our place within this. Why is Community High School not seeing many of the students that it could and should be seeing daily?

I believe that Community High School has been systematically marginalized. Our ability to identify and access our students has been reduced, while the support system in place to encourage our students to get to us has been also weakened.

Victor Hugo said, "He who opens a school door, closes a prison." This quote illustrates the natural tension between the institutions of education and corrections. Within the Vermont DOC this tension plays out in various ways. Overall factors that reduce our effectiveness as a program are a lack of clarity of purpose understood by all DOC staff, a lack of coordination between the various elements/subgroups of the Department, and a lack of a high level of respect for education, and in particular our educational program by too many of the staff. Indeed I would say that there is even some hostility by staff to the work that we do. I think it takes a high degree of understanding of (and focus on) the DOC mission and vision, coupled with strong leadership, to reduce this natural tension, and facilitate success with Education within Corrections. I think these elements of understanding and leadership are lacking.

Some specifics of how this works or does not work

At Northern State we have inmates with an educational need, some of them U23 and some of not, who are allowed to sleep instead of attending their classes, without consequence. This seems wrong to me. We also do not at this point get any good data on who had an education need and who does not, so it is difficult to find many of our potential students. The data that does exist is not trustworthy. Meeting their educational need is supposed to be an important part of an inmate's case plan compliance, for those who have the need, but at this point there appears to be no real consequence for inmates not meeting this part of their case plan. Many inmates do the minimum, and will only do what they figure out they really need to do to stay on track for getting released from prison. These inmates have figured out, based on the culture at this facility, that education is not currently something that they have to do, or at least do regularly, so they don't do it. Contrast this with the new programming initiative, which many inmates have been told is mandatory. They know that their release is dependent upon successful completion of this programming, including strict attendance requirements. These groups are FULL, not because of what they offer, I would suggest, but because the inmates know that they have to complete them before they release, and if they don't they have to wait a few months until the next round of programming begins, and then see that course through. The expectation is clear, and that is powerfully focusing for the inmates. Education does not get anything remotely like this type of support. There are no real consequences for truancy, and there are no added incentives for attending, beyond the significant one of improving academic and life skills, and possibly getting a diploma. The overall culture at the facility is not generally understanding, encouraging and supportive of education, I would say, at least not in a consistent and coordinated way. Inmates live there. They understand what the culture values. They see people sleeping instead of going to their classes and understand from that that education must not be important. After all, these are the people that control their lives every day, and some of them don't seem to understand or care. Many staff are supportive and professional and some staff are not supportive, but the overall effect, given the lack of clarity of mission and purpose, is that we see far fewer students each and every day than we should.

Windows/Space-The big squeeze. At NSCF we have only four hours per day to access students for classes! This is a facility with 400 inmates! 830-1030 and 130-330. The facility has implemented more control of movement, and this schedule has been the result of that for us. This is a huge limiting factor to us. Four hours per day is not a lot of time to get anything done! Some students have other appointments during the day, or a job in the morning or afternoon, and quickly you can see that even

the truly motivated students do not have enough access to education under this system. The time frame is so limited that some students say it's not worth it just for that reason. We used to have classes from 800 AM until the evening with a one hour break for lunch and dinner. This allowed flexibility for students who worked, or had programming, or wanted to exercise, at least some time to do education. It's very, very hard for the serious student to access his education at this point, and even harder for the student who needs education, but does not prioritize it among the various elements of life in prison.

Another element which has impacted education at Northern State is that our access to the classrooms that we teach in has been greatly minimized by the addition of programming facilitators leading groups in them. We have seven classrooms and a welding shop. During the working day, of the four hours in the seven available classrooms (= 28 hourly slots), programming providers occupy 6-8 of them. So that leaves about 20 hourly slots to meet the students' needs. We have seven teachers vying for some time within these narrow parameters, to do their work with students who also feel the pressure of little access and a lot less choice than they had before, in terms of curriculum. With the double whammy of reduced time and reduced space, combined with the general reluctance within the facility to value education, it is no wonder that our numbers are somewhat down. A good deal of our time we have two teachers per classroom, working with half the students we could be, if we had the space. And if we expanded the time we could access students, again we could greatly improve the amount and quality of the work we can do with our students. The reduction of our teaching hours and the reduction of our space is to me is also a clear signal that the facility as a whole does not value education. Inmates pick up on this as well, and this perception further erodes our ability to do our work. It feels like a set up.

Inmates have complex needs. The best chance at facilitating change in their lives/behavior is an approach that systematically coordinates services in a team manner rooted in good knowledge/data indicating each inmate's needs. We believe in the possibility of positive change, and we have the training and knowledge to play a key role in that transformation, which is really what is required, for an inmate to move forward successfully. The Community High School of Vermont program is built on the principles imbedded in the DOC mission regarding rehabilitation, as well as the basic human right to access education. Education is a key element in reducing recidivism. We need your help to improve our ability to accomplish our goals, by pressuring the larger organization to honor its mission, by improving its practice with respect to education, by supporting us with space and time to do our work, and by coordinating the identification of inmates with needs and the delivery of those students to us, so we can do our work!

What We Need from DOC

- A recognition that education can potentially transform all inmates' lives, and reduce recidivism accordingly. Support and policies that follow this.
- Clearly articulated case plan policies and procedures with respect to defining, communicating and managing inmates with an education need (there is an opportunity for this to happen with the imminent launch of the OMS system, but even this holistic system will be ineffective if the workers do not utilize it properly, or ignore aspects of the system, or do not understand or value the resources at hand, such as our school.)

- Accountability for protocols to be followed regarding getting students with defined need to us, and for allowing access of others who may benefit from our program.
- More time per day to hold classes for our students and more space(s) to accommodate them.
- Clear leadership that communicates the value of education, and that makes local policy changes and decisions with consideration of education, and the inclusion of education in that process when appropriate.
- Coordination of inmate work, education, recreation and programming to best meet the needs of each inmate in a prioritized manner.

What We Need from the Legislature

- Help in focusing DOC on recidivism reduction as a major goal, including our work in helping to accomplishing that.
- Support in holding DOC culture accountable to supporting education in its actions and not just its words.
- Support for us in our work of advocating for the rights of our students to access education.
- A consideration of statute that recognizes the value of education for a greater preponderance of offenders, and mandates this to a greater degree (even with the current statute there is a great deal of inconsistency of follow-through, but at least some take it seriously)
- The right questions to be posed for Commissioner Pallito, who is not telling the whole story at all.

PLAN GOING FORWARD

- A. Leadership with vision
- B. Ongoing Support from outside and from inside
- C. Easily Double or Triple our services and impacts

To summarize: We need access to our students, with enough time and space to get the work done! It takes a lot of coordination and persistence to get some of our students on the right track with respect to education, and conversely it does not take much to derail them, or keep them on the wrong track. The lack of understanding and valuation of education, as represented by Commissioner Pallito in his actions and recent budget proposal, is part of the whole in Corrections, which systemically undervalues and undermines education, and its ability to rehabilitate and reduce recidivism. This administration also, by its actions, appears to misunderstand the basic human right of access to education. We are essentially advocates for our students, and their right to access education. The Community of High School is a vital organization doing critical work with a diverse, talented and committed staff. We ask that you support us in our work, and help us improve our ability to do it by your encouragement of the greater department, and by your holding the greater department accountable to its mission, which we honor.