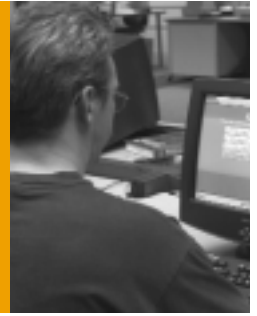


California Department of Corrections Literacy Program Changes Lives



California has always been at the forefront of excellence in adult education. Fortunately, for California adult inmates in need of improved literacy skills, excellence is also the norm in the literacy programs of the California Department of Corrections (CDC).

The important role of literacy

While improving inmate education has direct benefits to the participants, equally important is the "return on investment" the larger community experiences. A study funded by the U.S. Department of Education found that participation in state correctional education programs lowered the likelihood of repeat incarceration by 29%.¹ Similar results have been documented in other studies.² This is important for the financial support of these programs, since the cost of incarceration dwarfs the cost of inmate education programs.

In California, the impetus for the new literacy programs was the 1989 Prisoner Literacy Act, state legislation that provided the Department of Corrections with goals for literacy improvement in the inmate population. In response to this mandate, the Department implemented Literacy Learning Labs at 26 institutions to provide supplemental literacy instruction to inmates. California legislation requires the Department to provide literacy programs to 60% of the eligible inmate population to ensure that upon parole inmates can achieve a ninth-grade reading level. Current data indicates that 52% of California prisoners function below a seventh-grade reading level.

PLATO Learning provides foundation for literacy program

"The success of student learning in the Literacy Learning Labs can be attributed to two factors: the PLATO learning curriculum, which effectively addresses the needs of our students, and a dedicated staff who can assist the students in the learning process," said Gary Sutherland, Supervisor of Academic Instruction at the Education and Inmate Programs Unit for the California Department of Corrections. "Since 1990, PLATO Learning has provided the foundation of the literacy infrastructure in the Literacy Learning Labs."

The program faced some challenges early on, since placing a strong reliance on technology as the backbone of the program proved to be controversial. In many cases, the instructors needed to be convinced that technology was a useful learning tool. However, the inmates themselves helped the program succeed. When instructors saw how well the inmates took to the program and became accountable for their learning, they quickly came around.

More importantly, teachers adapted to new instructional roles that best utilized their talents and experience to help learners with a wide range of skills meet their goals in a highly individualized learning environment. "Quality instructional technology and the qualified staff to support the adult learner are key components of program success," said Mr. Sutherland. "Of course, teachers have to create a positive environment conducive to learning, and a strong curriculum is essential to accomplishing this goal."

The program model

Folsom Prison is one of 32 correctional institutions in California. At Folsom, as at every state institution, new students entering the program are assessed so the staff understands their strengths and weaknesses. Although some students already have a high school diploma or GED, most are at the lower functioning levels of adult basic education.

Folsom places the Literacy Learning Lab literally at the core of the education program—the PLATO Learning lab is situated right in the middle of the classroom area. The lab runs eight hours a day, six days a week, with no vacancies at any time. "If there is a cancellation, there is always another student eager to take the vacant slot," said Mr. Sutherland.

Teachers can see the impact the technology has had on the students. "In addition to the direct impact on improved literacy skills, students are empowered by being responsible for their own learning," said Mr. Sutherland. "The educational process is about making positive changes in the lives of our students."

As students reach a ninth-grade reading level, they can progress into the GED/High School Diploma program or on to vocational and post-secondary study. "The Literacy Learning Labs serve as a springboard to higher education for our adult learners," according to Mr. Sutherland. "Last year over 1,700 students passed the GED. Also, some inmates are trained as Literacy Learning Lab assistants and help teachers run the programs."

Tangible goals, such as increased reading skills, GED attainment, and post-high school study are important measures of program success. Less measurable but no less profound is the impact the program has on the inmates' self-esteem because they are largely responsible for their own success. "We get a lot of letters, tear-wrenching letters, from former students who are succeeding because of the skills they learned and degrees they earned while they were here," said Mr. Sutherland.

1. "Three State Recidivism Study" Prepared for the Office of Correctional Education, U.S. Department of Education, Steuerer, Smith and Tracy (Cited in State Correctional Education Programs – State Policy Update, National Institute for Literacy, March 2002)
2. Cited in State Correctional Education Programs – State Policy Update, National Institute for Literacy, March 2002, page 1