Policymakers' Role in Expanding Prison Education Access

Jennifer Thomsen and Shytance Wren

Preliminary data show that more than 1.25 million people were incarcerated in federal and state correctional facilities in 2023. Among those, the vast majority — about 95% — will eventually be released and often without having had access to postsecondary education or training programs that would help them transition successfully into their communities. This is a missed opportunity. Access to these programs has substantial benefits for both reentering individuals and their communities.

Research has shown that postsecondary education access in prison contributes to increased levels of hope for learners and increases the odds of securing employment after release, which is critical to gaining economic stability. In addition, access to postsecondary education has been shown

> "As state leaders and policymakers, we have a responsibility to provide high-quality educational opportunities to all our citizens, no matter where they might be in their educational journey. Far too often, individuals impacted by the justice system are overlooked and provided only limited educational services, despite the evidence that investing in educational and workforce training opportunities lowers costs for states and reduces recidivism.
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> **– KANSAS GOV. LAURA KELLY, EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES 2023-25 CHAIR.**

to decrease the likelihood of recidivism. This provides a cost savings for states since every dollar spent on prison education programs results in four to five dollars saved in incarceration costs. A survey of incarcerated adults found that 70% wanted to enroll in an education program but the demand outpaced availability.

State policymakers play an important role in ensuring learners living in carceral settings have access to the programs and support they need to succeed. To elevate state policy responses to barriers faced by these learners, Education Commission of the States convened a community of practice. The group brought together a diverse group of stakeholders including:

- State education policy leaders (including governors' policy advisors, legislators, state higher education executives, members of state boards of regents, and leaders from state departments of higher education and K-12 education).
- State leaders from departments of corrections, including department secretaries, education program superintendents and directors, reentry directors and others.
- Higher education in prison program directors and practitioners.
- Policy and advocacy organization leaders.
- Researchers.

The group met in-person three times over the course of 18 months to explore state policy questions while keeping students' lived experiences top of mind. To center students' experiences, the group toured the Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas and participated in a panel discussion at the facility that featured former students, educators, employers and representatives of the Kansas departments of corrections and commerce. The community of practice's goals included:

- Developing meaningful connection points between policymakers, practitioners, advocates and researchers.

A Successful Approach in Kansas

Members of the community of practice visited the Lansing Correctional Facility where they got a firsthand look at the postsecondary and career and technical education programs. The tour included the industry-recognized welding credential program, which is a partnership between Kansas City Kansas Community College and local businesses so students can earn industry recognized credentials. They heard directly from current students for whom the programs provide opportunities to build skills that will help ease their reentry experience and from former students who are finding stable employment. The Kansas Department of Corrections has created strong partnerships with private industry by offering in-demand skills students will need when they enter the workforce.

In recorded remarks, Gov. Laura Kelly told the group that this approach serves the 4,000 individuals released annually and noted that they are seeing real results. She stated, "In the past three years, 822 incarcerated individuals have completed postsecondary education programs — more than the previous two decades combined. And this year alone nearly 500 incarcerated individuals are pursuing degrees, while another 238 are enrolled in career and technical education programs. Kansas has transformed correctional education from a secondary consideration into a core component of rehabilitation and workforce development."

- Identifying the **governance structures** required to support higher education in prison programs and exploring how these systems impact incarcerated individuals.

- Sharing insights on **financial aid** (including Pell Grants and state aid) for incarcerated learners and addressing barriers to accessing aid.

- Identifying gaps in **student supports** and exploring state policies that could shore them up.

Drawing on the attendees' diverse roles, expertise and perspectives, the group ended its time together with in-depth discussions that highlighted key barriers faced by incarcerated learners, which informed the state policy considerations outlined below. While the community of practice focused on three distinct issue areas — governance, financial aid and student supports — and this report is organized in that manner, the group's discussions made clear that the issues are deeply interwoven and, as such, state policy in one area is likely to impact another.

Governance

Governance structures are complex and comprise multiple agencies and entities, including state departments of education and higher education, postsecondary institutions and systems, departments of corrections, correctional facilities, departments of labor, state task forces and coalitions, and community organizations among others. These structures vary from state to state, with different distributions of roles and responsibilities, but one overarching need, regardless of the differences, is collaboration between entities.

Barriers identified by the community of practice include:

- **Insufficient coordination between entities involved in providing education and training programs.** Entities within the structure may have competing interests. For example, departments of corrections and correctional facilities may make decisions about learning spaces, instructional materials, or access to devices and the internet based on security protocols meant to address safety concerns, while education providers may focus more on students' learning experience. Stakeholders can promote a shared vision that ensures alignment to provide education opportunities for learners.

- **Critical stakeholder voices, including individuals who have experienced incarceration, may be missing in policy discussions.** No one has a greater stake in decisions than the people these programs serve. Including their perspectives and experiences in policymaking conversations is key to creating and supporting successful programs.

● **Lack of data about program access and outcomes that would support policy decisions.** Complex governance structures with many actors can make data collection and alignment challenging. Data that answers questions about education program effectiveness and students' access and outcomes can provide policymakers and practitioners alike the information they need for improvement. In addition, data can tell a story and help stakeholders make a strong case for expanding access and providing students the support they need to succeed in education and training programs.

Considerations for State Leaders

States may consider examining governance structures to identify ways to better serve students participating in education and training programs in correctional facilities. While these are complex issues, some themes surfaced in participants' conversations that could help guide state leaders who are seeking to improve governance structures.

Key Considerations	Guiding Questions for State Leaders
Identify the agencies and entities involved in education and training programs as well as their roles and responsibilities.	● What structures are in place to allow communication and cooperation among various entities? ● Do they have a shared vision for how to best serve students? ● How can you build staff capacity at the department, correctional facility and postsecondary institution levels?
Think about where policies should exist — while legislation is important, it is not the only avenue for change.	● Would the most effective policy come from the governor in the form of an executive order? ● Would goals most efficiently be met by leveraging department-level, system-level or institution-level policy?

Key Considerations	Guiding Questions for State Leaders
Consider how to include the essential voices of people with lived experience in policy conversations.	• Is there a statewide coalition, task force or council to inform policy and programmatic decisions? • If so, does it include justice-impacted individuals alongside state leaders, the agencies and entities responsible for higher education programs in correctional facilities, community-based organizations and the business community?
Consider data-informed policy decisions.	• What existing data do you have on education programs in prisons? • How can you use data to align programs with workforce needs? • Are prison education programs included in state postsecondary completion goals?

State Example

In January 2024, then-Gov. Roy Cooper of **North Carolina** signed an executive order creating a coordinated effort across state government agencies to develop a Strategic Plan for Reentry 2030. Among the plan's goals is for the department of adult corrections to increase access to and completion of education programs in state correctional facilities. The department, in collaboration with the other cabinet-level agencies, created a strategic plan that includes cross-agency goals, objectives and strategies to ensure a successful reentry for individuals who are returning to their communities after incarceration. One of its early accomplishments was to create a comprehensive catalog of education and program resources at each correctional facility.

Financial Aid

The rising cost of postsecondary education is a barrier many students face, and incarcerated learners are likely to feel it even more acutely. Congress' action to end the nearly 30-year ban on Pell Grant access for incarcerated individuals was a big step forward. By one estimate, it made as many as 463,000 people eligible for these funds. However, Pell Grants often do not cover the full cost of attendance. State financial aid programs can help fill the gap, but students may still face barriers in accessing them.

Barriers identified by the community of practice include:

- **Students often lack information about available financial aid and application processes.** Financial aid programs can be difficult for any student to navigate. That difficulty is compounded for students in carceral settings who may not have access to advisors or access to internet and computers to do the research themselves. Most states have multiple programs that oftentimes have different eligibility criteria. Knowing what is available, what is required for an application and how to complete an online application can be a daunting task.

- **State policies may limit access to state aid for incarcerated individuals.** Some state financial aid program policies contain provisions that make incarcerated individuals ineligible. Others may exclude students with criminal convictions. In addition, there may be eligibility requirements that are difficult for incarcerated people to meet, such as full-time enrollment.

- **Residency requirements may make access to in-state tuition rates and state aid unattainable.** Even if state policy allows incarcerated individuals to qualify for state aid programs, proving residency can be a barrier. State policy sets forth criteria students must meet to prove they are state residents to qualify for lower tuition rates established for in-state students and state financial aid programs. Incarceration may not count toward the required length of state residence. Further, students may be unable to produce documents proving they met residency requirements before incarceration.

Considerations for State Leaders

While restored access to Pell Grants may provide new opportunities for incarcerated learners, Pell Grants often fall short of covering the cost of postsecondary programs. Members of the community of practice identified several considerations for state leaders looking to expand access to state financial aid to fill the gap.

Key Considerations	Guiding Questions for State Leaders
Ask if correctional facilities provide information on available aid and how to apply, including assistance with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and other financial aid applications.	• Do facilities have designated personnel or partnerships in place to assist students who face barriers such as limited internet access and difficulty obtaining required documentation?
Review existing state policies to identify financial aid programs that preclude incarcerated individuals from receiving state financial aid, including college promise programs.	• Is legislation required to remove the restriction or can another policy mechanism be used?
Consider how residency requirements affect students' ability to qualify for in-state tuition and state financial aid.	• Are residents of correctional facilities considered state residents for tuition and aid purposes? • If not, can they access the documents required to establish residency?

State Example

State higher education institutions in **Utah** must grant resident student status for tuition purposes to individuals in a state correctional facility while they are enrolled in a course and for one year after release.

Student Supports

Student supports encompass the services, structures and relationships that help learners succeed during and after postsecondary programs. Participants in the community of practice consistently identified student supports as a critical factor influencing whether incarcerated learners can access, persist in and complete postsecondary programs. While program availability has expanded in states, the broader infrastructure for student support remains uneven and underdeveloped.

Barriers identified by community of practice participants include:

- **Inconsistent access to technology and dedicated learning spaces limits students' ability to participate in courses.** Many students have no quiet or consistent place to study and often rely on noisy dayrooms, overcrowded libraries with limited hours or their own cramped living space. These challenges are made worse by the fact that 24% of programs report no access to devices and only 15% offer regular internet access.

- **Students face disruptions due to frequent facility transfers especially when comparable programs are not available at the receiving facility.** These transfers often result in lost credits, delayed enrollment and disengagement as students may be forced to restart coursework due to misaligned curricula. They face challenges such as lost study materials and inconsistent support at new facilities.

- **Student support roles are often understaffed, which may result in a lack of access to academic and career advising especially near release.** Without dedicated staff focused on student advising, responsibilities are commonly fragmented across faculty, correctional staff and external organizations, who may lack the time, training or access to students they need to fully support them.

- **Gaps in post-release access to education and employment are affected by limited housing, transportation and advising post-release.** These disruptions often result in missed appointments, difficulty maintaining employment or training, or complete disengagement from education and workforce programs.

Considerations for State Leaders

Barriers to student supports often determine whether students can meaningfully engage in academic work and sustain progress. Community of practice members stressed that without reliable advising structures, peer support, access to learning tools and coordinated reentry guidance, even strong instructional programs may fall short in advancing long-term outcomes for incarcerated learners. Student supports must be intentional, sustained and responsive to the specific experiences and challenges of learners in carceral settings.

Key Considerations	Guiding Questions for State Leaders
Assess the availability of essential academic infrastructure within correctional facilities, including access to laptops, secure digital platforms and dedicated learning spaces.	• How do technology policies, procurement practices, and space allocations align with instructional goals and desired student outcomes?
Review how correctional facilities account for students' education status during transfer decisions.	• Can you create formal transfer agreements between correctional facilities and partner colleges? • Can you establish internal codes or designations to flag students enrolled in higher education programs so that program continuation can be factored into transfer planning?
Survey existing capacity in student support roles. The addition of full-time education liaisons or navigators and investing in peer mentoring, such as paying incarcerated students to support other students, can strengthen student persistence and motivation.	• Do current staffing levels meet the needs of all current and prospective students?

Key Considerations	Guiding Questions for State Leaders
Evaluate whether current advising models allow for ongoing communication between correctional facilities and postsecondary institutions and whether formal agreements (e.g., MOUs) or cross-agency protocols are in place to support student transitions.	• Do advisors have access to relevant release timelines, reentry service directories or shared data systems that support continuity of advising?
Develop pathways for incorporating education and workforce guidance into reentry planning to ensure connections to community colleges, job training programs or support services are established prior to release.	• Can you clarify roles across agencies to strengthen paths to community-based partners for more consistent engagement after incarceration?

State Example

Virginia's Stand Tall — Stay Strong — Succeed Together Reentry Initiative, established through Executive Order 36 in 2024, identifies education as a core component of reentry and directs executive branch agencies to coordinate efforts that expand access to postsecondary and workforce training opportunities for incarcerated individuals. It specifically calls for alignment between the Department of Corrections, the Virginia Community College System, and other entities to support the continuity of education and training during and after incarceration.

To address persistent barriers such as limited access to technology and instructional continuity, the initiative also includes a strategy to increase remote learning and program delivery within Department of Corrections facilities. This strategy is being implemented with the support of the Virginia Information Technologies Agency and the Department of Housing and Community Development with the goal of maximizing digital connectivity and affordability. In addition, the order's focus on improved data sharing and case management helps reduce fragmentation across agencies. This cross-agency initiative aligns with the intent of state law, which encourages the development of pre-release programs that prepare individuals for successful reintegration through access to education, workforce and related supports.

Final Thoughts

Efforts to expand postsecondary education in prison increasingly depend on how states approach governance, financial aid and student supports. Governance shapes how decisions are made and who is responsible for aligning efforts across departments of corrections, higher education and other state agencies. The structure and clarity of these relationships, as well as the inclusion of people with lived experience in decision making, affect how well education programs are coordinated and how consistently they are delivered across facilities.

Financial aid policies affect whether incarcerated students can access the funding they need, and factors like FAFSA completion, documentation access and residency requirements are often barriers to participation. Student supports, including advising, access to technology and coordinated reentry planning help determine whether students can start, stay enrolled and continue their education after release.

While each policy area presents distinct policy questions, they are closely connected in practice as policy decisions in one area affect outcomes in another. States can move this work forward in different ways, from a statute amendment to launching a statewide initiative — what matters is that state approaches are coordinated and sustained to improve both access and persistence for incarcerated learners.

About the Authors

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