

November 10, 2025



Virginia's Correctional Education Programs

Commission Briefing

Study resolution

- Review correctional education and vocational training programs, including their:
 - availability and design
 - alignment with inmate and labor market needs
 - funding and staffing
 - participant outcomes
- Review the feasibility of expanding educational programs for jail inmates

Commission resolution (November 2024)

Primary research activities

- Interviewed key stakeholders in Virginia and nationally
 - DOC leadership and central office staff
 - DOC facility wardens, principals, and teachers
 - Staff at other state agencies
 - National experts and corrections staff in other states
- Visited six correctional facilities
- Surveyed DOC facility staff and jail officials
- Analyzed DOC data on inmate demographics, program participation and waitlists, and post-release outcomes
- Reviewed national research and other states' approaches

DOC = Virginia Department of Corrections

In brief

Recent participants in DOC's education programs had better employment and rearrest outcomes shortly after release than non-participants.

A small proportion of DOC inmates participate in educational programs, and demand significantly exceeds capacity.

Considering recidivism risk in enrollment decisions would help DOC more efficiently use limited educational resources.

DOC should ensure that its adult basic education program appropriately balances GED attainment with improvement among inmates at lower academic levels.

In brief (cont'd)

Effectiveness of CTE programs is undermined by lack of connection with job opportunities and frequent transfers.

To expand postsecondary programming, DOC central office needs a more active role in program administration.

Addressing DOC security and teaching staff vacancies, IT maintenance problems, and budgeting issues would improve access to and effectiveness of DOC's educational programs.

Most jails reported providing some educational programs, but shorter incarcerations make expansion less cost-effective than at DOC facilities.

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Background

Participant outcomes

Unmet demand and prioritization

Adult basic education (ABE) program

Career and technical education (CTE) programs

Postsecondary programs

Supporting program access and effectiveness

Educational programs in local and regional jails

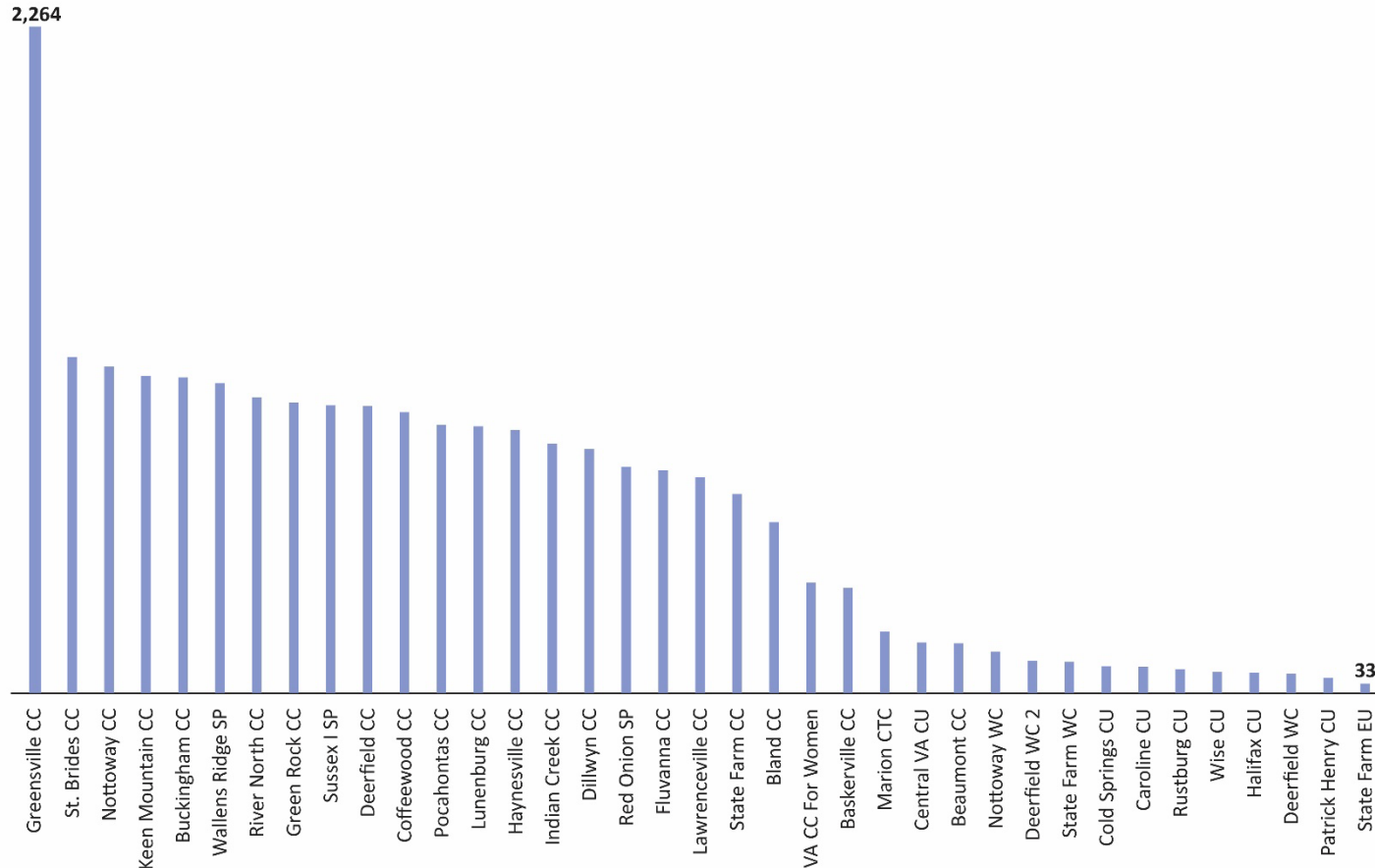
Educational programs are intended to increase employability and reduce recidivism risk

- State law specifies that a core purpose of state correctional facilities is to train and educate inmates
- Educational programs are intended to “assist prisoners in the successful transition to free society and gainful employment”
- Reducing inmates’ recidivism risk is also an explicit goal of educational programs, according to DOC policy
- National research indicates an association between educational program participation and reduced recidivism

DOC required to establish a range of educational programs for inmates

- State law requires DOC to provide
 - Adult basic education (including elementary, secondary, and special education)
 - Career and technical education
 - Postsecondary education
- DOC required to develop a “functional literacy” program for inmates testing below a 12th-grade level
 - To teach inmates “education skills necessary to function independently in society,” including reading, writing, and math

DOC had 22,742 inmates in its 37 facilities as of February 2025



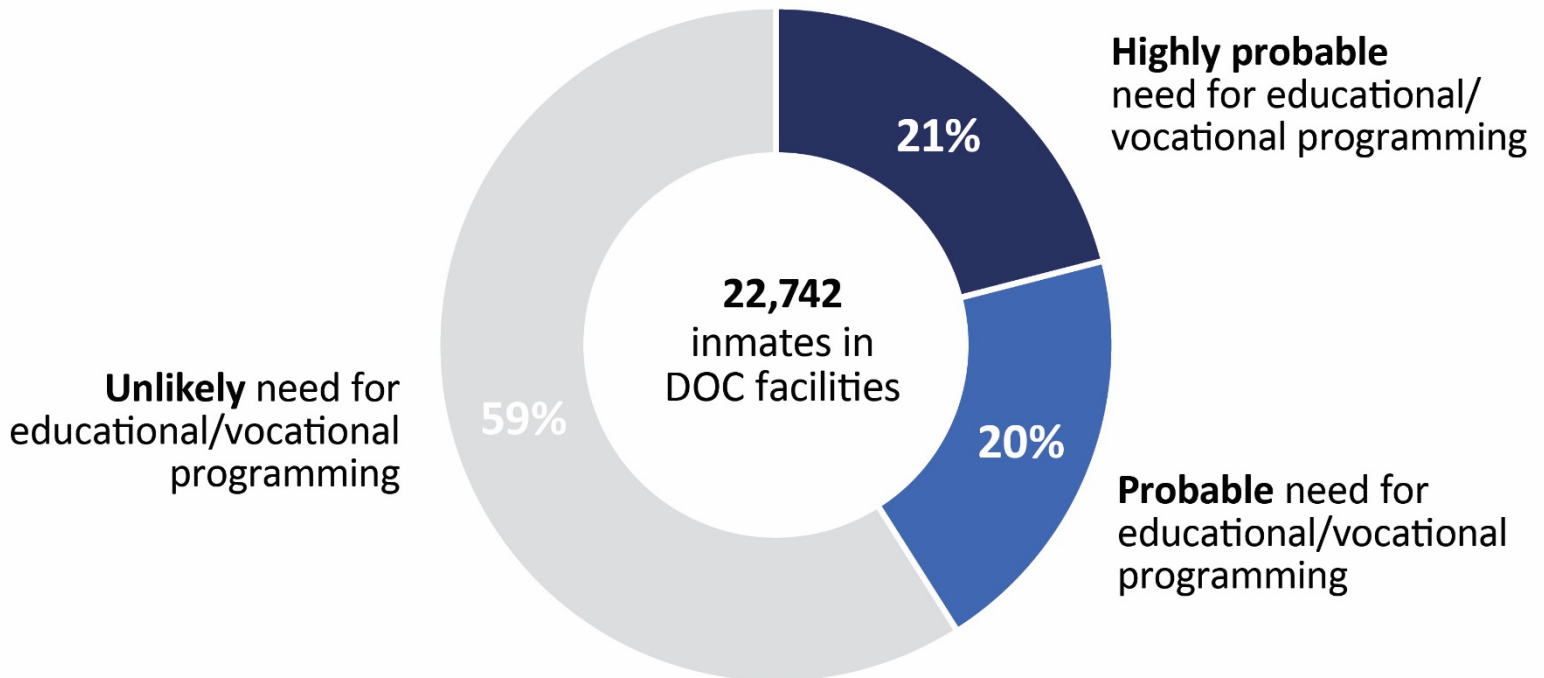
“CC” = correctional center. “CU” = correctional unit. “WC” = work center, “CTC” = correctional treatment center, “EU” = enterprise unit, and “SP” = state prison.

DOC assesses inmates' recidivism risk and programming needs

- Correctional programs should focus on inmates at high risk of reoffending and target “criminogenic risk factors”
- DOC uses COMPAS assessment to estimate each inmate's recidivism risk level and evaluate their specific program needs to reduce recidivism risk
 - Completed during initial intake and updated periodically
- Vocational/education component includes 12 questions that cover an inmate's education and work history and their perceived current need for this programming

COMPAS = Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions

DOC has determined that ~40% of inmates need educational programs to reduce their recidivism risk



Notes: As of Feb. 2025. Educational or vocational need is indicated by the inmate's most recent COMPAS assessment. A "probable" or "highly probable" need for educational or vocational programming indicates that participation in those programs would likely reduce their risk of recidivating to some extent. Information was not available for about 150 inmates.

Education is primarily state-funded and accounts for a small share of DOC's budget

- In FY25, total appropriations for correctional education were \$36.8 million
 - About 2% of DOC's total \$1.58 billion budget
- On a per-inmate, inflation-adjusted basis, funding for correctional education has increased 22% since FY19, largely because of a decline in the inmate population

DOC offers three types of educational programs; about 20 percent of inmates are enrolled

Type of educational program	Participation required or voluntary?	Program taught by	# of DOC facilities provided (Feb 2025)	Enrollment as of Feb 2025 (% of all DOC inmates)
Adult basic education (ABE)	Required if no verified high school credential	DOC teachers	34 of 37	2,642 (12%)
Career and technical education (CTE)	Voluntary	DOC teachers	29 of 37	1,509 (7%)
Postsecondary	Voluntary	Instructors hired by higher education institutions	14 of 37	446 (2%)

Note: Enrollment figures are not unduplicated and include about 135 inmates who were enrolled in multiple types of educational programs in February 2025.

Providing educational programs in a correctional setting is challenging

- Security staffing shortages make safe implementation of education programs difficult
 - In July 2025, DOC had 1,534 correctional officer (CO) vacancies; 16 facilities had CO vacancy rates over 20%
- Facilities may need to implement temporary or extended lockdowns, which can disrupt programs
- Other inmate needs (e.g., mental health or substance abuse treatment) may need to be prioritized
- Some inmates are unable to engage productively in a classroom setting with teachers or other inmates

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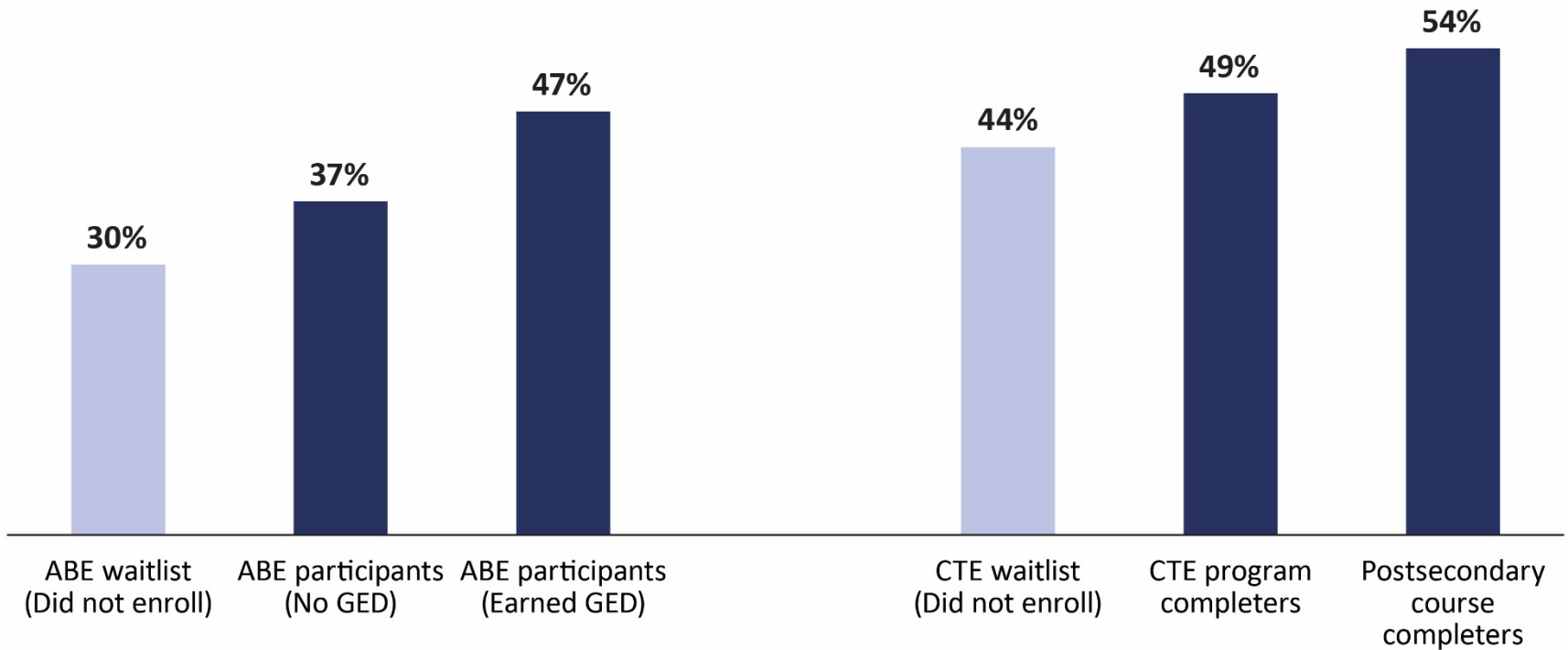
Educational programs in local and regional jails

Finding

Inmates who participated in educational programs in recent years have typically had better post-release employment and rearrest outcomes than those who remained on a program waitlist.

Participants in DOC's educational programs were more likely to be employed after release

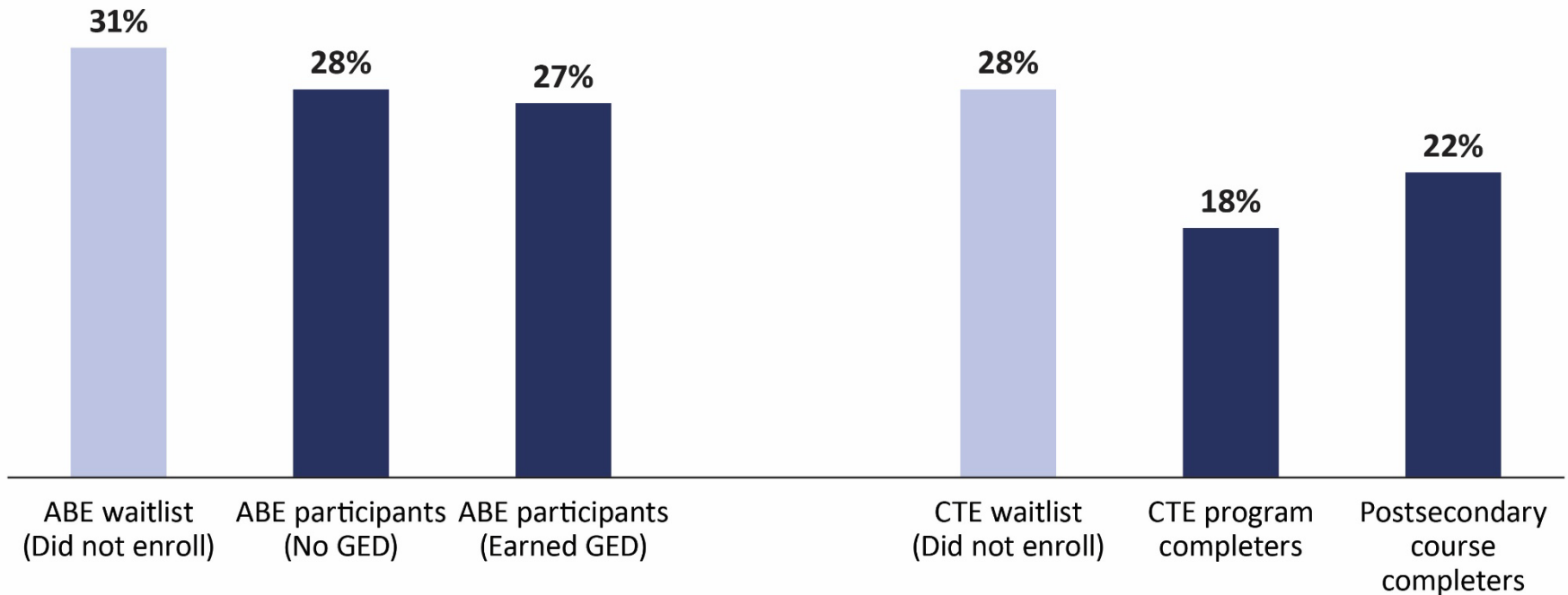
Percentage of DOC inmates employed in second full quarter after release
(April 2022 to June 2024 Releases)



Note: All differences in employment levels were found to be statistically significant. Nearly half of postsecondary course completers also participated in CTE, and whether their outcomes are due to postsecondary, CTE, or a combination cannot be determined. More details on methods are in Appendix B.

Participants in DOC's educational programs had lower 12-month rearrest rates

Percentage of DOC inmates rearrested within 12 months of release
(April 2022 through December 2023 DOC releases)



Note: Differences in rearrest rates were not found to be statistically significant. Uses Virginia State Police data reported to DOC that was available up to December 2024. Nearly half of postsecondary course completers also participated in CTE. More details on methods are in Appendix B.

CTE and postsecondary completers also earned higher wages than inmates on the waitlist

- Compared with inmates on the CTE waitlist who were unable to enroll, course completers earned higher post-release wages, on average
 - CTE completers: \$489 more per quarter*
 - Postsecondary course completers: \$550 more per quarter*

*These differences in wages were found to be statistically significant.

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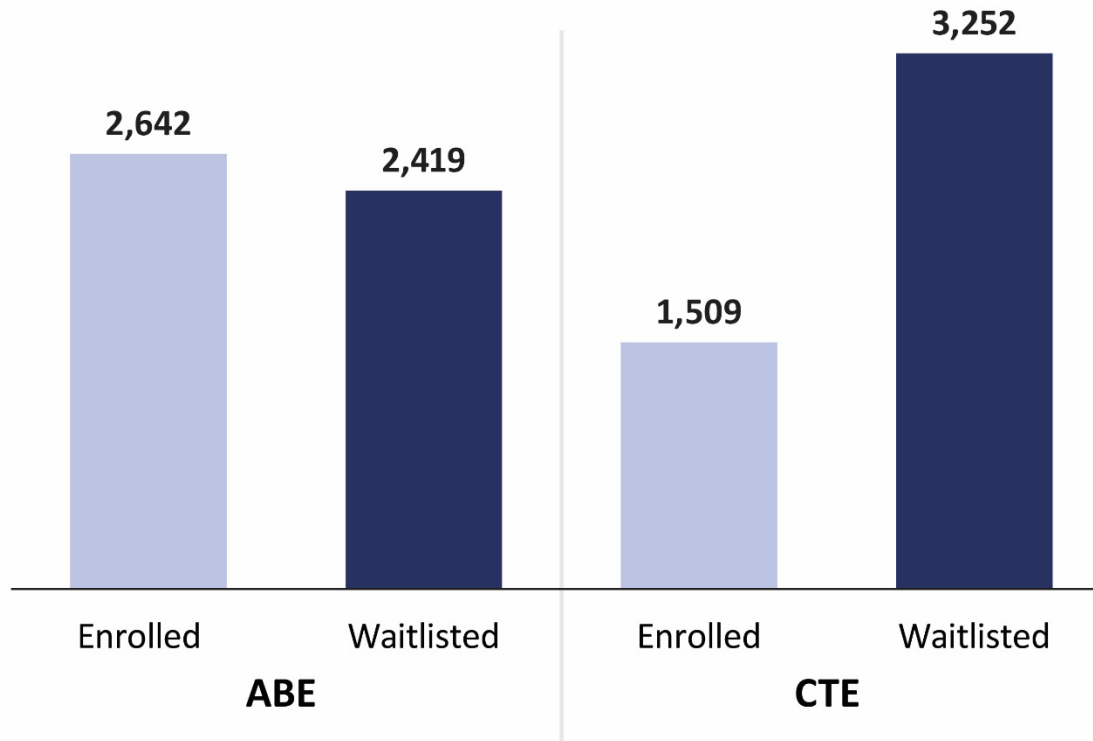
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Demand for educational programs significantly exceeds DOC's capacity.

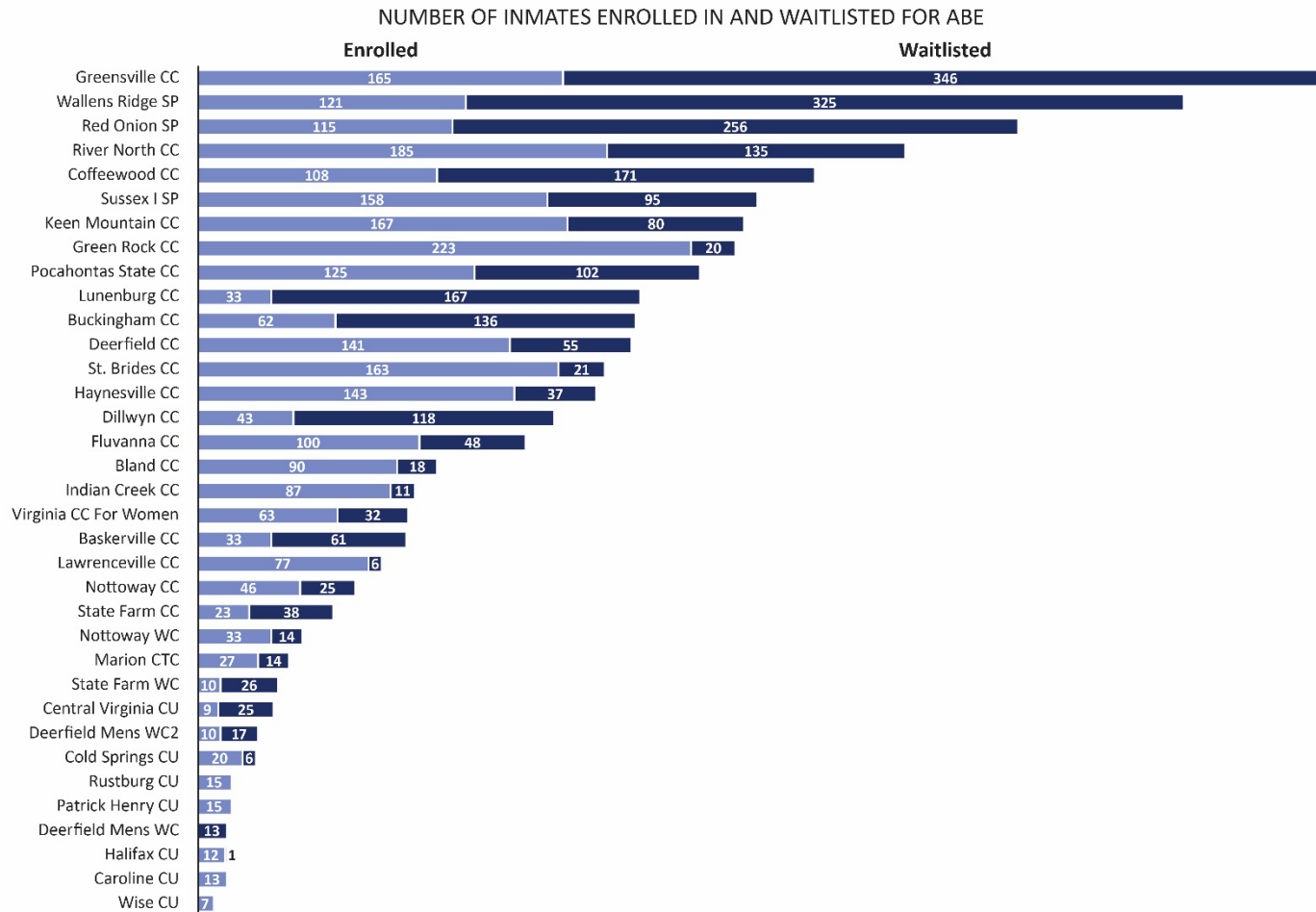
Waitlists are significant for ABE and CTE programs

DOC inmates enrolled in or waitlisted for ABE and CTE programs
(February 2025)



Note: DOC central office does not maintain a waitlist for postsecondary programs. Therefore, demand for these programs is unknown.

Waitlists exist at most facilities (ABE example)

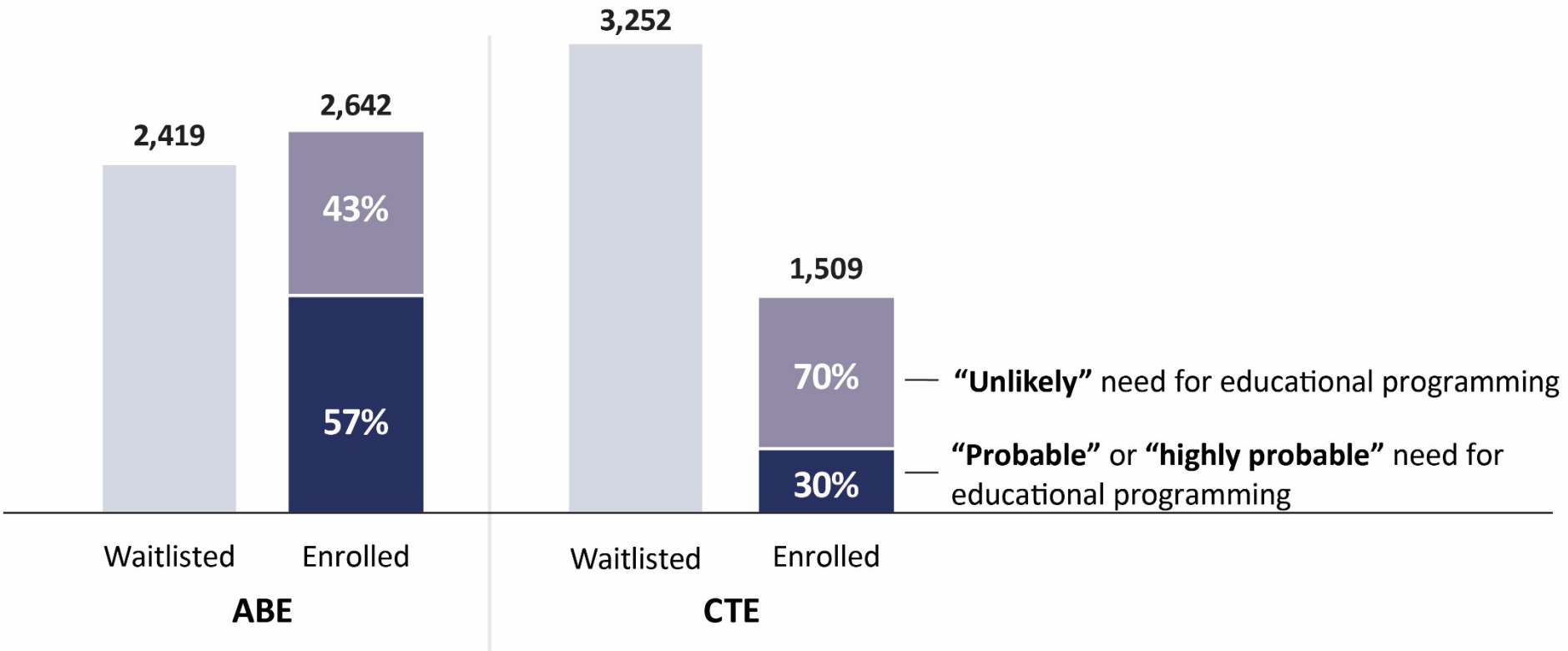


Note: As of February 2025. “CC” = correctional center. “CU” = correctional unit. “WC” = work center, “CTC” = correctional treatment center, and “SP” = state prison.

Finding

DOC does not consider inmates' recidivism risk when making educational program enrollment decisions, even though reducing recidivism is a primary goal of the programs.

Despite lengthy waitlists, DOC enrolls many inmates determined not to need educational programming



Note: Assessed need of “unlikely,” “probable,” or “highly probable” reflects the most recent score the inmate had received on the vocational/education component of the COMPAS assessment.

DOC does not consider educational or vocational needs in enrollment prioritization decisions

- DOC policy requires most program assignments (e.g., substance abuse) be based on “the results of the inmate’s risk/needs assessment”
 - Requirement does not extend to educational programs
- Doing this for educational programs would ensure limited resources are prioritized for those most likely to benefit
 - 548 inmates released in 2024 had been determined by DOC to need educational programming and were on a waitlist, but were not enrolled before release
- Should be considered along with other factors in enrollment decisions (e.g., remaining sentence length)

Recommendation

DOC should specify in its operating procedures that principals, when making educational program enrollment decisions, should consider whether DOC has determined that an inmate needs educational programming to reduce their recidivism risk.

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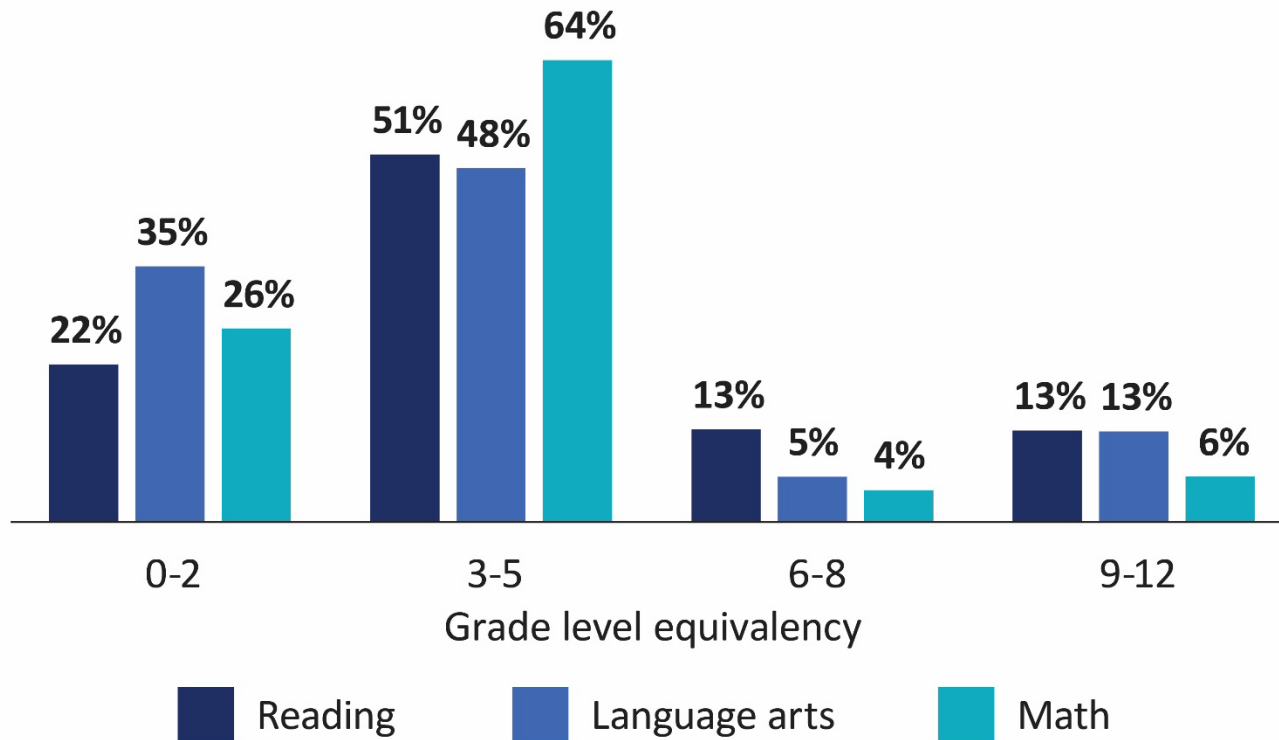
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Educational programs in local and regional jails

Most ABE-eligible inmates have elementary-level academic skills

SKILL LEVELS OF ABE-ELIGIBLE INMATES, FEBRUARY 2025



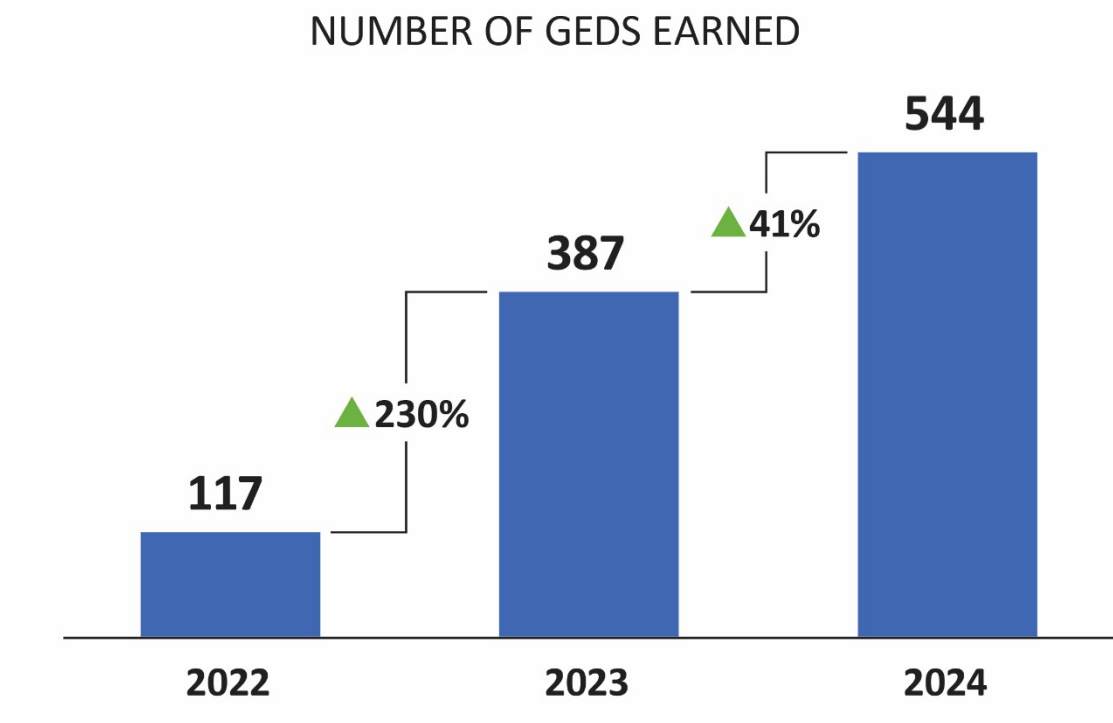
Finding

DOC has increased GED attainment in recent years, but the agency needs to ensure sufficient support is provided for lower-level learners.

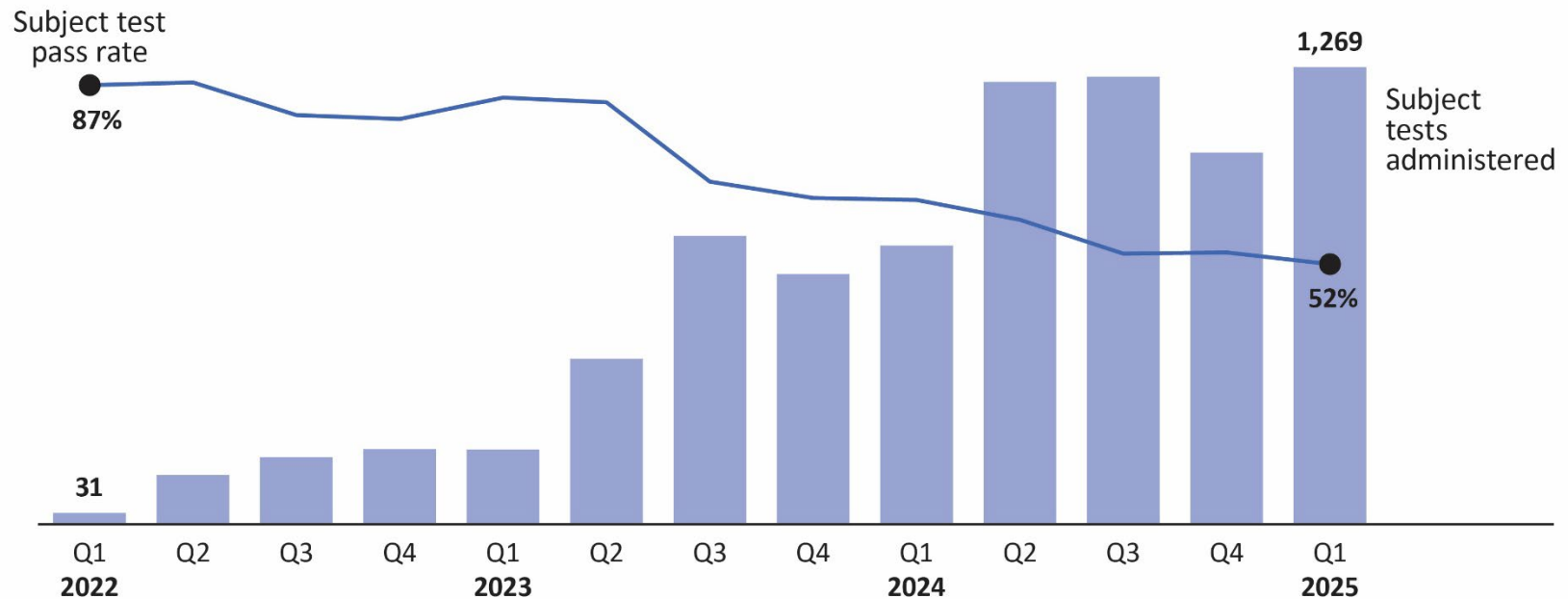
In recent years, DOC leadership has increased emphasis on GED attainment

- GED is Virginia's only approved high school equivalency credential
- Student attains GED by passing four GED subject tests
 - Reasoning through language arts, mathematical reasoning, science, social studies
- DOC leadership set statewide goal to increase GED attainment
 - Revised policies for assessing student eligibility for testing
 - Increased staffing and funding for GED testing

Substantially more DOC inmates have earned their GED in recent years



DOC's GED subject test pass rates are declining, indicating more students are testing before ready



Other data indicates declining student readiness to take GED tests

- Declining pass rates for all four subject tests between 2022 and 2025
 - Ranged from an 11 percentage point decline (Social Studies) to a 54 percentage point decline (Language Arts)
- Increasing unsuccessful test retakes
 - Retakes increased from 5% of all subject tests in 2022 to 25% in 2024
 - Pass rates on retakes are lower than initial test pass rates
- Declining scores among those who did pass the tests

Some ABE teachers noted positive impacts from GED emphasis, but others raised concerns

- Some teachers reported benefits, including easier access to testing and greater prioritization of education at their facilities
- More frequently, teachers and other DOC staff expressed concerns about the recent focus on GED attainment
 - Students testing before they are ready
 - Students retesting without sufficient time for remediation
 - Students memorizing information to pass a test, while not learning skills needed to succeed after release

Revised testing approach could ensure student readiness and promote program quality

- Requiring readiness assessment before students take GED subject tests aligns with common practices
 - VDOE, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and at least nine other states require a minimum score on a readiness assessment
- Would be a more efficient use of public funds
- DOC should use GED test results to identify and address skill gaps

Recommendations

The DOC should

- develop and implement an improved approach for assessing student readiness to take the GED; and
- monitor GED score reports to identify any skills that are not being consistently acquired by test takers, and use this information to inform program curriculum, learning material, and teacher training decisions.

Overemphasis on GED testing likely diverting resources and attention from lower-level learners

- DOC teachers, principals, and central office staff expressed concerns that focus on GED testing has diverted attention and resources away from other students
 - Most ABE-eligible inmates have elementary skill levels
- DOC has inconsistently collected data needed to understand skill growth among lower-level learners
- More prudent to spend resources to improve the quality of ABE program for lower-level learners, who are statistically more likely to reoffend, than on repeated testing

Recommendations

DOC should

- focus more in its ABE program on improving lower-functioning inmates' foundational literacy skills and grade progression, and focus less on the frequent administration of GED tests;
- require that correctional facilities regularly report to the DOC director on all educational gains, such as grade-level improvements in reading skills, not only GED attainment.

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CTE programs available at most facilities, but relatively few inmates participate before release

- State law requires DOC to provide inmates with opportunities to participate in CTE to the extent feasible
- Intended to prepare students for specific careers by providing knowledge, skills, and hands-on training
- Most DOC facilities offer CTE programs, but courses vary
 - Examples: Business Software Applications, Custodial Maintenance, Electrical, Welding, Horticulture, Plumbing, HVAC/Refrigeration, Masonry
- Relatively few inmates able to participate before release
 - ~1,100 inmates released in 2024 (16%) had participated

Finding

DOC's CTE programs are generally well designed and overseen, but their effectiveness is undermined by a lack of connection with employers prior to release and frequent inmate facility transfers by DOC.

CTE programs meet state staffing requirements and have relevant curricula and technology

- Most DOC CTE programs focus on in-demand jobs and skills, and jobs that pay self-sufficient wages
- Instructors meet VDOE licensing requirements
- Curricula & technology generally align with industry needs
 - Most CTE instructors reported that the curriculum (92%) and equipment (74%) used in their programs meet current industry standards and practices
- All programs receive routine internal and external oversight
 - Recent external audits determined DOC's CTE programs complied with standards and requirements

USDOE = U.S. Department of Education; VDOE = Virginia Department of Education

Lack of a formal process to connect inmates with relevant jobs undermines CTE's effectiveness

- Recent CTE completers had higher employment rates than non-participants, but almost half (49%) were not employed in the first full quarter after release
- DOC has no formal process to make relevant employers aware of CTE programs and completers nearing release
- DOC recently piloted a business developer position to engage welding and manufacturing employers on behalf of its welding program (federally funded)
 - Additional positions could increase CTE completers' employment rates

About half of CTE participants do not complete their program, and transfers are a leading cause

- Greater attention by DOC to its facility transfer practices would increase the impact of CTE programs and state funds to support them
- CTE programs had a 47% completion rate in recent years
 - Transfers second most common reason for non-completion
 - Inmates rarely able to resume their program at new facility
- Education and facility staff can request a “transfer hold,” but requests and approvals are inconsistent
- Transfers may be warranted for various reasons, but decisions should consider inmates’ CTE participation

Recommendation

DOC should (i) develop clear criteria for using temporary transfer holds for inmates in CTE programs and (ii) require classification staff to use these criteria to guide their facility transfer decisions for CTE participants.

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About half of DOC's major facilities offer at least one postsecondary program

- Most postsecondary programs are new; prompted by Pell Grant eligibility restoration
- Only about 2% of inmates participate
- Typically taught on-site by an instructor employed by a Virginia higher education institution
 - DOC provides space, administrative, and staffing support
- Funding sources vary, but may include Pell Grants, FastForward funding, and other forms of financial aid
- 2025 legislation (Del. Carr) sought to expand postsecondary programs to every DOC facility by 2030

Finding

Several administrative changes would improve the operation of postsecondary programs at DOC facilities.

Several challenges will hinder postsecondary implementation and expansion if not addressed

- Higher education institutions report frequent administrative delays from DOC central office
- DOC lacks operational policies and procedures for managing and implementing postsecondary programs
 - Challenges instructors' ability to provide classes comparable to those provided to traditional college students
 - Example: Allowable materials vary across facilities of same security level and depend on each warden's preferences
- Some programs depend heavily on DOC educational staff volunteering for administrative or security responsibilities
 - Not sustainable over the long term

Recommendations

DOC should

- elevate its new college coordinator position to report directly to the DOC superintendent;
- develop and maintain operating procedures for the administration of its postsecondary programs; and
- propose and negotiate cost-sharing arrangements with relevant higher education institutions to offset its costs, where such cost-sharing arrangements are feasible.

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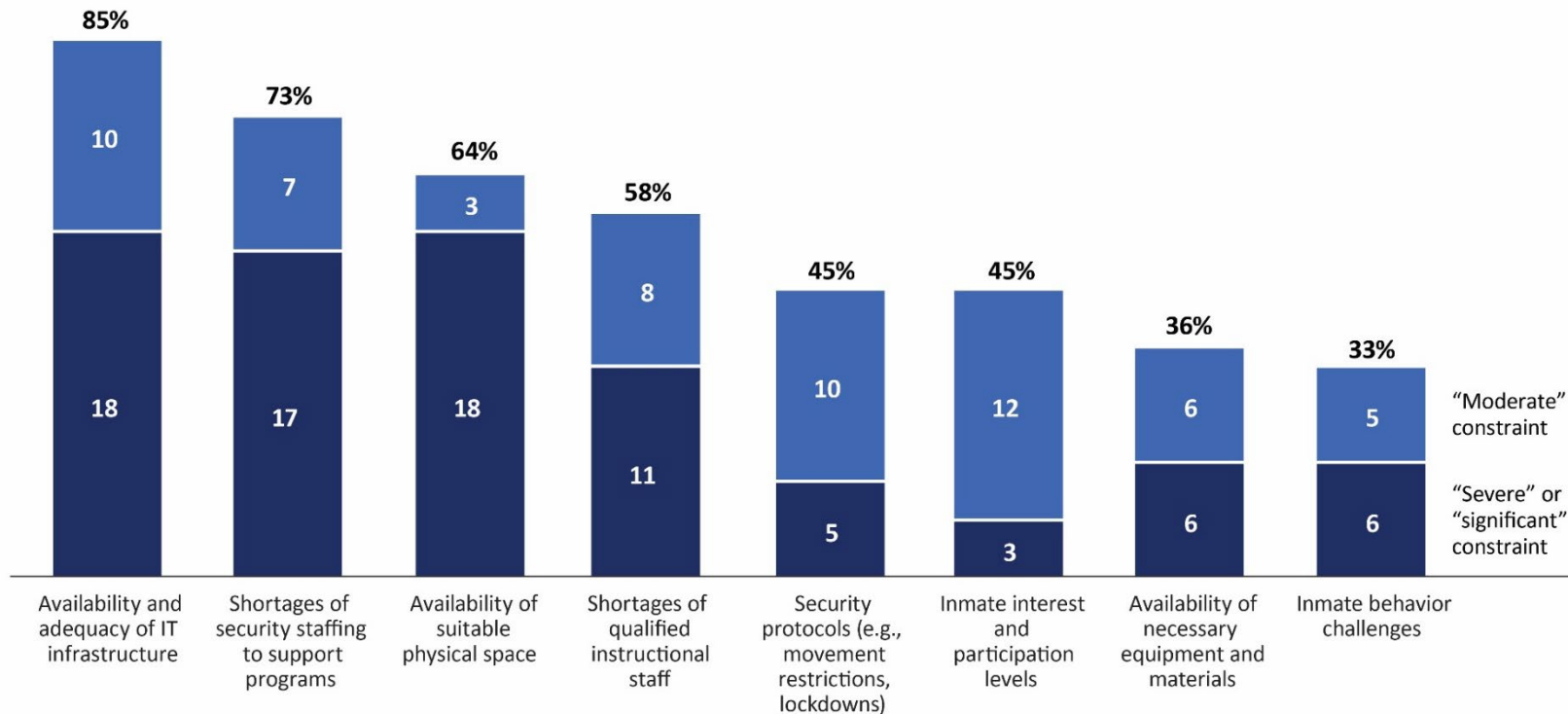
Educational programs in local and regional jails

Finding

Several operational changes at DOC could improve educational programming access and efficiency.

Surveyed wardens and principals reported several constraints to expanding programs

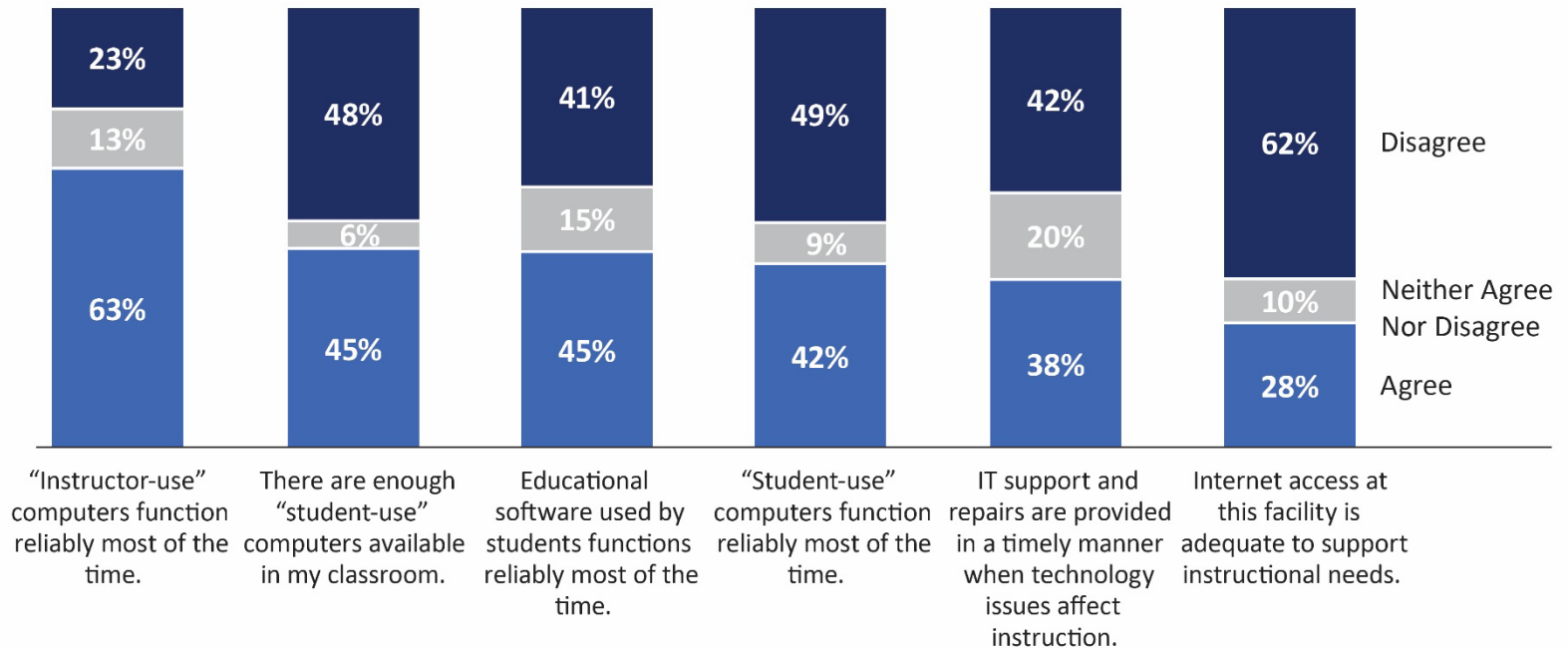
PLEASE RATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS IS CURRENTLY A CONSTRAINT TO PROVIDING NEW OR EXPANDING EXISTING EDUCATIONAL OR CTE PROGRAMS AT YOUR FACILITY:



N=33 facility wardens and principals

Note: The column totals do not add to 33 because some of the 33 wardens who responded did not identify some of these factors as constraints.

DOC teachers and principals report frequent classroom technology maintenance problems



N=135 facility teachers and principals

Improving timeliness of hiring teachers would enable DOC to enroll more inmates in classes

- Many instructional positions vacant as of May 2025 (ABE 15%, CTE 14%)
- Education positions vacant for median of 249 days
 - Delays in DOC hiring process, uncompetitive compensation, and perceptions about working in a prison are key reasons for hiring challenges, according to wardens and principals
- DOC holds a portion of its educational positions vacant
 - DOC estimates it needs \$4.3 million to fund these positions
- Filling 28 vacant CTE and ABE teacher positions would allow estimated additional 700–1,100 inmates to enroll

Reducing avoidable security-related disruptions to class would improve attendance, efficiency

- Numerous security-related challenges can impact delivery of educational programming
- Educational programs at some DOC facilities experience regular security-related disruptions
- DOC policy requires wardens to “minimize cancellation of educational programs to the extent possible”
 - 24% of principals and teachers disagreed that facility leaders were doing all they could to minimize disruptions
- DOC recently started to collect data on disruptions and student attendance, but data is not fully reliable

Recommendations

DOC should

- identify the primary reasons for the lack of timely and effective support for educational technologies at DOC facilities and delays in filling teaching positions, and take appropriate steps to address these issues;
- ensure the information it collects on class cancellations and student absences is sufficiently reliable and useful to effectively track the frequency of and reasons for them; and
- share this information regularly with wardens to enable them to fulfill expectations that they minimize cancellations and other disruptions to educational programs.

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Educational programs in local and regional jails

Virginia's local and regional jails house both pre- and post-trial inmates

- Statewide average daily population in local and regional jails was 20,651 in February 2025
 - 54 percent were awaiting trial
 - 46 percent were either awaiting sentencing or serving all or a portion of their sentence in jail
- Some state-responsible inmates are held in jails
 - ~2,300 state-responsible inmates in local or regional jails in February 2025
 - Tend to have much shorter stays than those transferred to a DOC facility

Finding

Most jails reported providing some educational programs, but shorter incarcerations make expansion less cost-effective than at DOC facilities.

Most jails offer some form of inmate education, though not required by state law

- Of the 51 jails responding to JLARC requests:
 - 49 reported offering some form of adult education to inmates (e.g., ABE, special education, GED preparation classes)
 - 28 reported offering CTE programs
 - 11 reported offering postsecondary programs through partnerships with community colleges
- Format and enrollment of jails' educational programs vary widely

Information on educational programming was collected from 51 of the 56 jail authorities in the state (91 percent).

Jails reported constraints to expanding education programs, and short stays also limit options

- Most jails reported being able to meet demand for adult education, but not CTE and postsecondary programs
 - Most common barriers to meeting demand were limited funding, physical space, and instructional staff
- Several constraints make comprehensive educational programs less feasible than in prisons
 - Post-trial jail inmates have relatively short lengths of stay (~2 months on average vs. 4 years in a DOC facility)
 - Jail officials indicated many inmates have higher-priority needs—like mental health or substance abuse treatment

If expanding educational programs in jails, certain strategies could be considered

- Using self-guided tablet-based educational programs
 - 11 jails in Virginia reported offering these to their inmates
- Prioritizing shorter-term CTE programs over longer-term CTE programs
 - Examples: OSHA 10 and ServSafe certifications*
- Prioritizing ABE and CTE programs over postsecondary academic programs, which require more time to complete

*OSHA 10 (Occupational Safety and Health Administration 10) provides training for certain entry-level workers, including those in construction and manufacturing, on common job site safety and health hazards. ServSafe provides training for food service workers on best practices for safe food handling, preparation, and service to prevent foodborne illnesses.

JLARC staff for this report

Tracey Smith, Associate Director

Drew Dickinson, Project leader

Tess Hinteregger, Senior Legislative Analyst

Scarlett Saunders, Senior Associate Legislative Analyst

Hannah Garfinkel, Senior Associate Legislative Analyst