

Recommendations: Virginia's Correctional Education Programs

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Virginia Department of Corrections should conduct a one-time targeted review of inmate records to (i) identify all inmates who have not been properly screened for their eligibility for adult basic education (ABE) and (ii) either enroll all non-exempt, ABE-eligible inmates who are identified in the ABE program or place them on the program's waitlist. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Virginia Department of Corrections should take appropriate steps to ensure that, when circumstances prevent proper screening for adult basic education (ABE) eligibility upon initial intake, inmates are assessed for ABE eligibility as soon as practicable after intake and, if they are found eligible, enrolled in or placed on a waitlist for ABE. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Virginia Department of Corrections should annually utilize a portion of its educational programming budget to provide professional development to its adult basic education teachers. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) develop and implement an improved approach for assessing student readiness to take the GED test that reliably predicts students' likelihood of passing the GED and ensures consistency across facilities, and (ii) review and revise its approach for assessing student readiness on an ongoing basis as needed. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) monitor GED score reports to identify any skills that are not being consistently acquired by test takers, (ii) use this information to inform program curriculum, learning material, and teacher training decisions if skill gaps are identified, and (iii) share these reports with principals and teachers to inform programming at their facilities. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Virginia Department of Corrections should take steps within its adult basic education program to place a greater emphasis on (i) improving lower-functioning inmates' foundational literacy skills and progression from one academic grade level to the next and (ii) teaching students the skills and material necessary to earn their GED, and place less of an emphasis on frequently administering GED tests. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) regularly assess adult basic education program participants using the Test of Adult Basic Education, or a comparable assessment, (ii) use test score data to measure program performance and identify needed program improvements, and (iii) as with GED reports, require regular reports to DOC leadership on trends in inmates' education gains, by facility, and by grade level. (Chapter 2)

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Virginia Department of Corrections should evaluate its Electrical program and develop a plan to either (i) improve the existing program's curriculum and re-entry support or (ii) replace it with one or more career and technical education programs that would more effectively prepare inmates for high-demand employment opportunities upon release. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Virginia Department of Corrections should incorporate an analysis of relevant labor market data maintained by the Virginia Office of Education Economics into its triennial reviews of career and technical education programs to (i) ensure the occupations and credentials targeted by each program are in high demand, (ii) identify new programming that would align with newly identified high-demand occupations, and (iii) take steps to modify its programming as necessary and feasible. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 10

The General Assembly may wish to consider including in the Appropriation Act (i) funding for three business developer positions to help inmates who participate in the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) career and technical education (CTE) programs prepare to obtain employment after release, and (ii) language directing DOC to report on the post-release employment outcomes of CTE students and the extent to which additional business developer positions are needed, if any. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 11

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) develop clear criteria for using temporary transfer holds for inmates in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and (ii) require designated staff to use these criteria to guide their transfer decisions for CTE participants. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 12

The Virginia Department of Corrections should elevate the position of the college coordinator to report directly to the department's superintendent of education. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 13

The Virginia Department of Corrections should develop and maintain operating procedures for the administration of its postsecondary education programs that, at a minimum, address the use of educational materials, waitlist management, and program eligibility. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 14

The Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC), in collaboration with the Virginia Community College System and other participating higher education institutions, should develop a process for (i) documenting the administrative and security costs to DOC of providing each existing and proposed postsecondary program, (ii) documenting higher education institutions' costs and revenues for each program; and (iii) negotiating a cost-sharing arrangement to offset DOC costs with net revenues, if any, earned by the higher education institutions when feasible. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 15

The Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC), with the assistance of the Virginia Community College System, should (i) evaluate whether a program other than the Associate in General Studies would provide a postsecondary credential that is more useful to inmates after release from DOC custody and, (ii) if a more useful credential is identified, replace the Associate in General Studies program with it. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 16

The Virginia Department of Corrections should require that any memorandum of understanding with a higher education institution to provide the Associate in General Studies degree program at a correctional facility include assurances that the higher education institution will assist inmates as needed with transferring their course credits and credentials to a bachelor's degree program. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 17

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) specify in its operating procedures that principals, when making educational program enrollment decisions, should give consideration to enrolling inmates who have been identified through the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Services (COMPAS) assessment as needing educational or vocational programming to reduce their risk of re-offending after release, and (ii) ensure principals have ready access to inmates' COMPAS assessment results. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 18

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) review the information collected from correctional facilities on class cancellations and student absences to determine whether additional or different information is needed to effectively track the frequency of and reasons for them; (ii) take steps to ensure that the information is collected and reported to the central office consistently across correctional facilities; and (iii) provide this information to wardens regularly to help them minimize disruptions to educational programs. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 19

The Virginia Department of Corrections should amend its policies to clarify that wardens are expected to minimize inmates' late arrival to class to the extent safe and practicable. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 20

The Virginia Department of Corrections should (i) identify the primary causes of delays in filling vacant instructor positions for educational programs, and (ii) take appropriate steps to improve the timeliness in filling these positions. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 21

The Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) should take steps to ensure that its unit heads, including the DOC superintendent, have sufficient, accurate, and timely information to regularly monitor spending and unspent balances within their respective programs. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 22

The Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) should establish specific financial controls to ensure that all funds appropriated to DOC for education are used exclusively to support educational programs. (Chapter 5)

RECOMMENDATION 23

The Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) should (i) identify the causes of the lack of timely and effective support for educational technologies at DOC facilities; (ii) take appropriate steps to address the causes; and (iii) request additional funding for personnel if an insufficient number of IT support staff is a primary cause. (Chapter 5)
