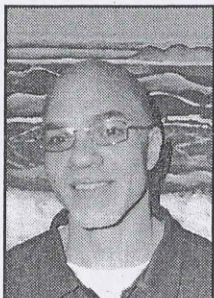


Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

Education vs Incarceration



Matthew Hattley

After several years of researching statistics regarding education and prisons, I've concluded that it would be much cheaper and more productive to educate rather than incarcerate. Education is the way to show individuals where they are making mistakes, the kind that lead to spending years in here.

Statistics already prove that the higher a person's level of education, the less likely they are to commit a crime or reoffend. Receiving an adequate education builds integrity and self-esteem. It also provides productive and marketable skills with which to compete in today's tough job market. The more time someone spends hanging-out on the streets, the greater their chances of getting into serious trouble.

Currently, it costs taxpayers about \$70,000 a year to keep someone in state prison. Oddly enough, it costs \$167,000 to do that on Rikers Island (disturbing, that, when you consider that a prisoner receives more services in a state facility as opposed to a city/county facility like Rikers).

Anyway, it is possible to educate someone for about \$15,000 a year. In essence, you could educate at least eleven people for less than what it costs to house just one of them on Rikers Island.

Here's a thought... Implement a program to offer individuals who face up to ten years of incarceration an alternative — education and/or job training. Hiring teachers at \$50-70,000 a year to teach groups of 15-20 individuals who would otherwise just be sitting in jail would save taxpayers millions. The program would pay for itself. And sure, those who fail to show up or make progress will simply get to serve their original sentence. Give everyone the opportunity to grasp the chance, and progress, before they are warehoused in prison.

A great starting point would be to create a curriculum similar to Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-Tech), located in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the very same school that President Obama chose to visit on October 25, 2013 (Congratulations, P-Tech!) If everyone had access to a school like that, the crime rate in New York City would decline dramatically — without the high costs of the NYPD's assistance. Plus, just think of all the money

saved from unnecessary lawsuits when we exclude the police. Education, not prison or physical force, is the logical answer.

Okay, taking someone from a less than educated state, and someone convicted of a crime, to place them in a position to obtain their GED or high school diploma and then allowing them to move on to a college degree and eventually a master's degree, would take about seven years, possibly eight. But even spending the money for seven or eight years worth of quality education would cost a fraction of the \$490-500,000 it would take to keep that person in prison for the same period of time. And even on a shorter sentence, with high likelihood of re-offending and re-arrest, you can add in the costs of police and courts, too, and none of those services are inexpensive. Best of all, once a person graduates with a degree their chances of committing a crime shrivel to slim to none (less than 1 percent). So not only is a lot of money saved, but communities are strengthened in the process, a real win-win situation.

As for those already incarcerated... since Pell grants are no longer available, each facility should strongly support and encourage surrounding colleges to offer and teach classes in that facility. This wouldn't have to cost the taxpayers a single cent. The college programs already available to prisoners are funded via private donations. Contrary to some popular beliefs, said contributors genuinely support granting prisoners a second chance at living a normal life in society. Unfortunately, funding these kinds of programs has never been a problem. The problem has been educators gaining access to the various prison facilities.

There's a fundamental social problem here. How can anyone expect specific impoverished communities to thrive, to get jobs, to start businesses, when such large percentages of teenagers and young adults are being incarcerated? Our community leaders and politicians need to focus on creating and implementing more educational and job training programs, not removing them! The primary objective should be keeping our youth home with their families and out of prison and the morgue. If you really want "safer streets" here's your opportunity to prove it.

Crime, drugs, prison — these corrosive things have a way of moving up the social ladder. Even those in a position of power can suffer the consequences of having a family member become involved, or perhaps wind up assaulted, robbed, even murdered. Drugs are everywhere; crime is not exclusively an "inner city problem." Prevention is so much better than reaction.

So, dear readers (and leaders)... do something that will benefit the entire state, not just the wealthy and privileged; support education over incarceration!