



U. S. Department of Justice

Office of the Deputy Attorney General

The Deputy Attorney General

Washington, D.C. 20530

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE ACTING DIRECTOR
FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS

FROM: Sally Q. Yates
Deputy Attorney General

SUBJECT: Building a School District in the Federal Bureau of Prisons

For more than 80 years, the Federal Bureau of Prisons has been committed to providing education, employment skills, and life skills training to federal inmates. These are critical public safety efforts. By preparing inmates for substantive opportunities beyond the prison gates, we reduce the likelihood that released inmates will commit future crimes, contribute to the health of our economy, and promote family unity. Given that 95 percent of the almost 190,000 inmates in federal custody will eventually be released back into our communities, it is our responsibility to ensure that each individual is well-equipped to lead productive lives after they repay their debt to society. I know that you are committed to that mission.

Education is an essential tool for reducing recidivism and improving reentry outcomes. Research shows that inmates who participate in correctional education programs have 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not, and that every dollar spent on prison education saves four to five dollars on the costs of re-incarceration. To maximize the public safety benefits that come from inmate education, we must fill gaps that inmates have in academic and employment skills. Prisons must ensure that education programs are grounded in a concrete, evidence-based strategy that will expand the quality, scope, and delivery of education services, particularly for inmates with literacy and special learning needs. Simply stated, in order to reduce recidivism and increase public safety, we must do all that we can to ensure that every inmate has access to a quality education.

The Bureau's current education program has been focused on helping inmates obtain General Equivalency Diplomas and pursue various vocational and technical training opportunities. However, the Department's recent evaluation of the Bureau's education system, including an assessment by an outside consulting firm, identified significant opportunities to enhance education programming in areas such as adult literacy, special education, high school diplomas, and post-secondary education. The evaluation also revealed an urgent need for the Bureau to develop a comprehensive strategy that transforms the education system's structure, governance, and operations.

The Bureau has been working closely with stakeholders in both the public and private sectors to obtain insight regarding education best practices in traditional and correctional classrooms. With those practices in mind, the Bureau has already taken major steps to redesign its education system in order to deliver high-quality academic and occupational training programs to federal inmates. Notably, for the first time, the Bureau has established a semi-autonomous school district within the organization and has hired Amy Lopez, a veteran correctional educator, to serve as the school district's first superintendent/Chief Education Administrator (CEA). These critical first steps will help ensure that the Bureau's education programming is high-quality and consistently implemented throughout all institutions.

In support of the Bureau's demonstrated commitment to the new school district and the many critical steps that must be accomplished to ensure its success, I am directing that the Bureau take the following steps to continue this important work:

1. Ensure that the Bureau's school district is well-positioned for success by identifying and providing financial, human capital, and operational resources and support.

Our goal is to create pathways for inmates to succeed, regardless of their educational progress when they enter the system; we will meet them where they are and take them as far as they can go. The Bureau's school district – and the many educators and administrators within it – are critical to achieving this goal. In order to have a strong foundation for long-term success, the school district must have a more centralized organizational structure, improved allocation of financial and human resources, improved hiring practices, and more unified education programs across all institutions.

To ensure that the school district's new structure and educational impact can be fully realized, the Bureau must ensure that the Central Office is staffed with education experts in fields such as curriculum and instruction, career and technical education, and special populations (e.g., special learning needs and English as a Second Language). The Central Office should also have support experts in areas such as instructional technology, education finance, and program evaluation.

In addition to identifying and securing key Central Office personnel, the Bureau should ensure that the CEA has sufficient authority and autonomy to provide supervision, guidance, direction, and support for education personnel and resources, including Regional Education Administrators and local educators. With this authority, the CEA should work collaboratively with Regional Administrators and Wardens on issues of budget, selection and retention of personnel, and evaluation of personnel.

I am pleased that this effort is already underway, as the Bureau has hired Ms. Lopez and has identified essential functional areas for the school district, including programming, human resources, and accountability. I encourage you to continue this work and to build out the full school district as soon as practicable.

2. Launch an education technology pilot program to test new education programs and delivery models.

Technology can be a powerful tool for transforming learning. As noted by the United States Department of Education, technology can help affirm and advance relationships between educators and students, reinvent approaches to learning and collaboration, and adapt learning experiences to meet the needs of all learners. When paired with face-to-face instruction, technology has the potential to expand the number and types of courses that are available to students and increase the amount of time that students can have access to educational resources.

While technology has many benefits in the education context, it must nevertheless be integrated and used with great care in secure correctional environments. The safety and security of the Bureau's institutions, staff, and inmates has been – and will always be – the Department's top priority. Recognizing the need to balance the virtues of education technology with prison security, I know that the Bureau has closely examined the circumstances under which technology can be safely used to meet the educational needs of federal inmates. I commend the Bureau for this undertaking.

In order to continue the momentum of this work, I direct the Bureau to promptly launch an education technology pilot program. This program will help the Bureau test the feasibility of a safe and secure education technology solution in federal prison facilities. In addition to testing technology security, the pilot can serve as an opportunity for the Bureau to test new education programs and delivery models, such as the use of ruggedized electronic tablets. For programming, the tablet's content could include curricula that will accommodate inmates whose education needs include adult literacy/basic skills, high school diplomas, post-secondary education, and special learning. With respect to delivery, the pilot could rely on a blended learning model in which education content is delivered on the tablet while support and augmentation is provided by live instructors.

During the pilot program, I also direct the Bureau to conduct a policy review to determine whether and to what extent current policies, manuals, and/or other guidance documents would need to be revised in order to allow technology-based delivery of education programming.

Finally, during the course of the pilot program, the Bureau should seek advice and support from the Department's Office of the Chief Information Officer, including those serving as Distinguished Information Technology Fellows. By leveraging these internal resources, the Bureau can access additional experts in technology security and industry best practices.

I understand that the Bureau has been working diligently to identify a vendor that can meet the Bureau's hardware and software requirements for this pilot program. I applaud your work to date and offer my ongoing commitment and support for this key initiative.

3. Develop a new Bureau policy regarding education services for inmates with learning disabilities.

Bureau inmates with low levels of academic achievement and/or disabilities need instruction, support, and job training that are designed to accelerate learning and maximize the likelihood that they do not reoffend after release. Without these opportunities, these inmates may leave the correctional system unprepared for reentry to society.

Although the Bureau's current education policy contemplates that inmates with learning disabilities or low academic achievement will be identified and receive specialized instruction, the policy is not fully implemented in practice. There is no Bureau-wide policy or process for identifying, testing, documenting, servicing, and tracking progress for special needs inmates. In instances where inmates do receive specialized instruction, the resources and curricula vary by teacher and facility. To create opportunities for all inmates, it is critical that the Bureau develop a systematic approach to providing inmates with low achievement levels access to meaningful education and occupational training, which will enable them to be ready for high school, college, and/or future careers.

To sharpen our focus and improve our ability to deliver quality special education services, I direct that the Bureau develop a new, standalone policy that focuses on Bureau inmates with learning disabilities. The policy should reflect an approach that relies on rigorous screening, documentation of inmates' disabilities, and testing accommodations that allow inmates with disabilities to complete courses and develop skills in an environment appropriate to their learning needs. This approach should be sufficiently inclusive to identify and address the needs of English Language Learners.

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Because the Bureau's union will play a critical role in this important work, I encourage you to work closely with union leaders as soon as practicable, including during policy development.

I have asked staff in the Office of the Deputy Attorney General to provide support and assistance to the Bureau as needed while it implements these reforms. I thank you and the dedicated professionals of the Bureau for your commitment to protecting the public, reducing recidivism, and preparing inmates for a successful return home. It is an honor to serve with you.