



Women's Advocacy Project 2009 Policy Recommendations: *Investing in Education in Prisons and Communities*

About the Women's Advocacy Project:

The Women's Advocacy Project (WAP) trains emerging leaders to craft solutions to the problems facing women in the criminal justice system. We are a diverse group of women who have had direct experience with the criminal justice system and other public systems such as child welfare, homelessness, and public assistance. Our group includes women who are college students, social service professionals, and dedicated advocates. We work together to transform our personal experiences into strategies for change. WAP is a project of the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice at the Women's Prison Association.

Making Education of Women a Priority, Especially in Times of Economic Uncertainty

As women who have been involved in the criminal justice system, we know how important education is to leading a positive, self-sufficient life in the community. We know that education can prepare women for the workforce, promote positive personal change, and help families escape poverty. Education has been shown to be a factor in reducing recidivism; for many of us, education helped to chart a new course for our lives. We envision a world in which all women, regardless of criminal justice history, can afford to access education to better our lives, our families, and our communities.

In this time of rapid change in our economy, a quality education is more important than ever. A criminal record only adds to the barriers we face in pursuing further education and better jobs. Economically, women still lag behind men in terms of earnings and career opportunities. The changes brought about by the current economic crisis could take years to unfold. In this time of uncertainty, we should be investing in educating *all* of our citizens, so that we can *all* contribute to the rebuilding of our economy. Women should not be left out of this effort.

Women are often the heads of single-parent households, so our children's well-being depends on our ability to provide for them. We know that education encourages economic independence. In our own lives, education has improved our quality of life, allowing us to access higher-paying jobs, and increasing our ability to provide for our families. As mothers, we know that when we continue our education we are setting a positive example for our children. We believe that investing in the education of adult parents will inspire the next generation of college-bound kids.

Despite the many benefits of education, our ability to further our educations has dwindled as resources for educational programs in prisons have dried up, the price of higher education in the community has soared, and our public schools fail to meet our children's needs. Now is the time to commit to educating everyone, regardless of criminal justice history. To this end, the Women's Advocacy Project offers the following recommendations.

1. Problem: Limited Resources for In-Prison Educational Programs

Because incarcerated individuals are no longer eligible for Pell grants (at the federal level) and Tuition Assistance Program (“TAP grants,” in New York State), the number of college programs in New York State correctional facilities has dropped dramatically since 1994.

Recommendation:

- Restore access to Pell and TAP grants for incarcerated people.

2. Problem: Availability of Education in Prison

There are not enough slots in education programs (including Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Equivalency Diploma (GED) prep, GED, and college courses) to accommodate all of the women who would like to participate. Some women serve their entire sentence just waiting for a slot to open up. There are not enough teachers in the prison system.

Recommendations:

- Commit to eliminating waiting lists for educational programs in prison, so that anyone who wants to further their education can do so.
- Encourage retired teachers and professors to volunteer their time teaching in prisons.
- Create placements for Americorps, VISTA, and Seniorcorps volunteers to teach in prisons.
- Consider allowing people in prison to take part in computer-based education programs, including college courses, as a way to reduce waiting lists for traditional courses.

3. Problem: In-Prison Training Insufficient for the Reality of Today’s Workforce

There is a lack of variety in the work assignments and training programs offered to women in prison. There are often waiting lists for the most desirable training programs, while others use outdated equipment that is not relevant on the outside.

Recommendations:

- Offer more training in marketable skills, such as office administration.
- Provide women with computer training, from basic to advanced skills

4. Problem: Prison-Based Support Services at Risk

Women come to prison with many outside concerns (such as housing, children, and addiction) that make it hard to devote energy and attention to education. Counseling and peer-led programs in prisons help women address their immediate needs so that they are more able to focus on education while serving their time. Unfortunately, in times of fiscal crisis, these support services are often the first to get cut.

Recommendation:

- Protect support services for women in prison, especially those that provide opportunities for women to educate themselves about health, mental health, and addiction issues through counseling, education, or peer-led groups.

5. Problem: Discrimination in Higher Education Admission and Financial Aid

Individuals with criminal records sometimes face discrimination and stigma during the college admission process and when applying for financial aid.

Recommendation:

- Eliminate discriminatory policies in college admissions and financial aid application processes.

6. Problem: Soaring Cost of Higher Education

Higher education is expensive and out-of-reach for many low-income and working people. Those who take out student loans to pay for their education often find themselves in over their heads.

Recommendations:

- Invest more public money in higher education to reduce the burden on individual students.
- As part of economic recovery plans, provide assistance to low-and-middle-income people struggling with student loans.
- Provide more education to loan-seekers about the risks and benefits of taking on student loans.
- Make information about loan forgiveness programs more readily available to students.

7. Problem: Lack of Quality Childcare

Quality childcare is unaffordable for many mothers. Without childcare, it is difficult for mothers to complete their education.

Recommendation:

- Increase the amount of quality, subsidized childcare available in the community so that more mothers can take advantage of education opportunities. Parents should be able to access childcare that meets their own needs and the needs of their children.

8. Problem: Failing Public Schools

There is not enough funding for needed services and supplies in our public schools and our children are lacking up-to-date computers and text books. Because the U.S. Census counts people in prison as residents of the area in which they are incarcerated, legislators have an incentive to keep prisons in their districts. This makes it difficult to close prisons and direct those funds toward education in the community.

Recommendations:

- Change the way that incarcerated people are regarded in the U.S. Census, so that they are counted as members of their home communities.
- Close empty prisons and reinvest the money, in part, into education.

9. Problem: The Criminalization of Children in Schools

As a result of the emphasis placed on school security, it is too easy for children with learning disabilities, emotional problems, and other special needs to be criminalized for their behavior. This has an adverse affect on our children's educational environment, and contributes to negative associations with law enforcement.

Recommendations:

- Shift from an emphasis on discipline to an emphasis on supporting students to create safer schools.
- Provide more individualized supports and counseling for all students, especially those with special needs.

For more information about WPA and the Women's Advocacy Project, please visit us online at www.wpaonline.org, or send an email to institute@wpaonline.org.