

Long Version.

Tell Me, Where's The Down Side?

Dear Editor,

Your 9-14-11 Viewpoint helped me answer a question I've had: Why is it that in 2009 Macon County was less than 1% of Illinois' population but 2.2% of our prison population? I'm sure it's related to the fact, as you pointed out, that thousands of Macon County citizens do not know how to read well enough to earn their G.E.D.

Bruce Western, a Harvard University Criminologist, has done a vast amount of research that concludes the largest correlation to if a person will be incarcerated is if they have earned a high school diploma (or G.E.D.) I see this truth on a daily basis.

Full disclosure: I've served the last 9 years in prison due to cannabis convictions. Fortunately, I have matured and I have decided to do all I could to help repay society for the harm I have caused it. Seeing no reason to wait until my release I've helped many people in here study for their G.E.D. And IDOC is bloated with people who do not have a basic understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic. This is the result of two systematic deficiencies within IDOC:

- 1) IDOC does not have enough G.E.D. classes. The waiting list to get in can exceed 6 months, and this results in thousands of people paroling without ever seeing the inside of a classroom,
- 2) For those who are here long enough to earn a G.E.D. many lack what economists call The Will To Develop. This is when you want something bad enough that you're willing to change your old ways in order to obtain it.

Essentially it comes down to a problem of supply (enough classes) and demand (people wanting G.E.D.s). On the supply side if we actually want to stop the repeating cycle of crime, and not be the Department of Corrections in name only, then we need to allow every inmate who's willing to do what it takes to earn their G.E.D. in a class--from day 1 in the system. Critics would argue we're in a recession and cannot afford to expand our G.E.D. programs. This is a great mischaracterization, because not only would it save us money in the future, it would also reduce IDOC's budget needs immediately. The hiring of each additional G.E.D. instructor would easily save our state \$125,000+ per year thanks to the Earned Good Conduct Credit (EGC) policy.

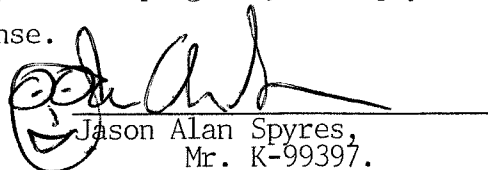
So, what is the EGC Credit? It's a good-time inmates can earn by going to school, participating in drug treatment, or earning their G.E.D—all which are statistically tied to lower recidivism rates.

And there's a solution to the demand side of IDOC's G.E.D. dilemma. For those who do not understand the importance of earning their G.E.D. we need to employ Mr. Western's findings and use programs like the EGC Credit to encourage them. But unfortunately, due to flawed EGC eligibility requirements, we often cannot do so.

Currently there are thousands of nonviolent offenders who do not qualify for the same EGC Credits murderers do. Yes, I said murderers; In Illinois second-degree murderers are EGC eligible, while those excluded include nonviolent cannabis offenders serving their first sentence (like myself) and others who are on their third+ offense. Yes, these are people who have messed up before, but often their priors were low-level offenses such as Retail Theft, Driving on a Revoked License, or simple drug possession with no underlining criminal activity. When IDOC admits that 89% of those who parole without a G.E.D. will return to prison within 3 years why in the world would we not use the EGC Credit for those on their 3rd offense? Are we not interested in preventing their 4th, 5th, or 6th offense?

We need to expand the EGC Credits to rectify these requirement flaws. My critics might argue this would lead to some people earning their G.E.D. only to receive the good-time. And they're right, but would that really be such a horrible thing? They would still have to demonstrate improved reading and writing abilities, and statistically their recidivism rates would drop nearly in half, meaning that much less crime in the future and current financial savings in IDOC's budget. Tell me, where's the down side?

And no, I didn't write this to try and directly benefit myself (I already have a high school diploma). I wrote this because the loss of potential I see in here on a daily basis is gut-wrenching. All that's needed is some encouragement. So please, call Representative Brown (217-791-5080) and Senator Bomke (217- ) and ask, "Why don't we expand the EGC Credits program, especially with the current budget crisis and prison overcrowding controversy?" I've contacted lawmakers before but have yet to receive a reply—I'm hoping they'll reply to you, because I'm interested to hear their response.

  
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