



TESTIMONY BY Jasmine L. Tyler
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House Bill 2158
Education - K-12 Subcommittee
Establishment of General System of Schools for Incarcerated Individuals
Monday, January 27, 2025

Chairperson and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in strong support of HB 2158, a transformative proposal to expand higher education opportunities within Virginia’s correctional facilities. My name is Jasmine L. Tyler, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Justice Policy Institute (JPI), a national organization that partners with communities impacted by the legal system to advocate for innovative and effective public safety solutions. I also approach this legislation from a personal perspective as a professor at Georgetown University, where I teach inside the Washington, DC Jail and have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of education in the lives of incarcerated individuals.

This issue is deeply personal to me. I was born and raised in Virginia, where my family’s history is one of both oppression and resilience. My father attended segregated schools in the 1950s and 1960s, a reminder of the stark inequalities that defined our education system not so long ago. Although he did not finish high school, he later earned his GED while incarcerated—a testament to the transformative power of education, even in the most challenging circumstances.

I was the first in my family to graduate from college, earning my undergraduate degree from James Madison University and later a Master's degree from Brown University, both institutions

known for their commitment to academic excellence and community service. That foundation led me to a career in public policy and education, where I've seen firsthand how access to learning changes lives. I've taught public policy in the Washington, DC Jail, where my incarcerated students embrace the opportunity to grow academically and personally. One student once told me, "I never thought I'd go to school after high school, but now I know anything is possible." HB 2158 aims to bring this transformative power of education to incarcerated individuals across Virginia.

HB 2158 represents that same promise of possibility, providing incarcerated individuals across Virginia with the tools to succeed while addressing some of our state's most pressing challenges: escalating incarceration costs, workforce shortages, and the need to build safer communities.

Hope as a Catalyst for Change

Education is more than a tool for building skills—it is a foundation for hope. For incarcerated individuals, the opportunity to pursue higher education provides a sense of purpose and a vision for a better future. It is a powerful incentive for personal growth, encouraging people to reflect on their potential and work toward positive change.¹

Research consistently shows that when people are offered meaningful opportunities to improve their lives, they rise to meet the challenge. Incarcerated individuals who participate in educational programs often describe the pride they feel in their accomplishments and the hope it brings to their families and communities. Another student shared, "This class is really hard, but I feel respected and supported here and I'm getting good grades!" Yet another student shared how "coming to class also helps me interact better with other people here." Programs like those proposed under HB 2158 do more than teach—they transform, offering people a renewed sense of dignity and the motivation to create a better path for themselves.

One of the most significant impacts of this hope is its ripple effect. When people succeed in prison education programs, their success inspires others around them to strive for the same, creating a culture of achievement and mutual encouragement within correctional facilities. This momentum benefits individuals and the broader community by reducing violence, fostering rehabilitation, and improving public safety outcomes.

Fiscal Responsibility and Public Safety

¹ Nazish Dholakia, "How College in Prison Is Changing Lives," *Vera Institute of Justice*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.vera.org/news/how-college-in-prison-changes-live>.

Virginia spends an average of \$61,000 per year to incarcerate an individual—resources that could be better utilized to reduce recidivism and invest in our communities.² National research demonstrates that expanding postsecondary education in correctional facilities reduces recidivism rates by 66 percent, directly lowering the financial burden on taxpayers.³ A recent study estimates that broader access to higher education in prison could save states over \$365 million annually in incarceration-related costs, a benefit Virginia could share.⁴ These savings could be redirected to other critical areas with the potential to enhance public safety and strengthen our economy, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Economic Growth and Workforce Development

Expanding higher education in prisons is a proven strategy to address Virginia’s critical workforce needs. Currently, Virginia has only 48 workers for every 100 available jobs, with companies facing a shortage of 135,000 full-time workers. The state also ranks 5th in the nation for the gap between available jobs and workers to fill them.⁵ The skilled trades, healthcare, and technology sectors are particularly struggling to fill jobs; a challenge this bill can help solve by preparing incarcerated individuals for meaningful employment. Programs like the Second Chance Pell initiative have shown that incarcerated students can thrive academically, earning credentials that equip them for high-demand careers.

Yet, Virginia has barely scratched the surface of this potential. Out of approximately 14,000 incarcerated individuals in the state, only 600 currently have access to higher education programs.⁶ HB 2158 builds the infrastructure needed to close this gap, ensuring that educational opportunities are available in every correctional facility and aligned with the needs of Virginia’s economy.

Advancing Equity and Reducing Systemic Disparities

² Venfitti, Bruno. “Mapped: U.S. States by Cost per Prisoner.” Visual Capitalist, June 9, 2024. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cost-per-prisoner-in-usstates/>.

³ Taber, Niloufer, et al. The Impacts of College-in-Prison Participation on Safety and Employment in New York State: An Analysis of College Students Funded by the Criminal Justice Investment Initiative. Vera Institute of Justice, November 2023.

⁴ National Council of State Legislatures. Postsecondary Education Programs for Incarcerated or Previously Incarcerated Individuals. January 17, 2023. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/civil-and-criminal-justice/postsecondary-education-programs-for-incarcerated-or-previously-incarcerated-individuals>.

⁵ “What the Ongoing Worker Shortage Looks like in Virginia,” JobTest.org (Stacker, September 18, 2024), <https://stacker.com/virginia/what-ongoing-worker-shortage-looks-virginia>.

⁶ Pope, Michael. “Pell Grants Are Available to Thousands of Virginia Inmates, Many Aren’t Taking Advantage.” WVTF, August 21, 2024. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://www.wvtf.org/news/2024-08-21/pell-grants-are-available-to-thousands-of-virginia-inmates-many-arent-taking-advantage>.

Virginia’s incarcerated population reflects the persistent inequities in our legal system. Black individuals make up 43 percent of the prison population despite representing only 20 percent of the state’s residents.⁷ Expanding higher education behind bars is a powerful step toward reducing these disparities, providing marginalized communities with tools for upward mobility and economic stability.

The ripple effects of this legislation extend beyond the individuals it serves. Parents who pursue higher education while incarcerated model resilience and achievement for their children, breaking cycles of intergenerational incarceration and creating stronger, more stable communities.⁸

Learning from Proven Models

Virginia is not starting from scratch. States like New York, California, and Washington have demonstrated the transformative impact of robust higher education programs in correctional facilities. For example, New York’s Bard Prison Initiative graduates have a recidivism rate of less than 2 percent, compared to a national average of over 40 percent.⁹ California’s Corrections to College initiative enrolls over 7,000 students annually, leveraging partnerships with community colleges to deliver accredited programs.¹⁰ These examples highlight the potential for Virginia to become a national leader in prison education by scaling up its efforts and building strong institutional partnerships. With HB 2158, we can replicate these successes in Virginia, reducing recidivism rates and creating a more educated and skilled workforce.

Addressing Barriers to Success

HB 2158 also tackles longstanding challenges that have limited educational opportunities in Virginia’s prisons. Many facilities lack the technological infrastructure necessary to support modern learning environments, including internet access and digital tools. This bill ensures that incarcerated individuals have the resources they need to succeed, bringing Virginia’s prison education system into the 21st century.

⁷ Vera Institute of Justice. *Incarceration Trends in Virginia*. 2019. Accessed January 13, 2025. <https://verainstitute.files.svdcdn.com/production/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-virginia.pdf>.

⁸ Martin, Eric. *Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children*. National Institute of Justice, March 1, 2017. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/hidden-consequences-impact-incarceration-dependent-children>.

⁹ Schwartz, Deborah. “From Sentenced to Scholar.” Bard Lifetime Learning Institute, May 29, 2019. Accessed October 14, 2024. <https://lli.bard.edu/2019/05/from-sentenced-to-scholar/>.

¹⁰ Britton, Tolani, Elizabeth Friedmann, and Sara Adan. “Higher Learning Inside: An Exploration of the Demographic Make-Up of Incarcerated Persons Taking Postsecondary Courses in California.” UC Davis, vol. 1, February 2021.

Conclusion

HB 2158 represents a forward-thinking approach to some of Virginia's most urgent challenges. By expanding access to higher education in correctional facilities, this legislation reduces incarceration costs, strengthens the workforce, and enhances public safety while addressing systemic inequities.

As a Virginian, I am proud to support a bill that honors the resilience and potential of individuals in our state's correctional facilities. This legislation embodies the belief that no one should be defined solely by their worst mistake but by their capacity to learn, grow, and contribute to our shared future.

I urge the committee to support HB 2158 and seize this opportunity to invest in Virginia's future—its people, its economy, and its communities.

Thank you for your consideration.