



Bianca Bagnarelli

Criminal justice officials across the country are struggling to break the recidivism cycle in which prisoners are released only to land right back behind bars. These prisoners are among the most poorly educated people in the country, and that fact holds the key to a solution. Decades of [research](#) has shown that inmates who participate in prison education programs — even if they fail to earn degrees — are far more likely to stay out of prison once they are freed.

That prison education programs are highly cost effective is confirmed by a 2013 [RAND Corporation](#) study that covered 30 years of prison education research. Among other things, the study found that every dollar spent on prison education translated into savings of \$4 to \$5 on imprisonment costs down the line.

Other studies suggest that prisons with education programs have fewer violent incidents, making it easier for officials to keep order, and that the children of people who complete college are more likely to do so themselves, disrupting the typical pattern of poverty and incarceration.

Findings like these have persuaded corrections officials in both Democratic and Republican states to embrace education as a cost-effective way of cutting recidivism. But Republican legislators in New York — which spends about \$60,000 per inmate per year — remain mired in know-nothingism and argue that spending public money on inmates insults taxpayers. They

have steadfastly resisted Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s common-sense proposal for making a modest investment in prison education programs that have already proved highly successful on a small scale in New York’s prisons.

The Manhattan district attorney, Cyrus Vance Jr., stepped into the void left by the Legislature when [he agreed](#) to pay for Governor Cuomo’s prison education plan with more than \$7 million in criminal forfeiture money secured from banks. Lauding what he described as a public safety measure, Mr. Vance said, “It makes no sense to send someone to prison with no pathway for them to succeed.”

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The goal of the program is to expand the number of inmates taking college courses to about 3,500 across much of the system from 1,000. The curriculum will be broad, covering science, math, philosophy, the social sciences and art. [Among the schools that will participate](#) are Cornell University, New York University, Mercy College and [Bard College](#), which has run a highly regarded program since 2001. The recidivism rate is 4 percent for inmates who

participate in the program and a mere 2 percent for those who earn degrees in prison, compared with about 40 percent for the New York State prison system as a whole.

Prison education programs were largely dismantled during the “tough on crime” 1990s, when Congress stripped inmates of the right to get the federal Pell grants that were used to pay tuition. The decision bankrupted many prison education programs across the country and left private donors and foundations to foot the bill for those that survived.

Despite limited and unreliable funding, these programs have more than proved their value. New York lawmakers who continue to block funding for them are putting ideology ahead of the public interest.

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