



The Imperative for Increased Access to High School Equivalency Programming in Corrections for Successful Reentry

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orijinTM



Mass incarceration in the United States is a pervasive and multifaceted issue, profoundly impacting individuals, families, and communities across the nation. With approximately two million people currently incarcerated, the U.S. holds the dubious distinction of having the highest incarceration rate globally¹. Amidst growing acknowledgment of the inequities and inefficiencies within the criminal justice system and challenges facing correctional institutions, there has been a burgeoning recognition of the critical need for effective reentry strategies for the estimated 650,000 individuals returning to their communities from state and federal prisons² and the estimated nine million people from our nation's jails³.

Central to this discussion is the imperative to accelerate pathways to high school equivalency diplomas via pre-release educational programming. In today's rapidly evolving job market, earning a high school equivalency (HSE) while incarcerated has become increasingly critical for justice-impacted individuals seeking to compete for employment opportunities upon reentry into society⁴. In fact, 73 percent of all U.S. jobs require a high school equivalency or diploma⁵. With technological advancements and shifts in workforce demands placing greater emphasis on educational attainment and skill acquisition, the attainment of a high school equivalency credential serves as a foundational stepping stone towards economic stability and career advancement.



¹ Sawyer, W., & Wagner, P. (2023, March 14). Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023. [Prison Policy Initiative](#).

² U.S. Department of Justice. (2024). *Prisoners and prisoner reentry*. [US DOJ](#)

³ Zeng, Z. (2018). Jail inmates in 2017. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. NCJ, 251774.

⁴ Torpey, E., & Watson, A. (2014, September). *Education level and jobs: Opportunities by state*. [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reports that 73% of all U.S. jobs require a high school equivalency or diploma.

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014)



As per the findings of the Prison Policy Initiative, individuals with a history of incarceration face nearly five times higher odds of unemployment compared to those without such history, and among those who manage to secure employment, their earnings typically amount to only about half of what the average worker earns⁶. Studies consistently demonstrate that justice-impacted individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to secure gainful employment, earn higher wages, and experience reduced rates of recidivism post-release⁷. With the restoration of the Pell Grant to confined and incarcerated students, earning a HSE opens the doors of opportunity to pursue postsecondary education, further reducing the odds of recidivism and increasing the likelihood of post-release employment⁸. Moreover, earning a HSE not only enhances an individual's employability but also fosters personal growth, self-esteem, and a sense of empowerment, positioning them to contribute positively to their communities upon reintegration.

Therefore, investing in educational opportunities within carceral settings to support incarcerated individuals in earning their HSE is not only a sound correctional strategy but also a fundamental component of broader efforts to promote successful reentry and address the systemic barriers to socioeconomic mobility faced by justice-involved populations.

According to a 2016 Bureau of Justice Statistics' Survey of Prison Inmates, while 43% of all surveyed individuals incarcerated in state prisons reported some participation in educational programming during their confinement, only 17% of surveyed individuals were currently receiving educational programming⁹. It is also difficult to truly measure the level of access provided to incarcerated individuals in need of HSE instruction as the definition of what constitutes educational programming varies from state to state. As an example, some research studies report that in some states, prison jobs are reported as educational programming¹⁰.

Several factors contribute to the limited access to HSE programs for incarcerated individuals, including physical space constraints, budget limitations, and staffing shortages within correctional facilities. Many correctional institutions struggle with overcrowding and limited physical space, which can make it challenging to accommodate educational programs such as HSE coursework. The lack of suitable classrooms or designated learning areas within prisons and jails restricts the ability to offer comprehensive educational opportunities to a larger number of incarcerated learners. Research indicates that 25% of adults in federal and state prisons are unable to enroll in an educational program because they are currently on a waiting list¹¹.

⁶ Wang, L., & Bertram, W. (2022, February 8) New data on formerly incarcerated people's employment reveal labor market injustices. [Prison Policy Initiative](#).

⁷ i.e., Davis et al. (2013); National Research Council. (2012). *Improving adult literacy instruction: Options for practice and research*. [National Academies Press](#); Ositelu, M. O. (2019, November 4). *Equipping individuals for life beyond bars: The promise of higher education and job training in closing the gap in skills for incarcerated adults*. [New America](#)

⁸ U.S. Department of Education. (2023, March 9). Eligibility of confined or incarcerated individuals to receive Pell Grants. [Federal Student Aid Office](#).

⁹ Wang, L. (2022, September 2). The state prison experience: Too much drudgery, not enough opportunity. [Prison Policy Initiative](#).

¹⁰ Harlow, C. W. (2003). Education and Correctional Populations. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report.

¹¹ Ositelu, M. O. (2019). *Equipping Individuals for Life beyond Bars*. [Research Brief]. New America.



Budget constraints also pose a significant barrier to expanding HSE programs within correctional facilities. With limited funding allocated to education initiatives, correctional institutions may struggle to secure resources for hiring qualified instructors or purchasing educational materials. Staffing shortages within correctional facilities are a persistent obstacle to increasing access to HSE programs for incarcerated individuals. Limited staffing resources may hinder the ability to supervise and facilitate educational activities effectively, leading to fewer opportunities for incarcerated learners to participate in HSE coursework. Additionally, qualified educators and instructors may be scarce, further exacerbating the challenge of providing comprehensive educational programs within correctional settings.

Addressing these challenges requires increased investment in educational resources, infrastructure improvements, and staffing support to ensure that all individuals in custody have access to meaningful educational opportunities that can positively impact their future prospects upon reentry into society.

With a mission to break the cycle of incarceration by preparing every justice-impacted individual for sustainable employment, Orijin provides incarcerated individuals with comprehensive, no-cost, evidence-based educational and workforce development programs via secure digital tablets and a dynamic learning platform. Founded in 2014, Orijin strengthens jurisdictions' ability to overcome staff shortages to meet their programming goals through scalable and customizable ed-tech solutions. Orijin's Whole Learner Framework™ delivers secure cloud-based assessments, plans, and access to a robust suite of educational and skilled trades courses, and social-emotional development, tailored to incarcerated individuals' goals, skills, and interests.

Through an informed analysis of existing research, policy considerations, and best practices exhibited by correctional leadership across the country, Orijin and its jurisdiction partners advocate for the expansion and enhancement of educational opportunities as a fundamental component of efforts to address the challenges of education and rehabilitation programming in an age of mass incarceration and to foster positive outcomes for individuals reentering society.



New Mexico Corrections Department

Correctional thought leaders and practitioners across the U.S. have tackled these issues in a variety of methods, including utilizing technology to supplement in-person programming. One impactful example is in the state of New Mexico, where correctional educators at the New Mexico Correctional Department (NMCD) identified the need for incarcerated students to earn their high school equivalency in order to meet the ever-increasing standards in a modern, technology-rich workforce.

NMCD collaborated with Orijin to explore avenues for reaching more students and offering quality preparation for HSE credential achievement. As is the case in many correctional settings, NMCD faced the challenges of having adequate teaching staff and adequate classroom space to expand the number of students who could prepare for assessments. Utilizing a traditional paper-based, one-room-schoolhouse approach made meeting each student at their educational functioning level and addressing their individual academic needs time-intensive. In addition, each student was required to complete 12 hours of review, either digitally or in-classroom, before sitting for an exam. These challenges made meeting a target goal of 165 earned credentials annually loom as a near-impossibility.

In January of 2023, NMCD realized that with only five months left to meet their goal, only 21 learners enrolled in the HSE prep program had earned a credential - they had met only 13% of their goal and time was running out. They began looking for effective, evidence-based solutions that would allow them to expand the number of students they could serve. Under the leadership of Shane Epperly, Tablet Learning & Development Coordinator, the department consulted Orijin, already a trusted educational partner, for assistance. Orijin specializes in deploying an educational platform delivered via secure tablet computers through which incarcerated students can prepare for academic, vocational, personal well-being, and reentry success. Orijin's Whole Learner Framework™ is a learner-centric model uniquely designed to motivate, engage, and educate students and never charges them or their family for its technology or services¹². The provision of high-quality course offerings bolstered by evidence-based programming aligned to proven learning standards was the solution NMCD was looking for.

¹² Orijin™. (2024) How Orijin™ is different. [Orijin™](#)



In early 2023, Orijin collaborated with NMCD to provide professional development to over 40 correctional educators across the state to implement a blended-learning classroom model that combined in-person instruction and intuitive HiSet Academy digital course-work accessed by learners on Orijin's high-powered devices and learning platform. This strategy enabled a much larger number of student cohorts to receive instruction and to complete the requisite 12-hour review period without displacing students who were still in need of in-person instruction. For those students, the adaptive learning system of the HiSet Academy created a personalized learning plan for each, focusing on their areas of need and accelerating past skills they had already mastered¹³, so that instructors were able to spend time supporting those students with specialized needs or who required additional support.

The collaborative efforts and successful implementation of the Orijin learning platform yielded remarkable outcomes that surpassed all initial expectations. In 2023, a total of 538 learners utilized Orijin's educational resources, dedicating a collective 7,811 hours to engaged learning. Impressively, learners demonstrated a commendable average weekly attendance of 11-12 hours per individual. Within a remarkably short span of just five months, 198 learners successfully passed the HSE exam, exceeding the original goal of 165 by 18%.¹⁴

This substantial achievement not only highlights the efficacy of Orijin's educational tools but also underscores the transformative impact of accessible and innovative learning opportunities for justice-impacted individuals when correctional leaders employ such tools, amplifying the impact of dedicated educators. Moreover, the noteworthy increase in the number of graduates in 2023 by NMDC, more than double the amount reported in 2022, highlights the significant strides made in promoting educational attainment and empowering justice-involved populations to achieve their academic and professional aspirations.

The data from 2024 in New Mexico demonstrates the continued success and impact of Orijin's educational initiative in facilitating access to learning opportunities for justice-involved individuals. With 442 NMDC learners utilizing Orijin devices in January, 2024, the cumulative hours of education soared to an impressive 11,621.¹⁵ This remarkable engagement underscores the effectiveness of Orijin's educational platform in fostering a culture of continuous learning and academic advancement within carceral settings. Furthermore, the program's success has prompted the NMCD to raise its 2024 passing goal to 200, an aspirational increase from the revised goal of 165 in the prior year. This decision reflects NMCD's confidence in its ability to leverage the Orijin platform to empower learners to achieve academic success and underscores the program's pivotal role in advancing educational attainment and reentry outcomes in New Mexico.

¹³ Essential Education. (2024). HiSet Academy®. [Essential Ed Educators](#).

¹⁴ Montoya, S. (2023, August 9). *Incarcerated adult graduation rates exceed state benchmarks*. [New Mexico Higher Education Department](#).

¹⁵ Data provided by OrijinTM and NMCD (2024).



Massachusetts Department of Corrections

Another Orijin partner, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MADOC), also evaluated how to leverage Orijin's digital tablets and learning platform to increase opportunities and access for learners to earn their HSE. Learners augment their in-person HSE preparation with access to HiSet Academy digital coursework on their Orijin devices. A recent MADOC report submitted to the Massachusetts Senate highlights the significant impact of educational attainment, particularly the completion of HSE programs, in reducing recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals in Massachusetts.

The report, conducted by analysts from the MADOC, examined over 8,500 men released from criminal sentences between January 1, 2013, and December 31, 2020, all of whom faced challenges related to substance use, educational attainment, or both. Among those individuals who did not complete programming addressing either substance use or educational needs, the recidivism rate, defined as being convicted within one year of release, was nearly 20 percent. However, for those who completed both a six-month substance use treatment program and obtained a HSE credential, the recidivism rate dropped by more than half to 7.8 percent.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing both substance use and educational needs to effectively mitigate the risk of reoffending among incarcerated individuals. The report emphasizes the necessity of implementing multiple programs to address the complex needs of individuals assessed with more than one need, ultimately aiming to maximize recidivism reduction and promote successful reintegration into society.¹⁶

Each of the Orijin partnerships with the NMCD and with the MADOC represent a promising model, which can be replicated in other jurisdictions for exponential impact to address the educational needs of incarcerated individuals and enhance their prospects for successful reentry into society. By leveraging Orijin's secure tablets and learning platform to deliver HSE programming within a carceral setting, NMCD and MADOC not only met but exceeded their goals, demonstrating the efficacy and

¹⁶ Lisinski, C. (2024, February 6). DOC: Education, substance treatment can limit recidivism. [State House News Service](#)



impact of these collaborative initiatives. Both NMCD and MADOC emphasized providing professional development for their instructors, emphasizing their commitment to delivering high-quality educational opportunities that empower justice-impacted individuals to achieve academic success and pursue meaningful pathways upon release.

The importance of studying the impact of programming cannot be understated, and the efforts of the MADOC to assess the results of implementation are critical to informing best practices and improving pre and post-release outcomes. Correctional educators who are willing to embrace digital learning tools for the betterment of their students are the backbone of student achievement, making the intersection of correctional education and technology a powerful solution.

The success of these collaborations highlights the transformative potential of secure educational technology in carceral settings and serves as a compelling example for correctional leaders nationwide. By embracing innovative solutions and fostering strategic partnerships, educational disparities facing justice-involved populations can be effectively addressed and the collective goal of promoting successful reentry and reducing recidivism rates across the United States can be achieved.



About the Author:

Dr. Lopez began her career as a public-school teacher and then administrator in Texas, her home state. She found her way into correctional education as the Superintendent of Education for the Texas Juvenile Justice Department and was later recruited to initiate education reforms for the students in the custody of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice by the Windham School District. In 2016, Obama-era Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates recruited Dr. Lopez to build a school district within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Dr. Lopez then served as the Deputy Director of College and Career Readiness and Professional Development for the DC Department of Corrections where she designed and implemented innovative academic and workforce development programs for incarcerated students and a post-release employment program for justice-involved individuals returning to the community. She is a graduate of Texas Tech University, earned her M.Ed. from Lubbock Christian University, and her doctoral degree from Sam Houston State University. She is currently the CEO of Past the Edges Consulting and the Executive Director of Operations for Hand2Heart DC, a nonprofit serving incarcerated students and returning citizens in the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area.