

REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE
Pursuant to P.A. 268 of 2016
Article V, Section 908
Feasibility Study of Online High School Education Pilot

Sec. 908. From the funds appropriated in part 1, the department shall explore the feasibility of establishing an online career high school education pilot program, or other alternatives to providing prisoners with a high school diploma in lieu of a high school equivalency. The department shall explore establishing outside partnerships to assist the department with providing high school diplomas. The department shall submit a report to the senate and house appropriations subcommittees on corrections, the senate and house fiscal agencies, the legislative corrections ombudsman, and the state budget director that describes the necessary steps the department would have to take, the resources the department would need, and departmental organizational changes that would be required, and the feasibility of the department's forming outside partnerships to assist with providing prisoners with a high school diploma in lieu of a high school equivalency.

Overview

Michigan Compiled Law 791.233 requires that subject to certain exceptions, a prisoner with a minimum term of two years or more must earn a high school diploma or GED certificate to be released on parole. While roughly 50% of the offenders sentenced to prison meet this standard at intake, the MDOC must educate and assist thousands of prisoners each year as they work to obtain a high school credential. To accomplish this goal, the MDOC employs teachers who work in a classroom setting within the prisons to prepare offenders to complete the GED high school equivalency test. MDOC prisoners complete roughly 13,000 GED subtests each year, while roughly 2,500 prisoners earn their GED by completing all of the required subtests. Due to the volume of testing that occurs within the prisons, the MDOC has the single largest adult secondary education program in the State of Michigan.

As new technologies and tests have become available, there has been interest in educational opportunities that are not currently offered within the MDOC system from a variety of sources. These discussions have focused on allowing prisoners to obtain a high school degree (traditional, charter or online) rather than a high school equivalency. The Department has explored forming partnerships with a number of outside entities, but has not established any formal relationships for the provision of a high school curriculum that would result in a high school degree for prisoners at this time.

The MDOC utilizes a high school equivalency test for prisoners to satisfy the requirement of MCL 791.233 because it allows prisoners to be paced according to aptitude, is an effective gauge of career and college readiness, and provides prisoners with an opportunity to complete or continue working toward the credential upon release without issues of credit portability. The main concern related to the use of a high school equivalency test such as the GED is that it may be viewed as an inferior credential compared to a high school diploma by some employers.

While obtaining a high school diploma is seen as preferential by some employers and stakeholders, potential drawbacks of this approach are the cost, the time necessary to complete the core curriculum, the potential lack of portability of credits and the potential for inconsistent quality that may limit an offender's future success in regard to employment or post-secondary education.

Due to the high volume of prisoners taking the GED test, the MDOC cannot shift to a high school diploma model for all MDOC prisoners without incurring significant transitional costs and operational hurdles. Most significantly, due to the statutory provision of MCL 791.233, any reduction in GED testing during the period of transition could result in the denial of parole to offenders and an increase in the prison population. As a result, this report focuses on the steps to implement a pilot program that would supplement the current academic education program by targeting a small cohort of prisoners to determine the effectiveness and impact of providing a curriculum which results in a high school diploma.

Pilot Models

The MDOC has identified the following models for obtaining a high school diploma while incarcerated:

1. A partnership with an existing traditional district or intermediate school district to obtain a curriculum, engage in credit recovery and provide a diploma upon completion.
2. A partnership with a new or existing charter school to obtain a curriculum, engage in credit recovery and provide a diploma upon completion.
3. Creation of a specialized public school district that would solely educate individuals incarcerated by the MDOC utilizing a curriculum established specifically for the MDOC and providing a diploma upon completion.
4. A partnership with an entity (traditional, charter, or private) that would provide an online curriculum, engage in credit recovery, and provide a diploma upon completion.

Resources/Organizational Changes

Physical Plant

Each of the high school diploma options reviewed by the Department would utilize classrooms within a MDOC facility. Due to the high number of programs occurring at facilities, classroom space is limited at most locations. If a pilot program were to occur, the MDOC would recommend repurposing existing classroom space due to cost. This approach may disrupt other programming opportunities currently being offered to prisoners.

Staffing

Each of the high school diploma options reviewed by the Department would require at least one in-classroom instructor per classroom for educational/supervision reasons. The qualifications for these instructors would vary based on the pilot program. Current MDOC academic teachers have the civil service classification of "School Teacher P11" and must possess a current Michigan teacher certification. Current teachers are not required to possess a certification in a specific subject or secondary education.

The State School Board requires that teachers providing high school level curriculum be "highly qualified teachers" with an endorsement in the subjects that they teach. While some current MDOC teachers may meet the requirements of being "highly qualified" to teach specific secondary level subjects, some may not meet this criteria. The result is that a pilot with a traditional, charter, or specialized public school district may require the hiring or contracting of teachers in a variety of subjects to meet the requirements for issuing a high school diploma. This may significantly increase costs for the MDOC. The MDOC's current GED program allows a certified teacher to teach all subjects during GED test preparation.

Staffing requirements for online programs differ from traditional in-classroom programs in that the online program generally provides qualified educators who interact with students from a remote location. In addition to these online educators, the MDOC must provide a facilitator in the classroom to assist students and ensure that students are supervised. To ensure quality and comply with civil service requirements, it is likely that these in classroom facilitators would continue to be School Teacher P11 positions.

Technology

For security reasons, prisoners may not have access to the internet. With the recent shift in the GED testing protocol to a computer-based test, the MDOC has added a sufficient number of computers to the network to complete GED testing and other relevant MDOC programming. The MDOC does not have excess technology to utilize as part of a pilot, so any computer-based training will require investments in additional computers as well as costs associated with the network.

For some MDOC offenders in need of academic programming, computers represent an additional barrier to education due to their limited experience with technology, limited literacy or learning disabilities. Prisoners may need significant in-person remediation and instruction regardless of the curriculum delivery model.

Contracts

The MDOC would have to enter into appropriate contracts for the provision of services under a pilot program. This would include the provision of a curriculum, testing, credit certification and diploma by the outside partner, as well as potential contracts for staffing and necessary technology.

Costs

The comparative costs of the various pilots can only be determined after the completion of a Request for Proposal. Each of the pilot models would utilize a classroom with an educator, which would be the single greatest cost. Whether or not that educator could be a current MDOC employee or would need to be hired/contracted for would depend on the qualifications needed for the pilot curriculum. Technology and curriculum costs would be in addition to any staffing costs.

Outcomes

The mission of the MDOC is “Offender Success”, which means preparing offenders to be self-sufficient when returning to a crime-free, productive life in the community. The MDOC believes that quality education is a cornerstone of offender success and that offenders should be prepared to pursue post-secondary or vocational education upon release while securing employment. As a result, it is vitally important to the MDOC that any pilot program produce measurable results. While degree completion is a key metric, the MDOC believes that if a high school diploma pilot is pursued, the pilot must include an independent assessment test after the completion of the curriculum (GED, ACT, etc.) to determine if participants are college and work ready.

Feasibility

The MDOC understands the increasing interest of many stakeholders who believe that there are benefits to providing prisoners with an opportunity to obtain a high school degree and will continue to review the options available within the educational sector. The MDOC is committed to providing offenders with quality educational opportunities, including vocational and post-secondary opportunities within the prison. On a pilot basis, it may be feasible for the MDOC to pursue a diploma based program in the future, but it is important that any pilot include strong metrics related to costs, capacity, and outcomes that can be directly compared to metrics for the existing high school equivalency program to determine what is in the best interest of taxpayers and offenders.