

Education is crucial to crime prevention, recovery

October 28, 2009

This column is adapted from a speech that Max Williams recently gave at luncheon for the Salem-Keizer Education Foundation.

As the director of the Oregon Department of Corrections, I may seem an unlikely person to be asked to speak at the Salem-Keizer Education Foundation luncheon about the importance of education. But every day I see firsthand the need for a quality education system. The relationship between Corrections and education is closer and more intertwined than you might think.

Over the past five and a half years, I have regularly heard the phrase "lock them up and throw away the key." What most people don't know is that 93 percent of all Oregon inmates will be released back into our communities. So locking up inmates and throwing away the key doesn't work if you want them to be productive members of society when they go home. For the vast majority of offenders, our job is to help give them the needed skills to be successful.

So, how do we work with offenders to help them become productive members of society and not recidivate? In one word: education.

As a bit of background, we house 14,000 offenders in 14 institutions across the state. Our budget for the 2009-11 biennium is \$1.4 billion. By any standard, this is a great deal of money and a lot of offenders to supervise, house, clothe, feed and provide appropriate health care and treatment. Managing this many inmates comes with many challenges, but here are just a few.

Over 60 percent of Oregon inmates need education skill upgrades. Some need to learn to read and do math at the eighth-grade level. For others it's getting a GED. Over a third of DOC inmates are under 30 years old, meaning they have a lot of life left to live and we know that education is effective in reducing recidivism. If we can give an offender with a high risk to reoffend an education skill upgrade, his or her chance of being convicted of a new crime drops by 27 percent.

At the Department of Corrections, we are also working to help



Additional facts

About the Salem-Keizer Education Foundation:

HISTORY: Founded in 1982, SKEF is the oldest community-based nonprofit in Oregon dedicated to enriching the quality of education in its local public schools.

During its 27-year history, SKEF has awarded more than 1,200 grants to teachers totaling more than \$1,100,000. It currently funds an average of 30 projects and about \$50,000 each year.

INITIATIVES: Academy for Teaching and Learning. Enrichment Academy. Tools for Schools. Subject initiatives in Literacy; Math, Science and Technology; Environmental Studies; Multicultural Literacy; The Arts.

FUNDRAISING: At the fundraising luncheon this fall, \$60,000 was committed or raised, with more funds, volunteers and in-kind contributions coming in every week. SKEF is halfway toward its goal of raising \$200,000 to support its work.

SIGNATURE EVENT: Awesome 3000 annual children's run. This year's Awesome 3000 involved more than 3,000 children and netted \$65,000 for the foundation.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED: (503) 364-2933 or krina@skeducationfoundation.org, or visit the SKEF offices and gallery Where the Sidewalk Begins, at 233 Commercial St. NE (next to The Blue Pepper).

HOW TO DONATE: Use the contact information above or go to www.skeducationfoundation.org to make a secure online donation or see the wish list for in-kind contributions.

Source: Salem Education Foundation

the next generation lead a successful crime-free life. It is important to not only focus on offenders, but also their children as we try to break the intergenerational cycle of criminality. We operate an Early Head Start program at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, our women's prison in Wilsonville. It is designed to create a lasting bond between mother and child and help the mother become an effective parent upon release.

The program provides services which include education, health and nutrition services to children, family support to mothers and caregivers through individual home visits and transitional planning for the family upon the mother's release.

Unfortunately, the Department of Corrections is dealing with these problems after the fact. But what if we could address the issue before a child or young adult begins making the choices that ultimately lead to prison? What if music or science or athletics or writing or art or history engaged that child or young adult at a critical time in their development? What if an after-school program provided the extra homework time and an adult role model or mentor who gave that child an example to look up to? Before these 14,000 offenders we supervise were inmates, they were children. Children are our opportunity.

Undoubtedly a robust education system, targeting the necessary protective factors, will help reduce the long-term burdensome cost of crime and corrections. I am not so Pollyannaish as to believe the Department of Corrections will ever be entirely out of work. But crime prevention can change the trajectory of prison growth, and an effective, robust education system is a significant and necessary part of that change.

As a state, we need to commit to the educational success of our children and, in doing so, we can ultimately reduce the number of people we incarcerate. We do not have to be bound by our prison population forecasts. We do not have to accept that a certain percentage of first-graders will drop out of high school, commit crimes and go to prison. We can do better than our forecasts. By our commitment to education, we can give all children the opportunity to make their lives happy, healthy and productive. We must hold on to our values that in Oregon all things are possible for all people.

Programs supported by the Salem-Keizer Education Foundation contribute to our efforts of building the robust education system that we need.

Max Williams of Tigard is the director of the Oregon Department of Corrections. He can be reached at (503) 945-0927.