



Finishing the sentence

The AEU's new policy on education in prisons highlights how a complex range of systems is failing teachers, inmates and the wider community.

STEVE PACKER reports.

In the ACT, AEU organiser Mike Fitzgerald cites the case of inmate education for a privately owned prison currently under construction. The contract has been awarded to a private provider based in the Bega Valley and following that there is no information at this stage about teachers' salary or conditions. "Canberra Institute of Technology and other providers with experience in the corrections area also tendered, and I know the CIT quote was well above what they were willing to accept," says Fitzgerald.

In Victoria, a new prison has been built next to an existing one. A TAFE 15km away provides education at the older prison, and it was thought it was the obvious choice for the new facility. But that contract went to a TAFE six hours' drive away, says AEU vice-president Gillian Robertson. "The way it's set up in Victoria, only TAFEs can tender, but they are competing against each other,"

she says. "Now that there are two TAFE providers, it potentially puts at risk the financial viability of delivery at both locations because there simply isn't enough 'critical mass'. The almighty dollar must have had something to do with it, but the criteria for the decisions are not easily made available."

In the Northern Territory, the AEU is continuing to negotiate with the NT Corrective Services Department over issues of teachers' wages, job permanency and safety, says NT branch president Nadine Williams. Access to education programs for the predominantly Indigenous prison population is also an issue. "In the region of Australia with the highest rate of imprisonment, this small group of prison educators is precariously employed by the department on a mostly part-time and casual basis."

Wherever you look, teachers in corrective facilities are doing their best, in difficult, stressful conditions, to provide the general and vocational education that can really

make a difference for thousands of Australia's most troubled and vulnerable citizens. "Everyone agrees that education is the solution to recidivism," says Fitzgerald. However, the system—legislation, governments, corrective services departments, prison officers—regards it as a low priority at all levels.

UN resolution

United Nations General Assembly resolution 45/111, on basic principles for the treatment of prisoners, states: "All prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality." Taking this principle as a starting point, the AEU has produced its Education in Correctional Settings policy, which was passed unanimously at the federal conference in January.

The AEU has members who provide education and training, often in relative isolation, in correctional centres, juvenile justice

→ Briefly

- **Education is recognised as the solution to criminal recidivism.**
- **The prison system tends to regard inmate education as a low priority.**
- **Prison educators are subject to various complex employment situations which impede progress.**
- **The AEU's new Education in Correctional Settings policy outlines how to tackle the problems.**

centres, detention centres and institutions for probation and parole. Their conditions are included in a range of industrial agreements which differ between the various states and territories. The state and federal governments share overall responsibility for the funding. Implementation is a state responsibility, with the training authority or corrections administration, or a combination of the two, taking care of arrangements.

The AEU policy recognises that being imprisoned is mostly a transitional situation, particularly for the young. It expresses the union's concern about the overuse of custodial sentencing evident in the massive growth of inmate numbers. "Imprisonment should be a punishment of last resort."

In the June quarter of 2006, about 77,000 people were under the authority of corrective services (excluding periodic detention), with about 25,000 of them in full-time custody. The average daily imprisonment rate was 158

prisoners per 100,000 adults in the population. Of these, 93 per cent were male. The Indigenous imprisonment rate was 2,110 per 100,000 Indigenous adults.

In 2002, the Australian National Training Authority reported that less than a quarter of prison inmates had completed secondary school, a large number had limited literacy and numeracy, most were unemployed prior to their sentencing, and more than three-quarters were likely to have substance-abuse problems.

The policy says teachers working in correctional facilities should be teacher-qualified, with their professional status recognised and linked to teachers in schools, TAFE and other appropriate sectors. The teachers have the right to:

- Industrial awards and agreements ensuring their conditions of work.
- A safe and healthy work environment protected by OHS legislation.
- Union representation, especially in workplaces.
- Approved teacher training courses and access to professional development.
- Secure employment with appropriate additional financial compensation for the particular circumstances of the work.

Guaranteed by law

Heading the policy's main principles is that provision of education in correctional facilities should be guaranteed in legislation. "In NSW we've had a long campaign to get the government to guarantee it, but the legislation says it 'may' provide funding," says NSW Teachers Federation organiser Peter de Graaff. "After the last election, the government said it would fund literacy and numeracy programs for four years, so the guarantee is running out."

The policy says education should include classroom subjects, adult basic and general education, accredited vocational education, distance education, creative and cultural activities, physical

education and sports, social education, and pre- and post-release programs. The programs must be adequately resourced, publicly funded and not subject to outsourcing to private, for-profit organisations. They should recognise inmates' diverse backgrounds and needs. Priority should be given to appropriate programs for young, Indigenous and marginalised inmates, and those with literacy and numeracy needs.

The AEU has undertaken to campaign for legislative guarantees, promote the establishment of communication networks between teachers working in correctional facilities, promote their role and recognise their unique position in the lifelong learning continuum.

"The policy outlines the depth of the problems," says de Graaff. "Now it's up to the activism of AEU members at a local level." ●

STEVE PACKER is a freelance writer and sub editor of *Australian Educator*.

Your say



**Ros Gay, literacy and numeracy teacher
Mannus Correctional Complex, NSW**

"We're a minimum-security prison farm and better off than many. We have the best access

to inmates and a very good relationship with the custodial people. But we do have trouble getting recognition that what we do is worthwhile. While the value of education is recognised at policy level, we don't have much say when it comes down to tin tacks."

Terrie Lowe, Koori teacher Grafton Correctional Centre, NSW

"I've been here 5 ½ years and I enjoy it immensely. It's good to see inmates—especially Indigenous inmates—improve their self-esteem, having been told they're no-hopers for so long. Learning literacy, numeracy and cultural studies, and emphasis on vocational skills, can change their life outlook. They can see that there's more to life than being in gaol."