
A Day at Osborne School

Many teachers would like to be able to offer their students individualized instruction. But they probably have not considered one option that would allow — indeed require — them to do so. Ms. Sarra and Ms. Olcott describe what it's like to teach adults in a school inside a maximum-security prison.

BY DENISE SARRA AND LYNN OLCOTT

MEN CLAD in green drift slowly across the yard on their way to classes. They are enrolled in academic and vocational courses at Osborne School, located inside Auburn Correctional Facility.

Auburn is a maximum-security prison for men in upstate New York. The prison was originally built on the edge of the city of Auburn, but in the last 189 years, bustling neighborhoods have grown up around the 25-acre facility. Inmates can hear the sounds of children playing and the melody of the ice cream truck outside the 40-foot concrete walls. Many of the inmates look forward to being released, while some will never leave. Meanwhile, each morning, they report to their assigned programs at Osborne School.

Program requirements for inmates vary by state. New York requires all inmates without a high school diploma or a GED (general education development) certificate to attend school and to work toward acquiring a GED, unless security or other issues take priority. According to the New York State Department of Corrections, the state has a prison population of nearly 63,400 men and women, with approximately 45,000 enrolled annually in educational programs. Auburn typically houses up

to 1,750 inmates. About 700 of them participate in academic or vocational classes at Osborne School.

Auburn Correctional Facility is the oldest prison still operating in New York State and has housed inmates since 1817. Though today it is an all-male facility, in the past Auburn housed both men and women, and schooling has always been an important element of incarceration here. In the 1840s, the first insane asylum inside a prison in the U.S. stood on the site of the present-day school. As early as the mid-1800s, priests and clergy from a nearby theological seminary taught basic literacy classes inside these walls. From 1893 to 1932 the site was used as the first women's prison in the state.

Osborne School, a compact, two-story brick structure built into a hillside, opened in 1962. The school is named in honor of Thomas Mott Osborne, who served as warden of Auburn Prison almost a century ago. Warden Osborne enacted many reforms at Auburn, including the expansion of education programs. Today, Osborne School operates an ambitious, multilevel GED pathway and an array of vocational training programs, including computer repair, building maintenance, masonry, barbering, welding, floor covering, computer operations, drafting, electrical trades, and custodial maintenance.

Corrections teachers are a highly diverse group of professionals. Some teachers get their start in corrections by teaching inside during a summer session and becoming fascinated by the unusual teaching challenges they find. Others are retired from traditional school settings and start new careers teaching inmates.¹

There are several avenues for certified teachers who

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decide to take up employment behind bars. Most jobs in correctional facilities are county, state, or federal civil-service jobs. Each state has corrections and civil-service websites where current job openings for officers and civilian personnel in correctional settings are posted. Sometimes openings for teachers are advertised locally, and people are hired “off the street,” though they still must meet the necessary civil-service requirements, including a background check. County jails often operate GED programs for minors through contracts with local public schools, in which case applications for teacher openings are processed through the local school district.

Classes at Auburn are organized into two, 3-hour modules per day. Students may be enrolled in one academic module and one vocational module, or they may come to school for just one class and have jobs or assignments elsewhere in the facility. As inmates near their release dates, they are scheduled into additional, required pre-release programs. Many of these special programs are also housed within the school.

In New York State, programming for inmates is geared to aid with reentry into society and designed to help prevent recidivism. Research has repeatedly verified that education is an effective deterrent to criminal behavior, and inmates who achieve their educational

goals while in prison have significantly lower rates of recidivism.²

But achieving academic success in prison isn’t easy. Typically, inmates come to school with uneven skills, significant gaps in their learning, and a range of learning and behavior problems. Most have little confidence in their ability to achieve academically, and some are nonreaders.

Education programs in the prisons of New York State use individualized instruction as a primary teaching method. Diagnostic tests are used for placement, and materials are assigned that are appropriate to each inmate’s specific needs. Class size is limited to 20 students per classroom, and teachers spend much of their classroom time helping students individually.

“Teaching in corrections isn’t for everyone,” observes Phyllis White, who has taught in three different facilities. “You have to respect the security concerns. And you have to like working with students one at a time.” White became interested in teaching behind bars as a result of her volunteer work in state prisons. She came to correctional teaching from a public school career, having taught in California, West Virginia, and New York.

Of course, teachers may use a variety of large- and small-group instructional strategies to supplement the individualized sequence of assignments provided for

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each student. Ultimately, as with community-based GED programs outside of prison, each student is responsible for his own progress. Many students find it difficult to focus on their individually diagnosed pathway of needed skills. They express a preference for the traditional classroom they remember, with everyone working on the same thing at the same time.

"I remind them that the traditional classroom model didn't work for them before," says Beth McBride, a pre-GED teacher. Students in her classes have scored at the sixth- through eighth-grade level in reading or math on diagnostic tests. McBride has taught at various levels in K-12 public schools in Florida and New York. She began teaching pre-GED classes at another central New York facility and later transferred to Auburn.

Adult Basic Education teacher Amanda Monette agrees that individualized learning is challenging for some students. "It may be hard for students to learn to work on their own, but it is what they really need." Monette is relatively new to correctional teaching. Her students have scored at or below the fifth-grade level in reading or math. She recently finished her teaching degree and was working as a substitute teacher when she heard about an opening at Auburn through word of mouth. Her multi-level substitute teaching experience has turned out to be extremely useful preparation for teaching in a prison classroom.

Understandably, student inmates demonstrate a broad range of abilities and learning styles. It takes years for some to raise their reading and math levels high enough to qualify for the GED exam, but others make startling progress. Teacher Nick Valenti recalls a student he had in a voluntary evening high school program in 1979. The student's first experience in writing an essay occurred in Valenti's class. Though quite weak academically, the student was very focused and earned his high school diploma in just one year. "That

student's achievement was an experience I carried with me for over 20 years, and it was instrumental in my returning to correctional teaching full time in 2000," Valenti said.

Osborne School is not luxurious. The furniture is sturdy and utilitarian, much of it constructed to specifications in the building trades classes. The hallways, with highly polished and well-worn floors, are windowed for security purposes. Security directives also greatly restrict what can be brought into the facility, and so there is a refreshing lack of clutter. Each day, inmates sign into their classrooms, retrieve their folders, and work on materials that have been carefully selected for their individual needs.

Academic time is protected here. Students study; teachers teach; officers patrol and monitor inmate movement in the halls. There are few interruptions in the learning day.

"Miss, you breakin' my head!" is the joking complaint of one large, heavily muscled inmate, as he pores over coordinate geometry.


"Good," responds Giselle Miller cheerfully. "That means you're doing it right." Miller, a GED teacher, was teaching remedial reading at a nearby junior high school before she responded to a civil-service posting about a position at Auburn.

The men laugh and return to their work. The peace of concentration settles in the room. Through the window, the sun is sinking deeper into the shadows of afternoon. It is time to clean up, signaling the close of another day at Osborne School.

The men break into conversation but remain seated until an officer dismisses them, one classroom at a time. Singly and in small groups, men stream from the building and then fan out toward the blocks. At the beginning of the last century, in the days when Thomas Osborne was warden, towering trees bordered a long walkway that crossed the yard. Today, inmates saunter across a black expanse of asphalt, demarcated by fresh white lines for baseball and basketball games. They are heading back to their cellblocks for the afternoon count.

Some pause to light cigarettes. Some stop to talk. Others walk on, carrying folders of GED work, planning to hit the books again later, in the stillness of the prison night.

1. For information about teaching openings in correctional facilities in New York State, go to www.docs.state.ny.us and click on Job Openings. In any state, teachers interested in correctional work may inquire about openings by phoning the personnel office of a particular facility directly.

2. John Nuttall, Linda Hollmen, and E. Michele Staley, "The Effect of Earning a GED on Recidivism Rates," *Journal of Correctional Education*, September 2003, pp. 90-94. 

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