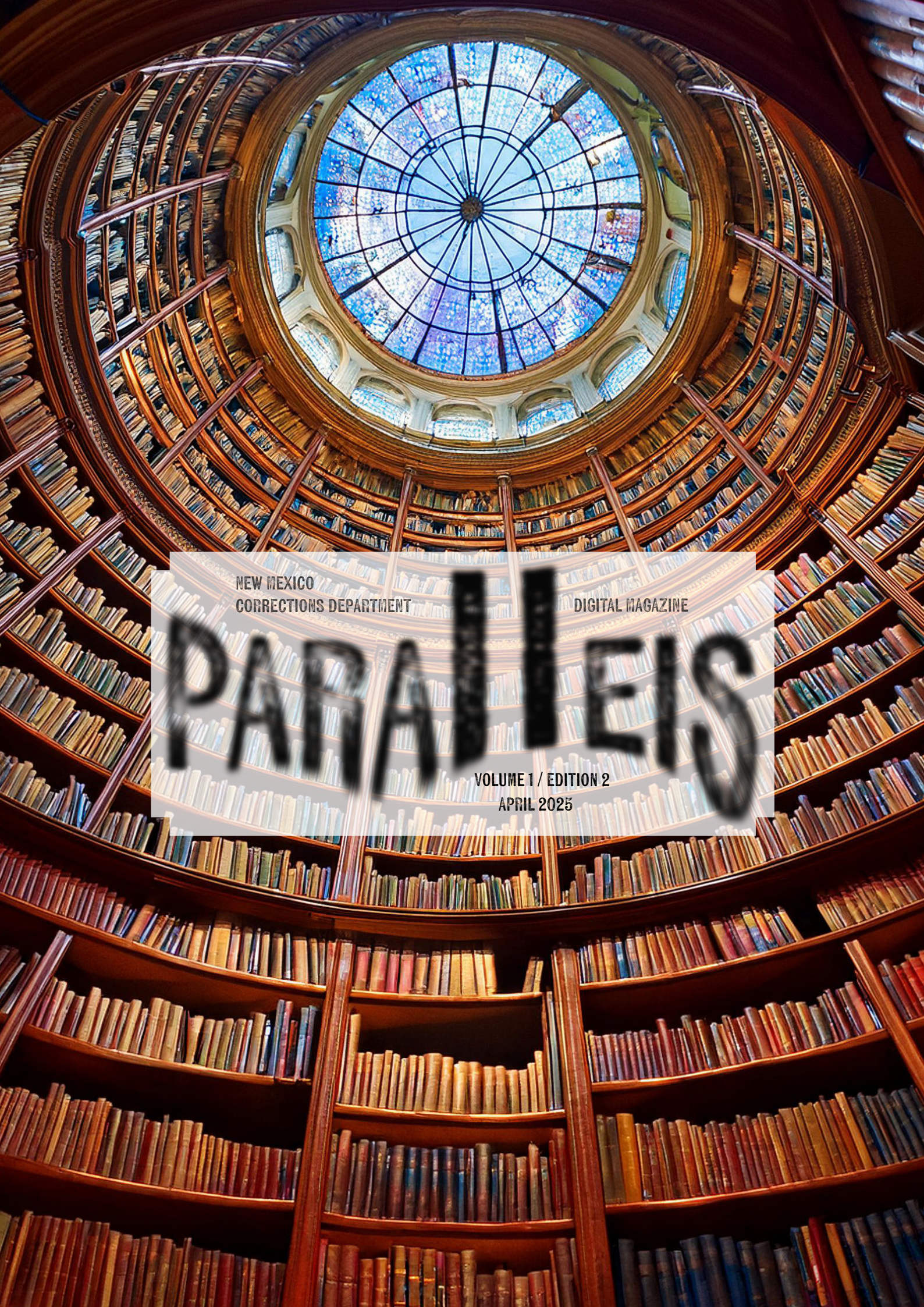




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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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VOLUME 1 / EDITION 2
APRIL 2025

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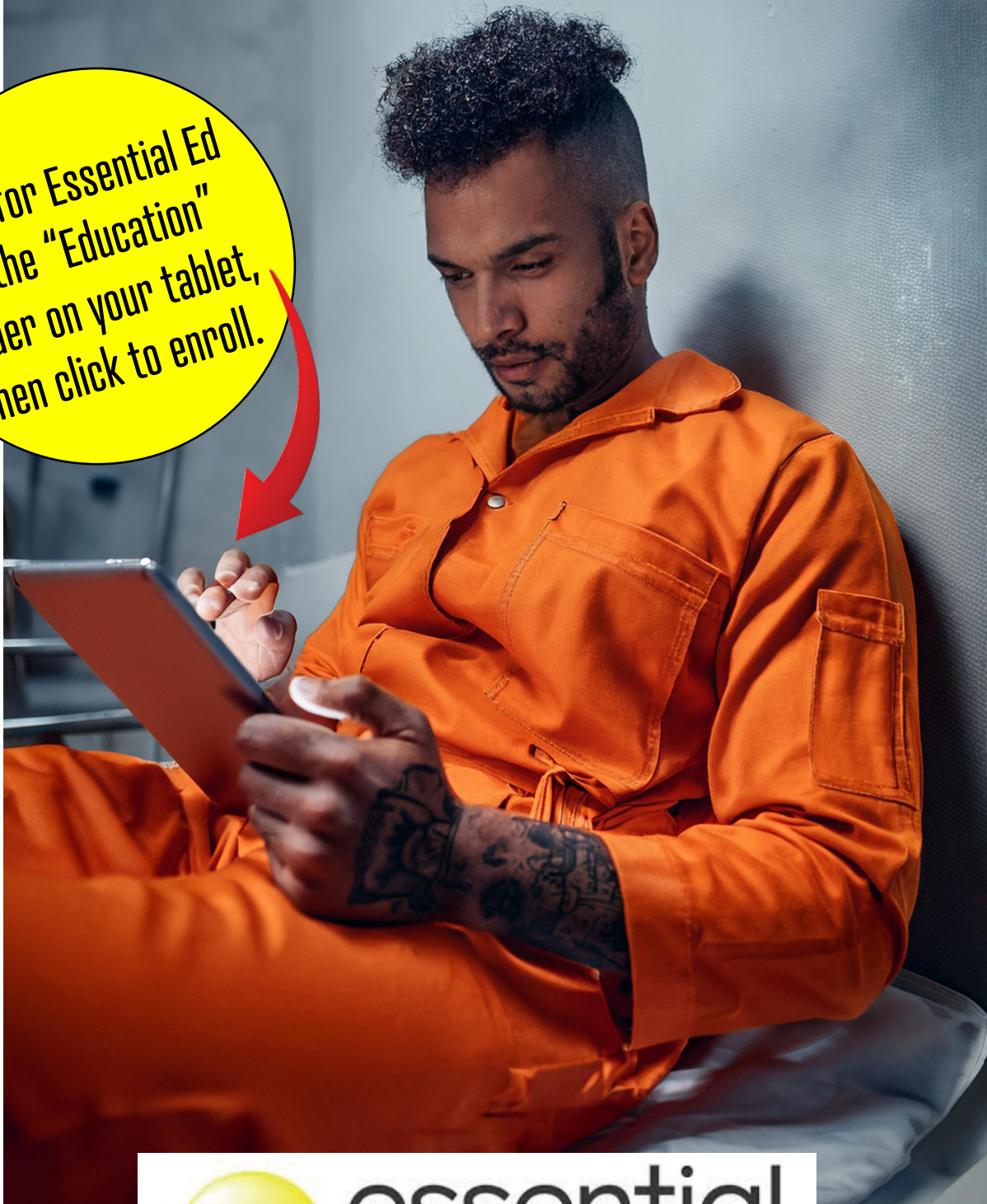
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"CATCHING THE CHAIN" PART 2



While many who are incarcerated within the NMCD are legally mandated to obtain their high school diploma or equivalency before they are released, anyone can opt to improve their future prospects via educational programming.

In this four-part series, we are exploring what getting out of prison really looks like and dispelling the myth that it can be defined by one moment of time.

Getting out of prison, or “catching the chain,” as it’s sometimes referenced inside, starts almost immediately upon entering the system, and takes months or years of work – working on one’s self and working toward a course correction for one’s life path.

The lives of justice-involved individuals, it seems, are more like massive, lumbering cargo ships than stealthy, agile speed boats that can turn on a dime. Changing their trajectory requires foresight, planning, and a lot of time. It also requires the efforts of a crew or team, rather than just the captain alone. For NMCD inmates, that “crew” is comprised of many within the department, including those in the Reentry Division.

In part one, we discussed the fact that behavioral health programming, including substance abuse counseling, is an integral component of the NMCD’s efforts to support inmates as they approach their release and eventually transition back to their communities as returning citizens.

But that’s only one aspect of NMCD’s approach to supporting those incarcerated within the NMCD. The second is academic education, including high school diplomas; high school equivalency

(HSE) certifications including GED / HiSET; and higher education such as college-issued Associate’s Degrees, Bachelor’s Degrees, Master’s Degrees, and PhD’s.

Eric Erickson, Acting Supervisor of Education at the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas, explains Reentry’s reason for offering education to incarcerated people in the most basic terms:

“When we talk about correctional education, essentially, it can provide a better chance for a better future outside of prison.”

But it’s not just the NMCD’s Reentry Division that has recognized the value of educating incarcerated people; the New Mexico State Legislature actually identified the benefits of doing so over three decades ago – and acted on that realization by enacting New Mexico Statutes Section 33-11-3.

Mr. Erickson explains, “As of 1988, legislation was passed that mandates all inmates within the New Mexico Corrections Department to be enrolled into adult education classes if they have not earned a GED (General Education Development) or high school diploma. They must have at least eighteen months or more left to serve on their sentence and less than ten years left to serve on their sentence.”

By establishing a minimum education standard and ensuring that all incarcerated people meet that

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“There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.”

~Jiddu Krishnamurti

standard, this legislation has introduced countless people - including those who are incarcerated and their family members - to the opportunities that adult education can provide.

Allison is one of those within the NMCD who has been required to obtain her high school equivalency per this legislative requirement.

“I dropped out at, like, eleventh grade. And one of my requirements, coming to prison, was to get my GED. It was a fight, but I got it. You know, it took a while, but I got it. It was very challenging for me. Many days I wanted to give up, you know? Many days. [But when I finished,] it felt accomplishing, like, I finally - I’ve been in such a dark place for so long - ...I finally accomplished something good so that I can finally become somebody.”

Krista, another high school equivalency student, was also glad to have been required to enroll in the program:

“...For me, when I started doing my GED and I started catching onto things and being able to see that I could do certain things, I started wanting to do them and wanting to learn. Learning, like, when I got my fractions down, you know, and they gave me a fractions problem and I was able to do it, you know, it [heightens] your self-esteem and it makes you feel good about yourself.”

The NMCD is mandated to assist those in their care with obtaining their HSE, but it also partners, voluntarily, with a variety of colleges to facilitate enrollment in higher education.

Kayla Cunningham, Adult Education Instructor and Ashland University Site Director at Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility (SNMCF) in Las Cruces, discusses the profound impact that she sees all levels of education make on her incarcerated



Pursuing an education not only opens an entirely new world of opportunities, but most students find that the more they learn, the more they want to learn.

students – both while they’re inside and after they’re out:

“I think corrections has the ability to make the biggest impact or change. A lot of the students here have never enjoyed education; they’ve never had that opportunity to really learn, and corrections has a way of giving them that chance to learn. A lot of students don’t know what they’re going to do when they get out. ...A lot of these guys don’t have a high school diploma or equivalency, a lot of them don’t have a college degree ...if you’re making only ten or twelve dollars an hour, or minimum wage, you really can’t afford your bills...”

“So education is the best possible way for these guys to, one, be able to graduate and do something with their lives, and then, when they get out, the hope is that they can find decent-paying jobs ...that will keep them out and reduce recidivism rates. ...So, corrections is wonderful in that manner, education is wonderful in that manner, because we’re giving them the tools to hopefully succeed and not come back here.”

While many incarcerated students discover

that they actually enjoy learning and gain self-confidence from their involvement with education, the most practical reason for pursuing a GED is the fact that doing so will improve one's earning potential upon release from prison.

In the third quarter of 2023, the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported that full-time workers age 25 and over, without a high school diploma, had median weekly earnings of \$721, compared with \$905 for high school graduates with no college. That means that by obtaining a high school diploma or equivalency, a person is increasing their earning potential by over twenty-five percent.

NMCD Reentry Division Deputy Director Haven Scogin explains that assisting incarcerated people in obtaining adult education "...helps them focus their lives in a way that they can make actual change and have a different future than they had when they stepped in."



The decision as to whether you will model positive or negative behaviors for your children is entirely your own. Demonstrating your own love of learning for them will help direct them toward their own path of literacy and success.

"...When you're thinking about what happens to someone when they get a degree or develop themselves educationally ... it impacts their entire family. They can now get a job that they couldn't get before; they can get a living wage that can pay bills that they couldn't pay before; support their children; step off of government assistance services; and be able to stand on their feet."

"And that pride that that client feels is then impressed on the children that they're raising and it really helps move us in a direction that hopefully, as we continue those paces, can really stop generational crime ...and make big, impactful

changes in families."

So, it seems that a diploma may be better understood as a different kind of piece of paper: a ticket – one that will grant a person admission into an arena of higher wages, a more stably supported family, and success in avoiding recidivism - in other words, keeping formerly incarcerated people from coming back to prison.

NMCD Reentry Division Director Byron Brown says, "Our focus is ...making sure that we're providing opportunities at all of our facilities for folks to get that high school diploma [or equivalency]. It's so important that you have that; that's just like, baseline. It's very hard to find employment if you don't have that high school diploma. So, we feel that's job one: make sure to get that in place..."

Obtaining a high school education may enable a person to earn twenty-five percent more than they could as a high school drop-out, but what can a person do to increase their earning potential even more? Simply put, obtain more education.

That same Bureau of Labor and Statistics research indicates that, in the third quarter of 2023, workers with some college or an associate's degree earned a weekly average of \$1,012; those with a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$1,499 per week; and workers with an advanced degree enjoyed median weekly earnings of \$1,864. So, the trend is quite clear: more education equals more income.

And when one is rebuilding their post-incarceration life, each dollar of legitimately earned income can help ensure that they won't be tempted to return to the illegal activities that may have led or contributed to their becoming justice-involved. When people can comfortably support themselves and their families with a legitimate job, they are less likely to resort to criminal activity to get by.

Matthew McKinnon, Academic Instructor at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF) in Grants, says that "A lot of the problem is that, when people get out ...they get back in contact with the people they were in contact with that got them in here. ...So, if they get their opportunity to get their GED ...it gives them a lot [more] opportunities when they get out."

The decision to pursue one's education looks different for each person. The motivation

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to start steering their life in a different direction can come in a variety of forms and at different points of time in each person's incarceration.

For Jamaal, he very clearly remembers recognizing the need for change in his life and the moment when he decided to start "steering the ship" in a different direction:

"I was like, '...I really need to do something with myself.' You know, I just wasn't happy with where I was at. ...I literally had a little talk with myself, you know, 'Am I gonna be that guy that complains about his life and does nothing about it? Or am I gonna start making some sacrifices and start trying to, like, fight for something better and try to be happy?' I wasted the first, you know, twenty-two and a half, twenty-three years I was locked up just acting like a dummy, really, if I'm being honest."

"...I had a goal to get a degree, but I never believed in myself enough to try it... So, I had ...a lot of questions about religion, so I had this opportunity – these dudes were tellin' me about this school in Florida that does correspondence courses, and I was like, 'You know what, man, I'm gonna check this out.' 'Cause I figured it would answer questions that I had, personally, and it would give me an opportunity to work on a degree. So, it took me ...fifteen months to get my Associate's, and then once I got that, I was like, 'Man, ...I gotta try for my Bachelor's.' So it took about nine months ...and I had a 3.90 gettin' my Associate's, and then I graduated [from my Bachelor's Degree program] with a 4.00. I was excited. I was proud of myself. ...So, for me, that was a huge accomplishment."

Jamaal is certainly not alone in having felt that initial self-doubt. Many incarcerated people don't think that they're cut out for formal education or they believe that their upbringing or past academic challenges have already predetermined their educational future.

But Travis, who earned his Bachelor's Degree while incarcerated, has some advice for those who may be nervous about enrolling:

"I would say, just start out slow if you have hesitation about it. Just take one class, and you'd be surprised how much learning can help you in every aspect of your life. ...and once you get a taste of it, you'll want to learn more about any and everything, really."

Aside from the increased earning potential and

decreased recidivism rates that education offers, incarcerated students consistently express that another benefit can be summed up in one word: confidence.



"Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right." ~Henry Ford

Krista says, "You grow up thinking, 'You can't, you can't, you can't,' and so when you finally do something and you put your all into it and you achieved it, it's a great feeling and you just want to keep going. You know, you start feeling a different way about yourself."

Asked what having earned his GED while incarcerated means to him, Joshua responds, "It means that everybody will kind of see me in a different light and know that I did everything I could to progress myself further and become a better person while in prison."

Enrique, having not only earned a Master's Degree and a Doctorate of Education while incarcerated, has also worked as a tutor to his incarcerated classmates. He says that he's seen many incarcerated students' self-confidence blossom upon being introduced to education:

"...Seeing some people, especially after helping them and getting to know them, [I realized that] a lot of the challenges they faced were just their upbringing, you know, they never were introduced to school or never encouraged to do well in school, so when they finally got a sense of accomplishment and, you know, saw the value of hard work and earning something as a result of that hard work, you could tell that it was something fulfilling for them."

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Many people, despite growing up thinking that they're not cut out for academic success, are finally able to focus on and enjoy reading, studying, and learning during their incarceration.

Darlene Hayes, Education Supervisor at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF), says that she frequently “preaches” to her students, “What’s changed if nothing has changed?”

“You have to [take] the first step forward to change generational curses. ...You have the power to change that within your own family. So, what are you gonna do different to set the stage for your family to do different? ...You’ve got that power; what are you gonna do with it?”

As we discussed in part one of this series, modeling substance abuse for one’s children could result in those children falling prey to the same addictive behavior. But modeling works both ways – both positively and negatively. So, by discovering, pursuing, and valuing education, incarcerated students have the opportunity to inspire younger generations to do the same. Just as substance abuse and criminal behavior can be passed on generationally, so too can literacy, self-worth, and a love of learning.

As a potent example, Antonio has found that his interest in obtaining his adult education has rubbed off on his grandchildren:

“I’ve been down for six and half years now, and I’m in the process of getting my GED at this time. I thought, when I [got] to this age, I didn’t need this education, but I have some grandkids and they’re

getting ready to [start] high school and they told me, ‘Grandpa, do you think you could get your education while you’re in there?’ I [said], ‘OK,’ and [my granddaughter] goes, ‘Well, if I get mine, will you get yours?’ So that was a lift up for me and I’ve been coming a long ways; I’m getting there. It’s been a long time since I’ve been in school.”

“[I feel a sense of] achievement. I feel good about it. I guess you could look at it as it’s never too late to get an education. [It’s been] hard to get a job. Now with this, I can get a good job and then go to school to learn another good trade. It’s never too late.”

It’s clear, then, that adult education can not only position incarcerated students to earn a better living upon their release, stay out of prison, achieve a sense of accomplishment, and increase confidence, but also pass on a love of learning to their children and set them up for success as well, breaking the cycle of generational illiteracy and poverty.

As Ambrosia noted in part one of this series, participating in substance abuse programming actually allowed her to positively influence the self-limiting beliefs and addictive behaviors of her parents and other elders.

Similarly, Jamaal believes that his involvement in education is changing how he interacts with his family on the outside, specifically, his mother:

“When I was making all the bad decisions in here

...the relationships with people out there suffered. ...But now, [my mom] sees the changes, so that naturally makes things better. Like, I don't have to work so hard to apologize for the mistakes that I made because she sees the changes I'm making. ...Your family's gonna see those changes. ...you don't have to convince them, like, 'Hey, I'm changing, I'm going to school.' ...If you're doing it, and you're like, really doing it, they're gonna see."

But how many people incarcerated within the NMCD are taking advantage of these adult education opportunities? In Fiscal Year 2024, over 1,300 inmates participated in educational services with 246 NMCD inmates obtaining their high school equivalencies and 43 obtaining post secondary education degrees and certifications. And both of those numbers represent an increase from the previous year.

Of course, some incarcerated students struggle more with their education than others. And because the NMCD finds itself working with students of all backgrounds and abilities, the Reentry Division incorporates Special Education into its programming.

Adult Special Education Administrator Robert Madrid shares how this type of programming enables the NMCD to reach all of its students:

"It is very fulfilling to see these students that have felt that they never had a chance because of their disability ...that they have that opportunity, even though they didn't have it on the outside, they have that second chance here with us."

"For our Special Education students, an inch is worth a mile. And if that's what we can provide, is just that one inch, you know, all those inches combine to make a foot, a yard, and so on and so forth, until they complete and accomplish their goals, whatever [that may be], while they're in here incarcerated with us, and even on the outside."

"Some of the students that have special needs have felt in the past that their disability defines who they are. With us, we make sure that that's not their actual definition. There's more to them than their disability and we make sure that they understand that."

Joaquin can attest to the fact that incarceration has provided him with an opportunity to pursue and enjoy education in a way that had not been available

to him in school on the outside:

"Before prison, I was the type of individual, growing up as a child, they told me my brains weren't the best and I had certain learning disabilities; they told me that I was different than everybody else. But finally, when I had gotten sat down in prison, and I opened up a book and I started using my mind, something clicked. And it's just like, '...Yeah, they were right, you're different than everybody.' I might have been just a tad bit faster, and I just didn't have the opportunity to sit down in an environment to where I was slowed down. And finally, I've gotten to where I can sit down and actually see things at a different pace, and it's like, it's helped me expand my mind."

While NMCD's Special Education programming helps students understand that their disability does not define who they are, the Department's Education programming as a whole – including high school diplomas and equivalency (GED and HiSET) and higher education (college) programming – aims to help everyone incarcerated within the NMCD understand that their crimes, their mistakes, and their incarceration do not define who they are. Obtaining one's education is a crucial steppingstone when forging a new path toward a more fulfilling, successful, and sustainable future and taking that first step requires nothing more than deciding that it's time.

If you are currently incarcerated within the NMCD and would like to learn more about getting your high school diploma, high school equivalency (GED or HiSET), or college degree, reach out to the Education staff in your facility to get started.

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RAISING READERS

Incarcerated Parents Who Embrace Education Set Their Children Up for a Brighter Future

In this issue's article titled, "Catching the Chain, Part 2," we touch on how an incarcerated person's education can contribute to a family legacy of learning. Some of the incarcerated students mentioned in that story share how their pursuing their own education has inspired their children, parents, or other family members to do the same, or has improved the quality of their family relationships.

There are actually a variety of programs available within the NMCD that encourage incarcerated parents to share their love of learning, and specifically, reading, with their children.

As was discussed in "Catching the Chain, Part 1," in the first issue of *Parallels*, a parent's behaviors can cultivate generational patterns – for better or for worse. Using substances as a coping skill; participating in illegal activities; and meeting family conflicts with anger, violence, and physical abuse are all behaviors that, when modeled for children, could manifest in their own adult lives. However, positive behaviors like pursuing education, valuing literacy, and fostering self-esteem can also be impressed upon the next generation by example.

This is so widely recognized that there are even national initiatives to encourage parents to demonstrate the power of literacy to their children. One such program is the "Read Across America" initiative, organized by the National Educational Association, in which students at Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility (SNMCF) in Las Cruces have participated. The men at SNMCF have participated in "Read Across America" by writing poems and reading classic children's literature to their children via video.

SNMCF, as well as Guadalupe County Correctional Facility (GCCF) in Santa Rosa and Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF) in Grants, also offer another program titled "InsideOut Dad[®]," which, offered through the National Fatherhood Initiative[®], is another way in which incarcerated parents can read aloud to their

children. This program for incarcerated fathers helps them improve their parenting skills and reconnect with their children in ways that include a distance reading program in which they can record themselves reading to their kids.



SNMCF Deputy Warden, Carlos Lazarin discusses the value of these types of initiatives:

"We are immensely proud of the impact that our literacy program has had on our prison community. This initiative not only promotes intellectual growth and personal development among our inmates, but also contributes to a positive and enriching prison environment. We believe that investing in educational and rehabilitative programs such as this one is not only morally right, but also serves the long-term interests of our institution and society as a whole."

SNMCF Educator, Kayla Cunningham also believes in the positive impact of these reading programs: "I believe reading has the power to transform lives, and we are proud to support initiatives that encourage a love for books and learning."

Jeremy, one of the incarcerated "Read Across America" participants at SNMCF, comments on how he hopes that his own literacy might influence that of his children: "I never thought much about reading when I was young, but now that I'm here, I see its importance. I wish I had appreciated it back then and stayed in school. Maybe things would've turned out differently for me. I just hope my kids will love reading. I want them to see what I didn't see back then - the power of education. Maybe it'll

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“From your parents you learn love and laughter and how to put one foot before the other. But when books are opened you discover you have wings.” ~Helen Hayes

give them a better shot at things than I had. More than anything, I hope my kids don't follow my same path. I hope they stay in school. I just wish I could be there to read to them.”

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the more students read or are read to for fun on their own time and at home, the higher their reading scores.

Nonprofit United Through Reading points out that there are numerous benefits of reading to children aloud, including building vocabulary; improving comprehension; promoting literacy; developing attention and memory skills; supporting problem-solving and critical thinking skills; cultivating imagination; reducing stress and anxiety; providing a sense of routine and comfort; and strengthening the bond between parent and child.

Mountains of evidence in support of these benefits have piled up since 1985, when a report by the National Academy of Education concluded that, for children, reading aloud was the most impactful factor in their future educational success. That is to say that the more a child is read to, the more

academic achievements they will enjoy later on.

Even in the absence of organized programming, there are a variety of other ways in which incarcerated parents can help support their children's appreciation for reading.

Incarcerated parents who want to encourage their children's literacy can:

- Read children's books that are available to them in their facility's library or on their tablet and then retell the stories to their children during in-person or video visits.
- Select a children's book from their facility's library or a piece of classic literature from the digital library available on their tablet and read it aloud to their children during in-person or video visits.
- Start writing a children's story and send it to their child, encouraging him or her to continue the story and send it back to the parent. This back-and-forth can spark both the parent's and the child's creativity and ultimately create a special ongoing narrative that connects the two.



Even during your incarceration, you can encourage those you love to embrace reading, literacy, and education, bringing you all closer and helping to ensure the entire family's future success.

- During in-person or video visits, encourage one's child to tell them about the books that they're reading at home or in school, ask questions about what they're reading, and find out what the child has learned from or has liked about the stories and books they've read.

- Write a special story or poem for one's child, customized with his or her name and interests. Read it aloud to the child during an in-person or video visit, or, if the child is able, allow him or her to read it on their own or with another adult at home.



Reading aloud to children is not only the single most important factor in their educational success, but there are few other activities that can create such a special bond between children and those who care for them.

- Coordinate with the child's other parent or guardians so that the whole family can read the same book and then discuss it together during an in-person or video visit. Ask the child what their favorite part of the story was, or whether they were surprised when the story took an unexpected turn. Remember, there are over 75,000 book titles available on NMCD tablets, so finding a book that everyone can enjoy won't be a problem – the only difficulty might be deciding which one to read first!

According to nonprofit The Literacy Project, a study of nearly 100,000 U.S. school children showed that access to printed materials was the key variable affecting reading attainment. Therefore, it is clearly important for children to have books – and lots of them – in their home, if they are to eventually become enthusiastic readers.

This can be an obstacle for families that may not have the economic means to acquire a large number of books. However, there are a variety of free solutions available for this challenge.

If you are currently incarcerated and would like to help your family on the outside ensure that your

children have access to books, be sure to let them know about the following options.

Families who would like to expose their children to reading, but for whom purchasing books may be financially difficult can:

- Register for a public library card for free and check out books on a regular basis. Local public libraries are usually operated by a city or county, so searching one's city or county website can be helpful in locating one's local public library. Public libraries are also a fantastic resource for free children's activities like craft classes, story time, and other free community events.

- Sign up for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library book delivery program at <https://imaginationlibrary.com/usa/> Each month, this organization mails a high quality, age-appropriate book to all registered children, addressed to them, at no cost to the child's family.

- Connect with other families in one's local area via "Buy Nothing" groups on social media sites like Facebook or Next Door and arrange to gift and receive books at no cost.

- Seek out citizen-run "little free libraries" that may be available in one's neighborhood. You can find a map of registered "LFL's" by going to <https://littlefreelibrary.org/map/>

Embracing education and becoming an active participant in ensuring that one's children are read to and have access to books are all ways in which anyone – even while incarcerated – can help raise readers. And raising readers means raising happier and more successful kids.

Be sure to listen to the episode of the NMCD podcast, "Inside Voices," titled, "Cleared for Departure" (Season 2, Episode 1), for more on the InsideOut Dad[®] program, as well as the distance reading aspect of that program.

And if, as an incarcerated person, you would like to participate in parenting classes or improve your own literacy and reading comprehension, be sure to reach out to your facility's Education staff for guidance on taking the next step.





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TEACHER'S PET

Inmates Participating in NMCD's Mentorship-Based Dog Training Programs Find Themselves Playing the Role of Both Teacher and Student

This issue of Parallels focuses on education and the many ways in which it can improve the lives of NMCD students, both during their incarceration and upon their return to the community.

But incarcerated people aren't the only ones going to class and earning diplomas inside the walls of the NMCD. Many of the graduates walking across the stage to claim their certificates are doing so on four legs.

NMCD has partnered with local animal shelters and rescues across the state in order to give both incarcerated people and rescue dogs a second chance.

Through good behavior, those incarcerated within the NMCD have the opportunity to qualify for these programs, which match inmate trainers with shelter dogs in need of socialization and obedience training. The inmate participants train the dogs for eight weeks, spending 24/7 with the dogs by their side. Upon completion of the program, the dogs are then "paw-rolled" and adopted by qualified applicants.

Each participating facility has built their own unique mentorship-based program with a local animal welfare organization. The Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM) in Santa Fe, for example, has teamed up with Española Humane for what they call their "Paws in the Pen" program.

Mattie Allen from Española Humane explains:

"Through our Paws in the Pen program, our shelter underdogs become top dogs through 8 weeks of 24/7 training with their inmate handlers, who are also in training four days per week with our team to be dog trainers."

Ms. Allen says that what started out as a way to socialize some of their rescue dogs has developed far beyond that initial objective and has evolved



Some of NMCD's graduates are more interested in kibble than credits, but with the help of their inmate trainers, they're acing their classes and earning their "dogrees."

into a true win-win scenario for the dogs and the incarcerated trainers.

Allen explains: "Before we were just trying to help our underdogs in the shelter get a little more exposure, become, you know, adoptable and right now, we not only want them to be adoptable, and be great family dogs, but we want them to have a more serious level of training."

That means that not only are the dogs leaving the facility with a certificate of completion for their obedience and training program, but the incarcerated people who are working with and caring for the dogs are also gaining valuable skills as dog trainers.



By spending all of their time with their trainers and attending structured, mentor-led classes, dogs in NMCD's dog training programs are socialized and house-trained, along with learning obedience, various commands, and even some tricks.

At the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility (SNMCF) in Las Cruces, staff has partnered with Action Programs for Animals (APA), a local animal welfare organization, to create what they call their PAWS Program, which stands for "Prisoners and Animals Working toward Success."

Nora Insurriaga, who is the manager and liaison of the PAWS Program with APA, details how the program works:

"Action Programs for Animals pulls at-risk dogs, long-term dogs, or dogs that are in danger of being euthanized, and we pull them from the shelter after they go through an assessment; and we bring them out to the prison, and the prisoners have been trained by our trainers to teach these dogs basic obedience."

"So they have ...these skills, once they graduate, to ...integrate into a home better."

Clearly, a socialized, well-behaved, and house-trained dog will have a much better chance of being adopted than one without those qualities. There is no doubt that these programs are greatly benefitting the dogs that are chosen to participate.

But there is also little doubt that the incarcerated trainers are benefitting as much as - or even more than - their four-pawed pupils.

Patrick, a PAWS program participant who is incarcerated at SNMCF, confirms that having been given the opportunity to become involved in the

program has enriched his life dramatically:

"This program has changed my life in many ways. It's taught me responsibility, reminding me that even though in prison, I still have a heart. And it teaches me ...I think it's getting me ready for the outside, because of the responsibility part, you know? I had to get up every day and take care of [my dog], just like you have to get up and take care of things out there in the world. And it teaches me that violence isn't the answer for everything anymore."

And Tim, another PAWS participant at SNMCF, agrees that the program has been beneficial for him in many ways:

"It's taught me a lot of responsibility. It's also kept me from getting in trouble. Like, I've been this whole time without a single writeup, not even minor, because it teaches you to think before you act, and how your actions have consequences on things around you."

Darius, a long-time program alum, has also improved his disciplinary record through participation in the program:

"I've gotten myself in plenty of trouble and since I started with this [in 2015], I have clear conduct, I mean, this is it."

Perhaps one of the most significant benefits that inmate participants enjoy is the opportunity to have someone in their care who looks up to them and has faith in them.

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NEW MEXICO
CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT
PRESENTS

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PODCAST



By participating in NMCD's dog-training programs, inmate trainers are able to cultivate empathy, compassion, and responsibility, while their trainees develop various qualities that will make them more adoptable.

Ms. Allen explains, "Dogs don't judge, and they're just - dogs are love ...they're hearts wrapped in fur, and they just walk around believing in you, and that I think is so powerful."

Darius was surprised to discover his own unique talent for training dogs many years ago. He has not only cultivated his own compassion and training skillset, but has also mentored fellow inmates to learn to do the same:

"Doing the baby talk with the dog, or playing with the dog, or the dog's rolling over on his back, and they're rubbing his little belly. These are tattooed guys that you would probably cross [to the other side of] the street if you saw them out there ...and they're in here, and they're playing with this little puppy. I'm pretty sure if I would've started this

"No matter how little money and how few possessions you own, having a dog makes you rich."

~Louis Sabin

maybe before I came to prison I probably wouldn't be in here."

If you are currently incarcerated within an NMCD facility and would like to learn more about whether applying for participation in a dog training program is available to you, contact your Unit Manager.



And if you have family members on the outside who are interested in adopting one of the inmate-trained dogs from NMCD's various dog training programs, you can tell them to visit www.cd.nm.gov/divisions/adult-prisons/dog-programs/ to learn more.

PARALLELS

ESSENTIAL EDUCATION

Tablet-Based, Self-Paced Program
Empowers Students to Prepare for GED Success



In this and the previous issue of *Parallels*, you may have noticed announcements promoting something called “Essential Education” and wondered what it is.

Essential Education is a program that is available to incarcerated students on their tablets. Specifically designed for adult learners, it has helped millions of people (both justice-involved and not) take steps toward a brighter future by preparing them for their GED or HSE exam, getting them college or trade school ready, or helping them obtain career development training.

Essential Education helps students understand why they are learning what they are learning while adapting the content to a level of understanding

that’s not intimidating. It’s also completely self-paced, so students can move through their lessons as quickly or as methodically as they like, focusing on their studies whenever it suits them.

Since a “one-size-fits-all” approach doesn’t work for most adult learners, this program pinpoints each student’s missing skills and then creates a unique learning plan for each student based on those needs.

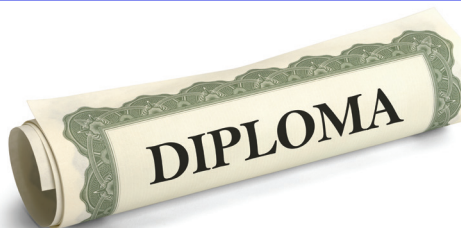
Essential Education assesses each student’s skills, determines their starting point, and then provides a customized learning experience that is the most likely to ensure that student’s success. The program’s automated learning system figures out exactly what each student needs to know so

The Sky's The Limit!



Get your GED and unlock a world
of opportunities.

Ask Education how you can get started
on your future today!



“Success is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”

~Roman Philosopher Seneca



that he or she doesn't waste any time re-learning material that they've already mastered. LaDawn Weston, Customer Success Manager with Essential Education, explains:

“If you know something, you're not going to have to waste your time going through those lessons. So, when you click the big orange 'Start Lesson' button, you can be confident that that's something that you actually could use a brush up on, or something that maybe you were never even taught for whatever reason.”

“If, in your learning plan, you are given a unit that makes you think, 'I probably know this, I don't need to go through the whole unit,' then there is the option for you to test out of that unit.”

No matter how long a student has been out of school or at what point their education was disrupted, Essential Education's GED Academy® will help them fully prepare to pass the test.

Ms. Weston details some of the benefits of having the Essential Education program available to incarcerated students:

“I believe that it really empowers students to take their own education into their hands and run with it. If you're motivated to do it, then you've got a great tool at your disposal along with the support that goes with it.”

But Essential Education isn't just a program that helps users prepare for their High School Diploma or equivalency exam. It has been designed to help users learn more effectively overall. Learning more effectively will benefit students in all areas of their lives. While learning the subject matter that will be covered on the GED or HiSET exam, students are also learning how to retain useful information and incorporate that knowledge into their lives. An improved learning capacity enables a person to build better communication skills and improve employment opportunities, among so many other benefits.

And another important aspect of studying with Essential Education includes gaining self-confidence – both in an academic setting and in an overall sense. Ms. Weston explains:

“One of the things that I love to see is that students know a lot more than they think they know. I can see them come in and they're just so scared. And then I see the relief after they've taken an initial assessment and they see that score automatically; it's instant, as soon as they submit, they can see just how close they are to being ready to test in that particular subject.”

“I like to tell students, 'Don't judge yourself harshly. Give yourself some grace. Just take the results of your assessment test as information. And then we're going to work together to move forward. Just continue to try even if it's only a little bit of a gain.’”

“I just love seeing their surprise. And then, they realize, ‘I can do this.’ It’s a good feeling to watch that.”

“Students’ gains are visible on the student home room screen. And I love that piece. It’s visual and they can see how long they’ve studied. When they ask, ‘How much effort have I really put into this?’, it’s right there.”

“You’ll get that instant assessment score right on your homeroom screen; it’s a little bar graph and you’ll see how close you are to being ready to take the GED / HiSET test. And then underneath that, it’ll give you the approximate number of hours of study that you still need to do before you’re ready.”

Essential Education’s GED Academy® practice tests have been certified by the GED Testing Service, so it’s assured that this program is adequately preparing students with exactly what they need to know in order to pass their exam. So, with the help of Essential Education, passing the exam often proves to be a lot less difficult than students might fear.

Ms. Weston offers a bit more insight on how Essential Education students can expect their tablet-based tutoring experience to go:

“You can choose what you want to study, unless your teacher has made some choices for you - the teachers do have a little bit of control there in order to guide you. But if you have access to all of the subjects that you’ll see on the GED or HiSET test, you can decide where you want to begin between math, reading, language arts, social studies, science, and writing.”

“I always suggest, ‘Why don’t you start with something that you’re really confident in to start out with?’ Whatever you feel like you’re good at; if you’re a history buff, get in and do some social studies.”

“So, you’ll choose your subject and then you’ll automatically be taken to an assessment. And that can be a little scary, a little daunting, especially if you haven’t been in school for a little while. But don’t be scared and try to go in with that mindset of, ‘I’m meeting myself where I am.’”

“And then an individualized learning plan is created from your assessment score. And that shows up in the center of your home page. And you are

given assignments according to the things that you weren’t able to answer correctly at that time. And now we’re going to have something tailored to your needs. It’s not just, ‘Here’s the entire social studies curriculum.’ The lessons are typically between 20 to 30 minutes, per lesson.”

Tony, who dropped out of high school at sixteen and later earned his GED while incarcerated within the NMCD, recalls that “...I did it. I signed up for it, and I was, like, pleasantly surprised that, like, I didn’t hate it, you know? Like, I kind of enjoyed it. ...I enjoyed the challenge and I got my GED fairly quickly, within less than a year.”



Ms. Weston says that many adult learners feel shame or embarrassment surrounding the interruption that occurred in their education. But she believes that students who receive their GED or HSE should wear their struggle as a badge of honor:

“Be proud. You’ve had certain experiences in your life that brought you to this point. Just own it; you’re moving forward and you should embrace the ability to say, ‘I’ve come through this and this is what I did with my circumstances: I went back to school and I got - I earned, I didn’t just get - my diploma.’”

“If I was sitting in a job interview, I would not want to keep that a secret. I would want to showcase that I have been resilient. I’ve come through something really hard, and I’ve come out and I’ve accomplished this and this is where I am right now. You know, I would want people to understand that, ‘That was me then, but this is me now.’ And I would

hold that up as a great accomplishment. It shows determination and the ability to be adaptive and dynamic and to change and evolve. And I think those are all things that we should be proud of.”

Ms. Weston emphasizes the fact that Essential Education offers students the opportunity to help themselves and to “do their future selves a favor:”

“I’m not going to change anyone. I’m not that powerful. But the students themselves have that power. And I’m happy to be able to give them the tools and then, if that’s what they are ready to do at this point in their lives, they can do it.”

Ms. Weston hopes that incarcerated students will recognize Essential Education as the life-changing tool that it is:

“I hope that you’ll embrace this opportunity. ...If you’re feeling even the smallest inkling of, ‘Now is the time,’ then you are being given a tool that really is incredible. It is a one-of-a kind tool with the interactive pieces, with the motivational dashboard, the individual learning plan, and then the support from your teachers. You’ve been given a gift. It may not seem like it, but I truly believe that this program is a gift that you have the opportunity to embrace and work as quickly or as methodically as you need to, to get to your end goal.”

The Essential Education program is available at no cost to incarcerated students within the NMCD. If you would like to learn more about using Essential Education to prepare for your GED or HiSET exam, be sure to reach out to your facility’s Education staff to get started.

And if you are a probationer or parolee who would like to start working toward your GED or HiSET exam, talk to your Probation / Parole Officer about resources that can help you get started, including Essential Education, or go directly to passged.com to enroll in the program.

PARALLELS

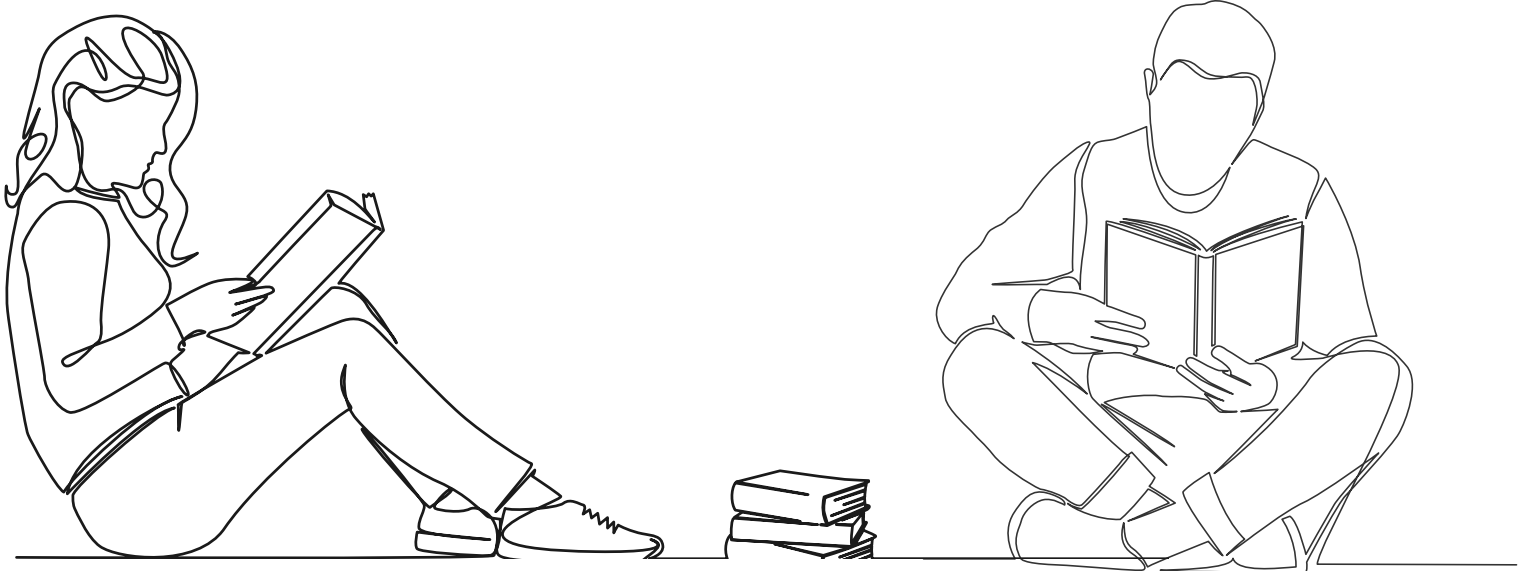


What does education mean to you?

"Having an education will open up so many opportunities for my growing company as well as securing a future for my children. Getting to go to school while being here is truly a honor. I'm truly blessed. It has been an honor getting the chance to better my life for me and my family. I love getting to take classes such as Job Readiness, Project Echo, and Domestic Awareness Program. ...Spending time in class with Mrs. Parker is truly amazing. She really gets involved and helps us understand the material. Thank you for helping me, Springer, New Mexico."



~NMCD Student at Springer Correctional Center



THE WORLD AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Incarcerated Readers Have Access to a
Wealth of Reading Material – and Literacy Help - via their Tablet



You may not realize it, but you are holding millions of pages of content – fictional literature, spiritual texts, non-fiction historical works, biographies, novels, and more – in your hands at this very moment.

Those who are incarcerated within the NMCD can use their state-issued tablets to access a variety of written material, allowing them to easily incorporate studying, education, and recreational reading into their everyday lives.

Whether you're interested in strengthening your reading skills, studying spiritual texts and worshiping, learning something new, or transporting yourself to another time and space through reading historical or fictional novels, there is bound to be something of interest to you in NMCD's extensive digital library.

The entire contents of the Gutenberg Library, comprised of over 74,200 titles, as well as a robust collection of religious and spiritual texts, are housed on each and every inmate tablet, and are available for incarcerated people to read for absolutely free. Everything from historical documents like the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, The United States Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address to classic

literature like Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Paradise Lost, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, and Moby-Dick are just a click away.

To access the Gutenberg Library via your NMCD-issued tablet, look in the Entertainment section under "Book Library."

Not only can exploring this wealth of content enrich your mind and expand your horizons, but it can also potentially assist you in enjoying quality time with your family.

As was mentioned in the "Raising Readers" article in this issue of Parallels, reading can serve as a powerful bonding activity for children and their parents or other caretakers. And with so many thousands of titles available to NMCD inmates, you and your family members can surely find a title that interests everyone. Choosing and reading a book together and discussing it during in-person or virtual visits can encourage a special connection that will create lasting memories for the entire family.

Reading a book along with peers can also provide insight and expand one's world view. For example, reading and learning about other faiths can expand a reader's understanding of others' belief systems,

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allowing for improved communication and more respectful relationships among inter-faith groups. Taking the time to learn about another person's belief system, after all, is one of the best ways to understand that person's motivations, inspirations, and world view. This type of understanding will surely foster more civil and cooperative interactions, and even friendships, between those of different faiths.

Not only is it enriching to study faith-based texts with others, but any book, when read together and discussed in a group setting, can serve as a guide for stimulating and interesting conversations. That's why it's estimated that over five million Americans regularly participate in some form of informal "book club." And it's no wonder that so many people enjoy such gatherings – all it takes to form such a group is shared access to the same book, the ability to read it, and a willingness to talk about it on a regular basis.

Many a long-term friendship has been formed between book club participants – often between people from diverse backgrounds, different generations, or opposite opinions who may not normally have the opportunity to have deep conversations and become friends. But that's what makes book club participation so fulfilling: gaining the perspective of others while sharing your own and finding out what different people draw out of the same book.

Bonding over a book can make it easier for incarcerated people to relate to one another, create healthy peer relationships, and reduce isolation.

If you are eager to explore the thousands of books that are available on your tablet but find your reading skills to be a barrier to enjoying them, be sure to ask your Supervisor of Education (SOE) about using a program called Mind Play that can help you improve your literacy. Also available on your tablet, Mind Play is part of the Essential Education platform. You can use Mind Play at your leisure, in private, to build your reading skills and there are thousands of book titles available there to help you do so.

LaDawn Weston, Customer Success Manager with Essential Education, explains how Mind Play can help students improve their reading skills in a program that feels more like a game than a lesson:

"We know that 50 to 80% of adults have learning difficulties: issues with reasoning skills, processing, attention, and memory skills. And it just makes reading difficult. If you struggle with reading, then everything else is just going to be frustrating to you. Reading comprehension is key to the success of everything else that you're doing. I think that reading challenges are one of the hindrances that people might feel. And that's one of those things that adult learners may not want to talk about."

"We partnered with Mind Play and have it available on our Essential Education platform. Students go through some assessments there, in the beginning,



just to kind of determine their reading level. And they're not necessarily lessons. It's reading and watching. It's kind of gamified a little bit. And there's also a learning library. There are thousands of titles in the Mind Play library that users can check out."

"Once you've gone through the assessments, the Mind Play program works with you on your reading skills. And I love that because you're able to do that while also learning about a subject that you're interested in, that you chose. It doesn't feel like necessarily a lesson, like a chore."

available to you through the New Mexico State Library's inter-library loan (ILL) program. This program allows people incarcerated within the NMCD to request that non-fiction books from the New Mexico State Library be loaned to them for a specified amount of time. If you would like to borrow a book through the ILL, simply reach out to the Supervisor of Education (SOE) at your facility to submit your request.

As attributed to Jhumpa Lahiri, "That's the thing about books. They let you travel without moving your feet." In other words, reading's a trip! So why not choose a title and embark on an adventure today?



If you're ready to up your reading game, ask your Supervisor of Education (SOE) how to get signed up for Essential Education and Mind Play.

And if over 75,000 book titles aren't enough for you, then there are even thousands MORE books

The following is a list of the religious and spiritual texts that are available to those incarcerated within the NMCD. All of these titles are available via inmates' state-issued tablets, in the Entertainment section under "Book Library."

Available on NMCD tablets:

The entire collection of the Gutenberg Library
(over 74,200 titles from a variety of genres)

The World English Bible (WEB) Complete
By Various Authors and Translators

The New International Bible
By Various Authors and Translators

La Santa Biblia (Spanish)
By Various Authors and Translators

The Torah/Pentateuch - Hebrew Bible
By Various Authors and Translators

The Koran (Al-Qur'an) in English
By Various Authors and Translators

The Bhagavad-Gita - Hindu Scripture
Translated from the Sanskrit Text
by sir Edwin Arnold, M.A., K.C.I.E., C.S.I.

The Book of Mormon
Translated by Joseph Smith

Circle 7 - Koran
The Moorish Science of America

The Poetic Edda
Mythological Poems by Anonymous

The Prose Edda
Mythological Poems by Anonymous

33 The Series
By Men's Fraternity

Freedom in Jesus Prison Ministry
By Stephen Canup

PARALLELS



You're not alone!



Behavioral Health Services

Life After Release Group

provides cognitive and behavioral skills training modules that assist in planning for life after release for incarcerated individuals approaching a release date.

The Depression Group

is an introductory psychoeducational group that provides participants with education about depression and its treatment.

IOP

Intensive Outpatient Addictions Treatment Programs offer a concentrated period of addictions treatment.

If you're struggling with mental health or substance use disorder issues, reach out to Behavioral Health staff in your facility.

TUITION ACCOMPLISHED

The Inability to Pay for Higher Education Need Not Stand Between You and a College Degree

While most people who are incarcerated within the NMCD are required to obtain their high school diploma or equivalency during their incarceration, anyone, regardless of whether they're mandated to do so or not, can study for and get their high school education while inside at no cost to them. And some NMCD students will decide to continue their education by pursuing a college degree.

But anyone who would like to pursue higher education - whether incarcerated or not - will first have to determine how their tuition will be funded.

There are numerous options for students who want to obtain a college degree but cannot afford tuition. These options include scholarships, grants, loan for service programs, and various other forms of financial aid.

- The New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship



The New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship has been an educational financing option for students incarcerated within the NMCD since being established by New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham in 2020.

The Opportunity Scholarship covers tuition and



required fees for eligible New Mexico residents pursuing career Training Certificates, Associate Degrees, and Bachelor's Degrees at New Mexico public colleges and universities.

If you are an established New Mexico resident and plan to enroll in at least six credit hours (but no more than eighteen) at a public college or university in New Mexico toward a Training Certificate, Associate Degree, or Bachelor's Degree, you may qualify.

There is no prohibition for incarcerated students. Students may receive the scholarship if other eligibility requirements are met and there is no balance of unpaid tuition and /or fees.

This scholarship requires a qualifying GPA of 2.50 or higher. Students accessing the Opportunity Scholarship cannot exceed 90 credit hours for an Associate's Degree or 160 credit hours for a Bachelor's Degree.

- The New Mexico Lottery Scholarship

This state fund covers tuition for full time enrollment (up to 18 credits), is available to students in their second semester of coursework, and is most often used after students have depleted the funds available to them via The Opportunity Scholarship. The Lottery Scholarship covers tuition only (excluding additional fees).

- Federal Pell Grants

While not anticipated to be available to NMCD students for a few years, another educational financing option for incarcerated students that is on the horizon is a Federal Pell Grant.

Federal Pell Grants are generally awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not previously earned a Bachelor's, Graduate, or Professional Degree. (In some cases, however, a student enrolled in a postbaccalaureate teacher certification program might receive a Federal Pell Grant.)

You may be eligible to receive a Federal Pell Grant if you are confined or incarcerated and enrolled in an approved Prison Education Program (PEP).

In May of 2024, The University of New Mexico's (UNM) Valencia campus received approval from the New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD) to serve as a PEP institution, becoming the first campus in the state with a PEP designation.

The program must be approved by the U.S. Department of Education before it will be available to NMCD students, which could take a few years. However, once that approval is achieved, the program will allow incarcerated individuals who are enrolled in the program to gain access to federal funding, such as the Pell Grant, for their education.

Additionally, the PEP program guarantees equal access to various student services, which were previously limited to students on traditional campuses.

- The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Higher Education students within the NMCD are strongly encouraged to complete the FAFSA to receive the maximum federal and state aid for which they may qualify, including federal grants, scholarships, work study, and more, including both of the state scholarships mentioned previously (The Opportunity Scholarship and The Lottery Scholarship).

The application window opens annually on October first, so be sure to talk with your Supervisor of Education (SOE) well before then so that he or she can help you apply.

“Your self esteem will start to soar when you make some critical decisions – decisions to walk a new road, to start a new direction, to start a new discipline.” ~Jim Rohn

If you have already earned your high school diploma or high school equivalency, and are interested in pursuing higher education, reach out to the Supervisor of Education (SOE) at your facility. He or she can help you determine which, if any, of these educational funding programs may be available to you.

PARALLELS

To hear more interviews on this topic, check out the free podcast on your tablet. Located in the “Information” folder.



Inside Voices S1E3

**It's not
just a diploma.**

**It's your ticket to a
brighter future.**



If you have your GED,
do your future self
a favor by taking
the next step:

A College Degree!



**Ask Education How To
Get Started Today!**

LEARNING TO FLY

“Transition Skills” Class Prepares Returning Citizens for Life on the Outside

For those who have been incarcerated for any amount of time, getting out of prison is the milestone that keeps them going. Daydreaming about reuniting with family, enjoying their favorite foods, and experiencing even the small freedoms of life on the outside tend to drift through their minds and often serve as motivation, keeping them focused on their rehabilitation.

But the world that incarcerated people come back to seldom looks like the one they left. Technology, as well as family dynamics, social expectations, and other everyday responsibilities and requirements are constantly changing, meaning that even a few months or years in prison can result in returning to a world that seems foreign and confusing. For those who spend many years incarcerated, stepping back into the community they left behind can be downright surreal, much like the experience of Rip Van Winkle, the fairy tale character who fell asleep for a hundred years and woke up in a bewildering futuristic world.

This kind of “culture shock” can not only create anxiety and even fear for returning citizens but can also jeopardize their chance to succeed on the outside.

That’s why the NMCD provides classes specifically addressing these concerns, designed to prepare returning citizens for some of the aspects of post-incarceration life that may prove to be confusing, foreign, or difficult. Think of this peer-led class as an opportunity to obtain the wings needed to fly upon one’s release. This idea brings to mind the lyrics of Tom Petty’s song, “Learning to Fly.”

“I’m learning to fly

But I ain’t got wings

Coming down



Is the hardest thing

Well, some say life will beat you down

Break your heart, steal your crown

So I've started out for God knows where

I guess I'll know when I get there"

But instead of starting out for "God knows where," these classes are intended to provide a roadmap that will lead to a fulfilling and successful post-incarceration life and will not, most importantly, lead back to prison.

Wendy Price, Psy.D., NMCD Behavioral Health Outreach Administrator, explains how the course has been designed to help ensure returning citizens' success upon release:

"We were looking for an evidence-based curriculum to use within the facilities as a reentry class for individuals who are leaving to kind of orient them to what reentry might look like for them and help them to make goals for what they want their future to look like..."

"The class covers what healthy relationships look like, what realistic expectations look like, how to manage their anger. It talks about how to work with

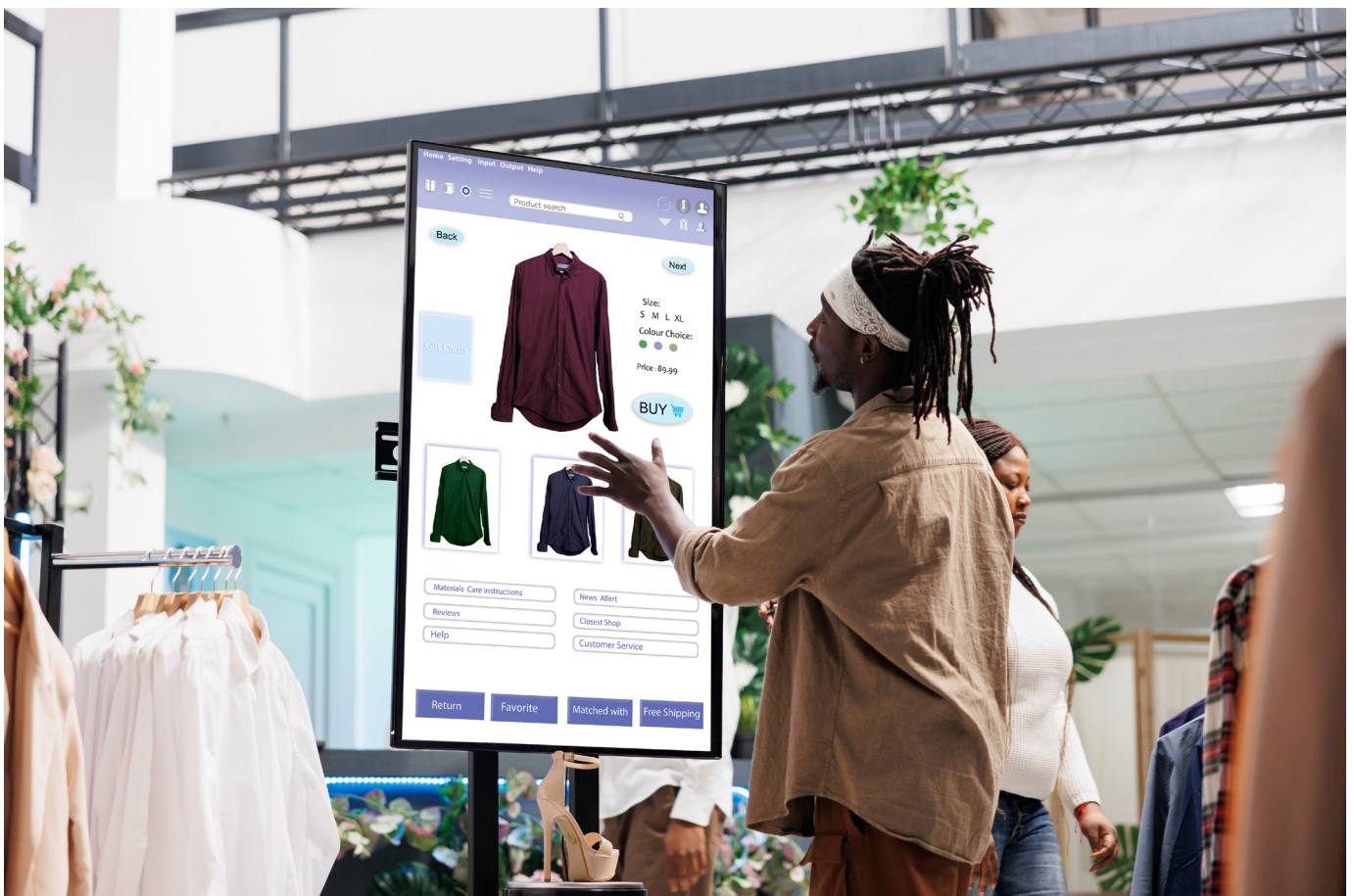
their Probation or Parole Officer when they get out and it kind of orients them to what it may really look like for them versus what their ideas might be."

"Participants do receive a certificate upon completing this transitions program."

In order to ensure that returning citizens exit with a list of post-incarceration resources, the class also guides participants in creating a customized contact book that they can take with them upon their release.

Dr. Price explains that this contact book "is where you can list your Probation Officer, you can list your therapist, you can list who you're going to contact for substance abuse or information regarding how to get your driver's license if you need to, different things like that. And so, they actually have this little book they can take with them as well and they work on that during their last two class sessions. It's called the 'Passport to Action.'"

Anthony Blevins, Reentry Coordinator for the women's facility at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF), says that the "Passport to Action" is an important component of



BECOME THE PERSON YOU WERE MEANT TO BE.

A close-up portrait of a man with a shaved head, a full brown beard, and a wide smile. He has extensive black and grey tattoos on both arms and neck. He is wearing a dark, possibly black, button-down shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

RDAP
RESIDENTIAL
DRUG ABUSE
PROGRAM

ASK BEHAVIORAL HEALTH STAFF
HOW TO GET STARTED.

the course:

“With the passport, they have a plan. The only thing that we need from them is their input on the plan. They’re more likely to follow through and become successful, never returning to this place, if they have input on their own plan. The passport fits anywhere. We’re making sure that those passports are 100% filled out, because that’s an easy go-to guide.”

Developed in collaboration with the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, the course includes nine week-long modules covering topics including realistic expectations, healthy relationships, time management, handling social influences, roadblocks in transition, thinking for a change, authority figures, anger management, and establishing a safety net. Through a journal-based curriculum, participants work to develop key skills that help them make responsible choices and avoid future incarceration.

Dr. Price explains that the class jumps right into some uncomfortable and difficult ideas that those who are releasing may not have considered:

“The first couple of sessions even talk about how your expectation as you come home may be that your family will welcome you with open arms

and they’ll be so glad you’re home and they’ll be saying, ‘We’ve missed you so much!’ and what that integration may really look like. In many cases, their family has built a life around them not being there, and so how do they reintegrate into that family structure when they’re not necessarily vital to the family’s day-to-day functioning anymore? What does that look like? And so even that idea is something that may be a challenge for a returning individual.”

Finding their place in a family that has had no choice but to adjust to their absence is just one of the many challenges that returning citizens are likely to face. These classes give participants an opportunity to consider and foresee these types of situations and to plan how they might navigate them calmly and compassionately, without anger.

Mr. Blevins has been able to leverage some of his own personal experiences as he has worked with class participants. As a military veteran, he explains how his own training has helped him relate to returning citizens:

“On deployment, we would be gone for nine months to a year. So, we would come back to our family and be trained on how to work ourselves back into everyday life. So, I use that in the transition classes just to let them know that, ‘You’ve been gone for

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- Have a release date between 20-270 days of the individual's enrollment in the program. (Prefer 180 Days)
- Upon release, scheduled to reside in Bernalillo, Sandoval, Valencia, or Tarrant County (Central Region)
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a while and things are already in flow. There's a schedule, you know, things are done a certain way. So, you've just got to take those steps back. You've been gone for a while, so you just need to insert yourself where you can and when you can. But don't overdo it.' So, you have to acknowledge, like, 'Hey, I know I've been gone for a while. I just want to know where I can help or where I'm needed right now. I don't want to become a burden or cause a fight. So, I just need to know the rules here and I'll fall into suit with it.'"

"Your family has been doing things a certain way, and they're used to it, and what's going to cause friction is you coming in, trying to change it."

One of the most powerful aspects of the Transition Skills course is the fact that it is a peer-led experience. Verna Maslowski, Reentry Coordinator for the men's facility at Western New Mexico Correctional Facility (WNMCF) explains the importance of the peer model aspect of the class:

"I think it's a major necessity to have the peers in there with them because they've been through the same or similar things that they have and the way that they think is a little bit different."

"The class covers topics like conflict resolution and anger management. And then the best thing about the class is that it asks for input. And then as a group, with their peers, they're going to listen more. They're going to take their advice a lot more to heart because they're with them every day."

Octavio, a Peer Educator for the Transition Skills course, offers this analogy for why fellow inmates are the most effective messengers to deliver the lessons of the class:

"In the NFL, you have more coaches that were players and they get more of a response from other players because they know how to play the game, they've played the game. So, when it comes to us, it's like, if somebody from the outside was to come in and teach this and they haven't been through prison, it's like, 'Well, what do you know about prison?' So, having that experience of being in prison gives me a testimonial of my own, you know what I'm saying? From my testimonial, I'm able to pass it on to somebody else."

While the Transition Skills class is taught by volunteer Peer Educators, Dr. Price goes on

to explain how NMCD staff members are also involved in facilitating participants' transition:

"During the last class session, a Transitional Coordinator actually goes in and sits down and talks with them and they often have questions such as, 'What are the opportunities for jobs?', 'How often do I need to see my officer?', and, 'Who are the therapists available for substance abuse treatment or anger management treatment?', and so a Transitional Coordinator will go in and answer those questions."

"One of the main goals is to really facilitate a good working relationship between the returning citizen and Probation / Parole Officers (PPO's) and other people when they get out to let them know that these resources are available to them. There's been some really positive feedback regarding this class from the educators who are teaching it."

Dr. Price wants probationers and parolees – whether they participate in the Transition Skills class or not - to understand that their PPO's are eager to connect them with the resources that they need, but to realize that PPO's are not mind-readers:

"Your officer doesn't know you need something unless you tell him or her that you need it. They can't put that request in unless you tell them and so it's really important to have a good working relationship with your officer and be willing to tell them, 'I need substance abuse treatment,' 'I need transportation to my job,' 'I need steel toe boots in order to keep my job,' 'I need hygiene products.' And so, it's just really important to make sure you have a cooperative relationship with your officer."

Over the course of two days, Dr. Price met via Zoom with inmate volunteers who were interested in teaching the class and taught them how to present the curriculum. "...They were all very excited about facilitating this class," she says.

Ms. Maslowski points out that another important aspect of the class is getting to know one's self and preparing accordingly:

"A lot of it is really self-reflection. So a big question is, 'What are your stress relievers?' 'What do you do to manage your stress?' And they'll say, 'My stress reliever is working out,' or crafts is another big one that I see."



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your rhythm
when you realize
that even the steps
backward
were part of the
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“So, I give them scenarios. Once they identify what their stress reliever is, I do one of those scenarios with them. I ask them, ‘So, once you’re out, what are you afraid is going to happen?’ For example, ‘Are you concerned about what might happen if you meet up with old friends?’ and, what are the ‘what if’s?’ And then I help them work all those into their plan.”

Through her exposure to the class, Tiffany has discovered several stress-relieving coping skills that help her manage her anger and calm herself:



“I have a lot of coping skills actually in here. I try to do my time, like, doing stuff instead of, like, sleeping or just being there in my cell. I work out... and I like to listen to music, read, I go to the library every Monday and try to check out books as much as I can, and ...I like to read the Bible.”

Tiffany is also very close to finishing her GED, which has allowed her to focus her energies on something positive.

Ms. Maslowski acknowledges that incarcerated people, while feeling generally excited about their approaching release, also tend to experience some apprehension as the date grows closer:

“Returning citizens have anxiety. They have fear. Some say that they don’t know how they’re going to act when they get released. They don’t know who to turn to. They may have their family, yes, but their family members don’t know what they’ve been through in prison. So, when they do get out of these walls, they’re like, ‘I don’t know if I’m going to shut down. I don’t know if I’m going to go back to the substance abuse. I don’t know if I’m going to go back to drinking.’ So, they have a lot of questions within themselves that they need answered. And

with their peer support, I think that it does have a great, huge impact on them. They come up with ideas together on how to cope with it, on how to communicate with their family.”

Mr. Blevins says that there’s yet another invaluable skill that the Transition Skills class teaches:

“Another topic that is covered in the class is patience. But they practice that here. All they have to do, once they’re out of here, is just apply it. So, it’s really muscle memory until they’re out of here, and then they’ve just got to continue to apply it and they’ll be set up for success.”

“Many incarcerated people lack skills in conflict resolution, or knowing what triggers them, or how they can relieve their stress from certain things. They don’t know how to come up with the solution, or they’re just weak in those areas. So, what we focus on as they’re getting out is how to strengthen those areas in order for them to be more successful.”

“A lot of them just say that they need someone to talk to. ...just someone to listen.”

Dr. Price echoes the idea that returning citizens struggle with nervousness surrounding their release:

“This is a class for inmates who are releasing, led by peers where they can discuss their fears or challenges that they might face when they reenter into the community. There is a lot of fear, I have heard, from offenders. They wonder, ‘What’s it gonna be like when I get out?’, ‘Is my family still going to be there?’, ‘How do I find a job?’, ‘What do my probation / parole requirements look like?’ These are very basic questions that they don’t necessarily have the answers to. This class will help them kind of structure that and bring up those questions and help alleviate those fears. And then, with the addition of the Transitional Coordinator coming and being able to even answer questions, that’s a bonus for them. So, this is their time to be able to think about that process and what that process looks like for them and to also get questions answered regarding that process.”

Barry, a class participant, feels that some of the most valuable lessons for him included “identifying with my anger and my problem with authority figures. I think that identifying that, I’ll be more open to doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Barry also appreciated the modules on establishing a safety net, having learned “the importance of a support network. ...I do have quite a large support network that’s clean and sober to help me stay that way when I get out.”

Tiffany believes that the classes have been a positive experience for her and she took a lot from the coursework:

“It was a good class. It taught me new skills. We were talking about, like, healthy boundaries and communication skills, and ways to help us cope with, like, our anger and our attitudes and how to adjust that. ...I learned to stop and think about my actions, to stop and think, like, ‘Is this gonna help me?’ ...One thing with me is my anger. Sometimes I’m a hot head, so like, [I’ve learned that] there’s ways I can go around that.”

Tiffany also found the collaboration that happens in the Transition Skills class to be helpful:

“We would share... Everybody has different experiences, different perspectives. ...That’s what I liked about it ...it was a peer-led group and we got to share with each other and open up with each other and find new things.”

Casey, who is enrolled in a parenting class, Project ECHO, and Prison Fellowship in addition to this course, agrees that her peers’ input was an extremely valuable piece of the Transition Skills course:

“Honestly, for me, I loved it. It gave me a different perspective, different insight on a different way of thinking and some ideas to try things a different way other than what I’ve been trying myself, because, obviously, I haven’t been getting it right, you know? It was refreshing. A lot of times, I feel like, for us inmates, we’re so stuck in a cycle, this way of life, that even if you want a way out, you don’t really know where to begin or where to start and this class was honestly a push in the right direction and it definitely gave me perspective to a different way of thinking. ...I feel like I gained a lot from it and learned to be more open-minded on how to handle situations.”

“In this class, it was nice because there’s other girls that have been to prison before, have gotten out, and they’ve done things wrong, made mistakes. They were able to bring back that feedback into the class and let me know, ‘Try it like this. Do it this

way instead of this way.’ Because if you go out there thinking that you have it figured out, ...sometimes we get ahead of ourselves, you know? ...When I first took the class, I was maybe overconfident in returning back to society. But having [taken] the class, I was able to be around other peers that have already been there, done it. I was thinking, ‘I got this, I’m gonna be alright,’ but then once I started partaking in the class, it opened my mind.”

Peer Educator Connor, who teaches the Transition Skills course to fellow inmates, emphasizes some of the topics that he considers to be the most important: “Like, handling your anger, dealing with your Probation Officer, dealing with finding people that are going to be your support system, stuff like that.”

“[The class] kind of gives them a little reality check about what they’re going to go through when they get out, because there is no easy way. You just have to get out there and have the will to be able to overcome some of these factors that we deal with [such as] finding a job, having to overcome the stereotype of being a felon, being an inmate, and of being a convicted criminal.”

Connor’s advice to others who will be releasing soon is, “Look, if you’re not interested in this, you will be. Because this is something that you are going to encounter, whether you like it or not. You are going to have to face this sooner or later.”

Since these peer-led Transition Skills classes began in November of 2024, over 239 returning citizens within the NMCD have participated in the programming.

If you have six months or less to serve on your sentence and would like to find your wings to fly, reach out to Education staff at your facility to find out how to enroll in the Transition Skills course.

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Inside Voices S2E1

Reflections on Corrections

***"... The success of the future
...is fueled by how positively
the mistakes of the past
are handled."***

~ Israelmore Ayivor



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Incarceration Can Provide a Unique Opportunity to Pursue a College Degree



Anyone who decides to pursue a college degree, either shortly after high school graduation or much later in their adulthood, has to overcome a number of difficulties in order to devote adequate time, focus, and energy to their studies. Finding time away from the demands of family, work, and regular “adulting” can be nearly impossible and make it difficult to complete a degree.

And then there’s the challenge of paying for tuition. How can one commit to studying full-time when there are tuition bills to be paid and little time to earn the money needed for those bills? Arranging and paying for childcare during class and study time, making sure the rent is paid, putting food on the table, attending classes, maintaining one’s grades, and keeping up with tuition costs can easily become overwhelming.

Often, when students become overburdened with the demands of pursuing secondary education, that dream of a degree is abandoned in favor of more pressing responsibilities.

However, this is where incarcerated people may actually have a “leg up” on others who are seeking a degree. While people are incarcerated, they need not worry about housing, clothing, or feeding themselves. They have ample time to study, and

the educational staff in their facility can assist them with enrolling for classes and applying for scholarships, grants, and other financial aid to cover their tuition. (See the article titled, “Tuition Accomplished” in this issue of Parallels for more on financial aid options.)

In fact, The State of New Mexico offers several state-funded scholarship programs for which incarcerated students can qualify, which are not available in other states.

While incarceration is not what most people would consider to be an ideal situation, it turns out that it can, in fact, be just that: an ideal situation for pursuing higher education, that is.

And many people who are incarcerated within the NMCD are discovering just that. In 2024, 426 NMCD inmates participated in post secondary education. (Post secondary education includes any college coursework that comes after earning one’s high school diploma or high school equivalency such as a GED or HiSET).

Forty-seven of those participants actually completed a post secondary program (a Certificate, Associate’s Degree, Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, or PhD).

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Theory and practical on basic home/commercial wiring systems to understand how to identify faulty wiring and potential fire hazards, and repairs that can be done without a professional certification.

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****Bonus**** Participants releasing to the following counties - Union, Harding, Quay, Guadalupe, De Baca, Curry, Roosevelt, Chaves, Lincoln, Otero, Eddy, and Lea - may be eligible to receive tools purchased by Eastern Board WIOA offices.

For those who are motivated to do so, the absence of constant work and family responsibilities and the structure that incarceration offers can provide the perfect foundation on which one can build strong and successful study habits.

As quoted in “Catching the Chain, Part 2” (included in this issue of *Parallels*), Joaquin found prison to be an environment where he could focus on his studies in a way that he simply couldn’t do on the outside:

“...Finally, when I had gotten sat down in prison, and I opened up a book and I started using my mind, something clicked. Finally, I’ve gotten to where I can sit down and actually see things at a different pace, and it’s like, it’s helped me expand my mind.”

For some incarcerated students, it takes a while – months or even years of incarceration – for them to realize the unique opportunity that lay before them.



It took Jamaal over two decades of incarceration to realize that he was actually in a place that could support his educational development. Once he finally recognized the opportunity that was available to him and put his mind to it, he earned his Associate’s Degree, and then his Bachelor’s Degree. As he was quoted as saying in “Catching the Chain, Part 2,”

“I was like, ‘...I really need to do something with myself.’ You know, I just wasn’t happy with where I was at. ...I literally had a little talk with myself, you know, ‘Am I gonna be that guy that complains about his life and does nothing about it? Or am I gonna start making some sacrifices and start trying to, like, fight for something better and try to be happy?’”

But regardless of how long it takes someone to discover the educational options that exist for them

inside prison, once they find their educational path, they often take off like a rocket toward their goals.

Jamaal, for example, after twenty-some years of “actin’ like a dummy,” as he puts it, got his Associate’s Degree in fifteen months and his Bachelor’s Degree in just nine months.

Joaquin and Jamaal, then, are just two of a growing number of incarcerated people who are realizing that, while incarceration may have initially seemed like the worst possible turn their lives could have taken, prison time can actually be spent obtaining an education, improving their future options, and elevating their lives overall.

And the beauty of earning a college degree – or even taking college credits – is that, just like a high school diploma or equivalency, once you have it, no one can take it away from you.

When considering which certificate or degree you might want to aim for, there are many factors to take into account, including the following:

- Where do your interests lie? Are you more interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics); arts and letters (visual arts, performing arts, and literary arts); business and economics; language arts; psychology; social science; law; communications? The list of possible areas of study is nearly endless!
- What are you already good at? Are you skilled at picking up languages? Have you always had a knack for numbers? Are you an artist or writer at heart? You might be surprised how your natural talents may prepare you for the coursework required for a post secondary degree.
- What are your post-incarceration career goals? What job do you see yourself doing when you’re released from prison? Is that career choice a practical one? Will your criminal record prevent you from qualifying for security clearances or background checks that may be associated with that particular job? If so, don’t give up hope – as mentioned earlier, there are so many choices available that you can surely find a career field with which your past won’t interfere. Another question to consider is whether the field that you choose is likely to experience future growth, or maybe a downturn. If you’re not sure, ask the Education staff at your facility to help you do some research.

- How much time do you have to devote to your post secondary education? While earning a Certificate can take a year or less time, an Associate's Degree generally takes a couple of years, and a Bachelor's Degree usually takes about four years. If your goal is to complete your degree by the time you're released, then you'll want to consider the estimated length of your chosen program. Keep in mind, however, that many incarcerated students are able to focus so completely on their education that they are able to complete coursework even faster than a traditional student might. Speak with your facility's Supervisor of Education (SOE) to determine a realistic timeframe for completing the program that interests you.

- How will you pay for your degree? For example, if you'll be accessing the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship and / or the New Mexico Lottery Scholarship, which programs are offered by the public universities that can accept those scholarships?

In 2024 alone, the certificates and degrees that were earned by NMCD post secondary students include the following:

- 17 Certificates in Christian Studies
- 2 Certificates in Computer Technology
- 3 Certificates in Paralegal Studies
- 1 Certificate in Professional and Technical Writing
- 2 Associate Degrees in Business Administration
- 1 Associate Degree in Christian Counseling
- 1 Associate Degree in Communications Studies
- 1 Associate Degree in Computer Technologies
- 3 Associate Degrees in General Studies
- 12 Associate Degrees in Liberal Arts
- 2 Bachelor Degrees in Community Leadership
- 1 Bachelor Degree in Religious Studies
- 1 Masters of Business Administration in Health Care Management

Post secondary certificates and degrees and the educational paths that lead to them are as varied as students themselves. Each person's college career will look completely different than that of other students; not better or worse, just different.



So, if you've ever had even the slightest desire to go for that higher education, now may be the perfect time to hit the books and "give it the old college try!"

If you already have your high school diploma or high school equivalency (GED or HiSET) and think that a college degree might be the next step for you, reach out to the Supervisor of Education (SOE) at your facility to discuss your options and find out how to get started.

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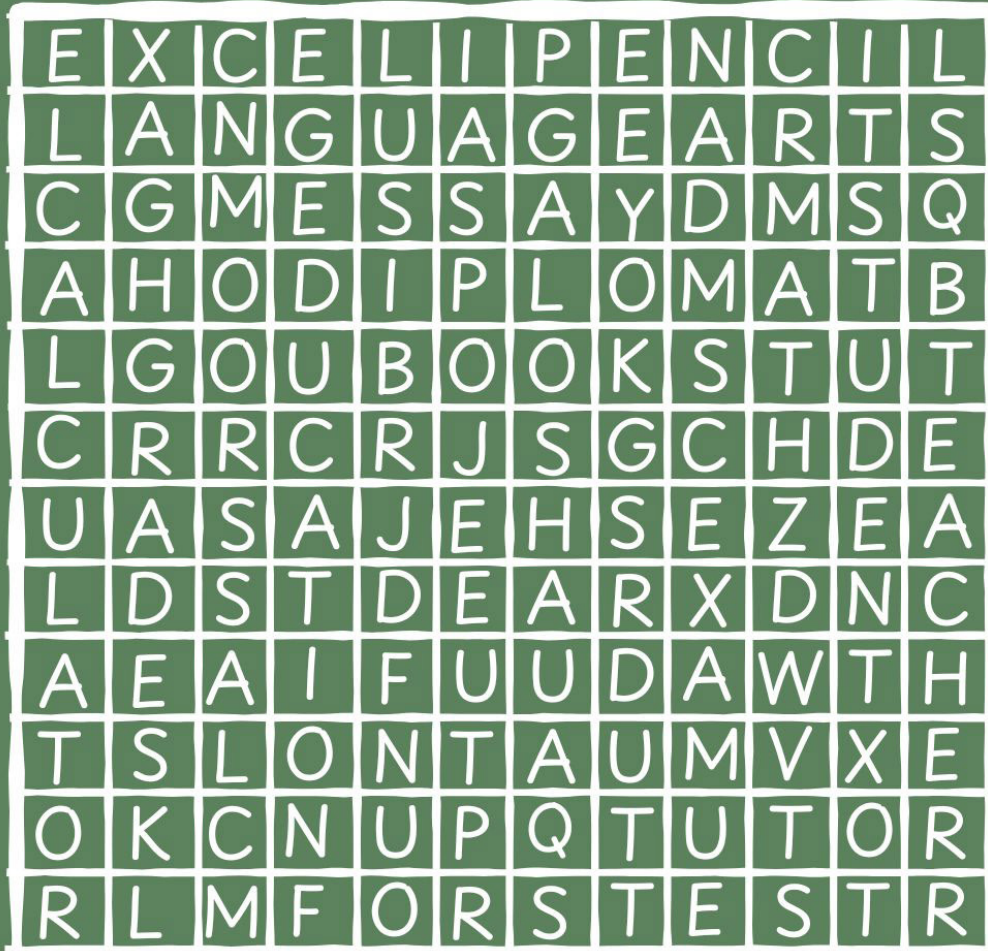
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Inside Voices S1E3

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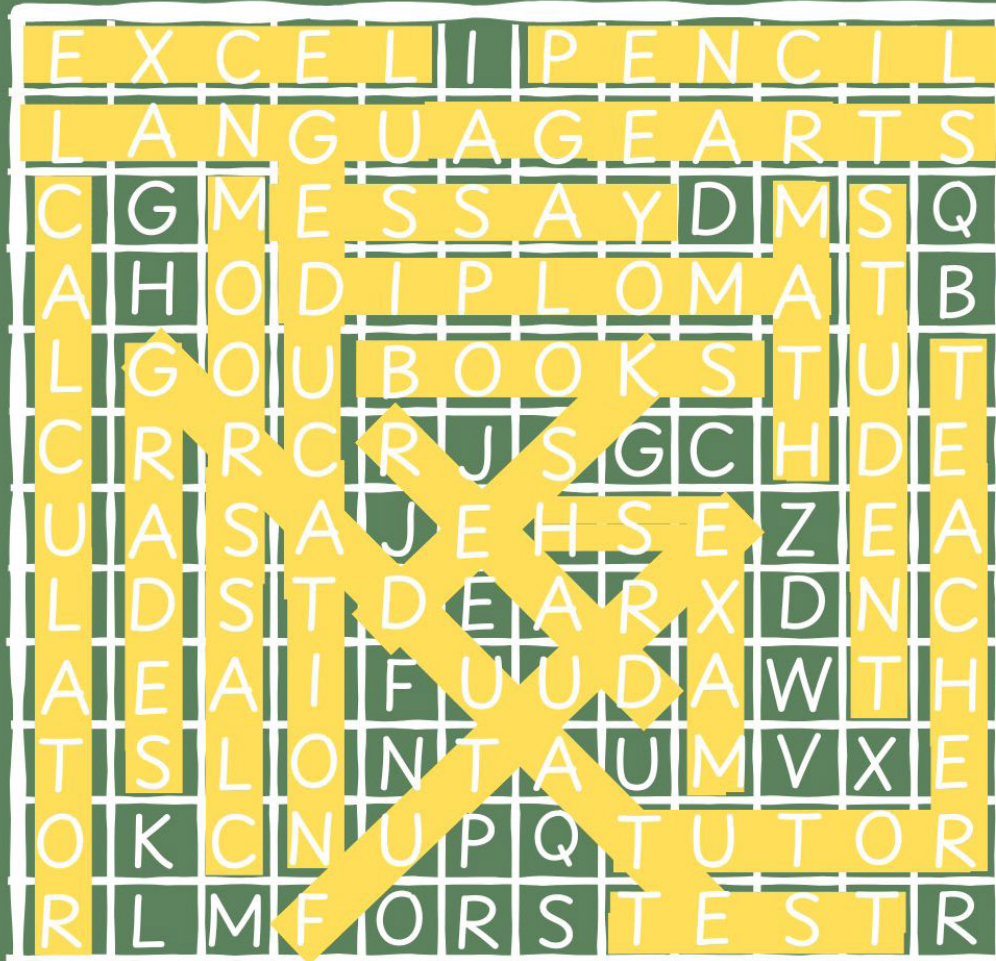
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