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Bard Prison Initiative

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Saturday, I had a very memorable experience.

Last summer, on a visit to Eastern Correctional Institution up in Napanoch, I was introduced to prisoners who were enrolled in *college* – - yes, real *college* ! – - and was very impressed with the program. These inmates invited me to be the commencement speaker at their graduation. I was moved and grateful, and happily accepted.

This remarkable college program, all taking place behind bars, is called the *Bard Prison Initiative*, and has been up and effectively running at six of New York States' prisons, as well as in six other states. The radiant success of this college program is due to daring leadership by Bard College, Holy Cross College at Notre Dame, Indiana, and the New York Department of Corrections. *Bravo* to all of them!

Special congratulations to the class of 2015, my fifty-three “classmates,” since I was privileged to receive an honorary degree Saturday, who successfully completed this rigorous college education in an atmosphere many would consider depressive, degrading, and oppressive.

As was so brilliantly evident in the joy of the graduates, the pride of family and friends, the satisfaction of devoted faculty, the smiles of the correction administrators and officers, and, especially, in the splendid address by three of the students, this program is a real light in the darkness.

The prison officials, two Holy Cross brothers, and some of the dedicated Bard College faculty with whom I chatted observed that one very high common characteristic of our prison population in that most have had very poor education, the majority never completing high school, to say nothing about college.

Speaker after speaker, from the President of Bard College, Dr. Leon Botstein, to the director of the *Bard Prison Initiative*, Max Kenner, to Superintendent William Lee and State Acting Commissioner Anthony Annucci, Holy Cross Brother Jesus Alonso, and, most dramatically, the three student speakers, were so clear: a solid education is perhaps the most valuable gift we can (and must) provide our young people. Better schools mean less poverty, violence, crime . . . and prisons!

We Catholics have known this for a long time. That’s why we sponsor, as one of our essential ministries, given us by Jesus Himself, the largest private education system in the world . . . and what many consider the best.

This is *Catholic Schools Week*! My deep gratitude to our parents, people, teachers, principals, volunteers, priests, sisters, brothers, and benefactors who are the heart, muscle, mind, and wallet of our magnificent system.

What's imperative, as Saturday taught me, is that our youth stay in school through high school. You know our numbers: 97% of the children who enter kindergarten in one of our catholic schools persevere through high school graduation, and 95% of them go on to college! As one of the prison officials told me, "You won't meet many, if any, alumni of a Catholic school here in jail!"

I've said it before, but I'll say it again: you want to put a dent in drugs, unemployment, crime, violence, poverty, broken families and homeless, hungry people? Of course you do! Well, help us help our Catholic schools stay strong, affordable, accessible . . . and full!

For anyone still with me, here's the text of my commencement address at Eastern Correctional facility last Saturday: