

Newsday: Editorial: Education can turn prison inmates around

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By Newsday:

Offering people in prison the opportunity to earn a college degree is an enlightened initiative that would save money, increase public safety and salvage lives. That's the trifecta Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo is banking on with his proposal to fund college courses at 10 New York State prisons, possibly beginning as soon as this fall. It's a good bet.

Higher education programs behind bars all but ended in the state in 1995 when inmate access to student financial aid was discontinued, done in by public animus. Privately funded programs have filled a bit of the void. One is the Bard Prison Initiative that now has 275 students in five state prisons, and has graduated 250 inmates with associate or bachelor's degrees since 1999.

The recidivism rate -- the percentage who land back in prison -- is 4 percent for former inmates who completed some Bard College classes while locked up, and just 2.5 percent for those who graduated, said the program's founder, Max Kenner. That's a far cry from the 40 percent recidivism rate for others released from New York prisons.

The potential to help more ex-convicts create successful, law-abiding lives for themselves is extraordinary. And fewer ex-cons committing new crimes would be a boost for public safety. Those are reasons enough to make the investment, but it would also save taxpayer dollars. It costs \$60,000 to lock up one person in state prison for one year, while one year of college for an inmate in the Bard program costs just \$5,000. So there should be a significant return on the investment of public dollars for every inmate who seizes the opportunity to study and, as a result, never returns to one of those costly cells.

Officials will wait for responses to a March 3 request for proposals from schools vying to provide the classes before deciding how much to ask the State Legislature to spend for the program. Legislators should seize this cost-effective opportunity to turn lives around.