

WNYT: Report: In-Prison college betters society

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ALBANY - A first of its kind report out on Tuesday shows that expanding access to college education for people who are locked up in prison has myriad societal benefits and no negatives. Despite those findings, the New York Legislature, for now, remains reluctant to reinstate Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) money for inmates.

Many believe believe it's unfair to provide tuition assistance for prison inmates at a time when law-abiding citizens could also need the money.

From the time he was 16 until he was 32, Andre Centeno was locked up in state prison, but because tuition assistance money was available to him, he not only finished college, he earned a masters degree. He says not a day goes by when he doesn't think about where he'd be today without his education.

"I go and work in Rykers Island so when I walk through those doors every day it reminds me of where I could have been," Centeno says.

In 1995, tuition assistance money and PELL grants for prison inmates were eliminated, which meant college opportunities for New York prison inmates essentially disappeared.

The issue has become controversial. Many people, and many lawmakers believe it's unfair to make college affordable for lawbreakers when so many law abiding citizens have trouble scraping together tuition money.

"Sometimes our colleagues on the opposing side of the aisle only like to think about it in terms of how much money it saves us, not whether it has a positive impact on peoples' lives," says Senator Gustavo Rivera (D - Bronx), "But this is one of those issues where both things are accurate."

Those in favor of inmate tuition assistance swear by the societal benefits.

"Parents who got an education in prison have become better parents and bring more financial support and security to their homes," says Kim Gilhuly, of Human Impact Partners, one of the not-for-profit groups to conduct the study.

Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry (D - New York City), wonders if denying prisoners a way to improve their lives is tantamount to modern day slavery.

"Does America need an underclass so bad that they're afraid that these black and brown people who we incarcerate supposedly to help them become better citizens, are afraid of them?" Aubry asks rhetorically.

At this point it's unclear if activists, lobbyists, and lawmakers will be able to reopen the tap of tuition assistance money.