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COMMENTARY

Education Beats Incarceration

By Tom Carroll

We're No. 1! We lead the world in prison incarcerations. If only we were No. 1 in education.

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The sobering news from a new report by the Pew Center on the States is that one of every 100 Americans is behind bars. Of greater concern is that one in nine black men ages 20 to 34 is in jail. If only they had spent more time in school.

The Pew study, **"One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008,"** found that the United States has the largest per-capita prison population in the world, followed by Russia. The highest-scoring European countries in international education comparisons are among those with the lowest prison populations.




The study links growing U.S. incarceration rates to a wave of policy choices that send more lawbreakers to prison, along with increased use of prison stays for those who break probation rules. Compounding this trend, more public schools are choosing to use law enforcement to deal with disruptive school behavior. A recent report from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, **"Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline,"** found that a growing number of schools are pushing young people out of classrooms and into the juvenile-justice and criminal-justice systems; African-American students, who make up less than 20 percent of the overall youth population, account for one-third of suspensions, and they are more likely to be referred by their schools to the juvenile-justice system.

States and local jurisdictions want to be tough on crime. But there are better choices. "For all the money spent on corrections today, there hasn't been a clear and convincing return for public safety," says Adam Gelb, the director of Pew's Public Safety Performance Project. He suggests that "more and more states are beginning to rethink their reliance on prisons for lower-level offenders and finding strategies that are tough on crime without being so tough on taxpayers."

The average annual state expenditure on a prisoner is \$23,876, in contrast to \$8,701 per year on a K-12 student. The average in-state college tuition is \$10,674 a year.

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States and localities that are attempting to control crime by spending more

on prisons would be better off spending more on schools. Texas, California, and Florida, for example, hold the highest state prison populations, while at the same time they fall below the national average on providing opportunities for educational success, according to the *Quality Counts 2008* report. (*Quality Counts*, Jan. 10, 2008.) In the Johns Hopkins University-based study “**Locating the Dropout Crisis,**”  these states also rank among the leaders in their number of high schools considered to be “dropout factories”—schools where graduation is not the norm, attended by almost half of the nation’s African-American students and nearly 40 percent of its Latino students. | **on a K-12 student.**

In study after study, we have seen that education investments that improve school performance and increase graduation rates can reduce rates of incarceration, increase economic competitiveness, and lower health-care costs.

The Economic Policy Institute found that payoffs for education investments are dramatic and long-term. Children in poverty who receive high-quality early education have significantly fewer arrests than peers without this opportunity. The Committee for Economic Development found that investing \$4,800 per child in preschool can reduce teenage arrests by 40 percent.

High school completion increases the payoff. The Coalition for Juvenile Justice reports that high school dropouts are three times more likely to be arrested. The Alliance for Excellent Education has found that almost \$2.8 billion in additional annual earnings would enter the economy if we increased high school graduation rates.

Community college and higher education investments produce even greater returns. Yet the Pew study found that the rate of prison cost increases is six times greater than the rate of cost increases in higher education.

Education also lowers health-care costs. The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that if the 1.2 million students who drop out each year earned high school diplomas instead, states could save \$17 billion in health-care costs over the graduates’ lifetimes.

The Pew study is alarming, but what is most distressing is that state and national leaders are not taking more proactive steps to change this picture by investing in education. We need to learn from countries that have strong school performance and low prison populations.

Our success in a competitive global economy will increasingly depend on our ability to meet the learning needs of students who currently are being pushed out of our schools. Educating each one of today’s students for successful participation in a complex world is a demanding challenge. No teacher should be expected to do this job alone.

The first step states can take is to ensure that teachers have the support they need to succeed. Schools serving low-income children and students of color often have teacher-dropout rates that exceed even their student-dropout rates. The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher finds that teachers are leaving because they are not given leadership backing to build a culture of success with principals, colleagues, students, and parents. It is time to recognize that great teaching is not an individual accomplishment. Quality teaching is a team sport.

The second step is to recognize that teacher collaboration in other countries is buttressed by, and contributes to, a consistent national framework of teaching and learning standards. It is time to abandon our uneven academic quality and two-tiered education system in favor of collectively built national standards for teaching and learning, with the goal of ensuring that no child will have an inferior education simply because of where he or she lives.

The third step is to prepare and hire well-qualified teachers who have demonstrated time and again their ability to improve student performance.

Our competitors in other countries have shown that this begins with closing the gap between teacher preparation and teaching practice. Teaching residencies that provide extensive clinical experience and apprenticeships in urban schools are proving to be particularly effective in Boston and Chicago. We can also accelerate the effectiveness of new teachers with induction into a professional community that sustains their growth with continuous professional development embedded in the day-to-day work of their schools.

The fourth step is to provide teachers with career paths that recognize and reward their accomplishments. Teachers' responsibilities and compensation should grow as their expertise and effectiveness deepens. It is time to support multiple career paths with pay systems that recognize accomplished teaching and reward effective performance.

To be tough on crime, be strong on education. State leaders would be much farther ahead if they worried less about how many prison beds they have and concentrated instead on improving the schools and teachers they provide.

For decades, we have tried to manage school improvement with command-and-control, regulatory, prescriptive, or market-based incentives that treat school leaders, teachers, and students like the targets of change rather than its agents. We need to replace these approaches with strategies that empower those individuals to lead and shape the reinvention of their own learning organizations. National leaders should pledge to support educators who are engaged in a cultural transformation of their schools to support 21st-century teaching and learning.

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