

## Projo: ACI inmates receive degrees and recognition

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CCRI President Ray DePasquale, left, A.T. Wall, director of the Department of Corrections, and R.I. education commissioner Deborah Gist present associate degree diplomas to Mark Halverson, in cap and gown, and Christopher Sanden, at a graduation ceremony and GED certificate presentation Monday at John J. Moran Medium Facility at the ACI.

CRANSTON, R.I. -- In this graduation season, Rhode Island's two top education officials made it a point Monday morning to attend a recognition ceremony held in an unlikely place -- the state prison.

Education Commissioner [Deborah A. Gist](#) and Higher Education Commissioner [Ray Di Pasquale](#) went to the John J. Moran Medium Security Facility to congratulate more than 100 inmates who were enrolled in General Equivalency Degree or college-level classes, and to shake hands with the two dozen men who received degrees of completion.

"The fact that you are here means you have made mistakes along the way and you have had difficulties," Gist said. "But the fact that you are here means you are lifting yourself above those circumstances. We've all made mistakes. You've decided to better your education. You've made a very important decision."

It was the first time in memory that prison officials could recall both education officials attending the ceremony. Di Pasquale, who also serves as president of the Community College of Rhode Island, has attended in recent years to confer associates degrees from CCRI.

Monday, he handed out two associates' degrees and praised the recipients for their persistence. He encouraged the inmates to continue their education to "change your lives for the future."

"Twenty-five years ago, we didn't have such ceremonies and we had very little in the way of programming," [Corrections Director](#) A.T. Wall said. This year, more than 800 inmates in seven different facilities are enrolled in classes, and 159 inmates received GEDs.

Of the 3,300 inmates, all but 200 are men. More than 80 percent of the inmates arrive without a high school diploma or GED, and 22 percent of those inmates are functionally illiterate, meaning they read below a sixth-grade level, said Roberta Richman, assistant director for rehabilitative services. Many inmates have learning disabilities and mental health issues that have gone unaddressed until they are incarcerated, she said.

The ACI offers more than a hundred classes, ranging from anger management and drug and substance abuse counseling to college writing and carpentry. There are long wait lists for every type of class, said Ralph Orleck, principal of the educational programs and special education director. The various programs cost about \$3.7 million a year.

National studies show a link between higher levels of education and a drop in the number of repeat offenders who end up back behind bars.

Orleck says ACI data shows similar positive results. Among the prison population, inmates who leave with a GED or high school diploma are 18 percent less likely to re-offend, while those who take post-secondary classes or earn college degrees are 70 percent less likely to end up back in jail.

At the same time, the crimes that landed the inmates in prison are never far from the thoughts of Director Wall.

Among the degree recipients Monday were a child molester and a man convicted of beating his girlfriend's 2-year-old son to death when he was babysitting.

"It's a challenge for us. We know participating in programs targeted toward behavior are an investment in public safety, because the more you are prepared to live a productive and law-abiding life after you are released, the better for society," Wall said.

But, Wall said, ensuring the safety and security of everyone at the prison is costly. Expenses include locks, perimeter checks, the salaries of correctional officers and housing and feeding the inmates, which cost the state about \$171 million this year.

Such expenses make it hard to expand education programs, even though studies have shown they can save states money, Wall said.