Dear CEA Members,

As we say farewell to the year 2020, and welcome in 2021, I must take a moment to reflect on the monumental changes of our world today. The loss of friends and colleagues, the masks worn by us all, and the missed opportunities to network in person have been a few of our burdens this past year. But, with eyes to the future, 2021 promises to bring a brighter day. One of these brighter changes in correctional education is the elimination of the PELL ban after more than two and one-half decades. In 1994, correctional education was devastated by the ban to use PELL federal funding to educate any person housed at a state or federal prison. But, in December, 2020, the U.S. Congress reversed the 1994 decision to again allow this federal funding to be used to educate correctional students. This change alone will brighten the future for tens of thousands of Americans. So, while 2020 was memorable, 2021 is the bright promise for a better future. Bless each of you for the work you do to improve the lives of so many.

Happy Holidays!

Good News From TN

Lauren Solina, M.Ed., Coordinator of Special Programs for Correctional Education

The TN Correctional Education Initiative began as a partnership between the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC). Through this partnership, per Governor Bill Lee’s leadership and grant dollars, an initiative was created to offer technical and community college programming in nine out of ten state run prison facilities within three years. The vision of a statewide system of post-secondary correctional education represents a partnership between the college system of Tennessee, with robust student services provided by THEC Navigators similar to services provided to free-world students receiving TN Promise or TN Reconnect, and the TDOC seeking to provide rehabilitation with the overall goal of reducing recidivism and increasing public safety.

For the initial program year, the Correctional Education Initiative (CEI) was able to implement technical programming pairing three Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) locations each with a prison to offer Computer Information Technology (CIT) and either Building Construction Trades (BCT) or Farming Operations Technology (FOT). TBR was able to evaluate existing TDOC Career Technical Education (CTE) coursework to create articulation agreements allowing for current CTE coursework to transfer as clock-hour credit in the fields of Welding, Cosmetology, Barbering, and Building Construction Trades. For the upcoming Spring 2021 semester, TBR will add eight additional TCAT programs and five additional Associate programs spread between five new prison locations.
As a teenager in solitary confinement at the Southampton Correctional Center, Reginald Dwayne Betts found freedom in a book. “One afternoon, I shouted to the men in the hole with me: ‘Somebody, send me a book.’” He says. “Moments later, Dudley Randall’s The Black Poets was slid under my cell door. By whom, I never knew. But the book got me through some long days.” Books, says Betts, paved the path that would take him from prison to a degree from Yale Law School, publishing three collections of poems and a memoir along the way.

Twenty-two years later, Betts founded the Million Book Project, an initiative to extend access to books across the prison system and create opportunities for incarcerated people to interact with the world beyond a prison cell. The project will bring 500,000 books and dozens of authors to correctional institutions around the United States and Puerto Rico, partnering with correctional educators and staff to forge relationships, share stories, and offer books as a symbol of freedom.

**About the Million Book Project**

The Million Book Project aims to transform the role of literature in the lives of people in prison by planting a “Freedom Collection” of 500 volumes in 1,000 prisons and juvenile detention centers across the country. These Freedom Collections will function as literary time-capsules, transporting people from the frozen-in-time experience of life in prison to the tomorrows they may presently struggle to contemplate and envision.

“I know that books made me believe my life would be possible. What if everyone had a chance to have books touch and move them as they have for me?” says Betts.

The project is currently curating its collection of poetry, fiction, history, and social thought, which will run the full range of subject matter and perspectives, from Mark Twain’s Huck Finn and Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov to contemporary classics like Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Chimamanda Adichie’s Americanah and Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian. It will also include Betts’ most recent collection, Felon: Poems, a New York Times notable book of 2020.

With more than two million incarcerated people in the US, transforming the presence and power of the written word in their lives is no small undertaking. The project will start by implementing three strategic goals:

1. Place 500,000 books in state prison systems across the country by planting a thousand 500 book time-capsules in every medium and maximum-security prison in the United States and Puerto Rico and a juvenile facility in every state and Puerto Rico.

2. Curate a nationwide reading series that brings 52 writers into men’s, women’s, and juvenile detention centers across this country and Puerto Rico.

3. Produce a catalogue that documents the project and introduces readers to the books it contains.

This project, unprecedented in its scope and size, is funded by a generous $5.25 million grant from the Mellon Foundation. That will enable the project to curate its collection, purchase books, and install the literary time capsules. The project is housed within the Justice Collaboratory at Yale Law School, a center established in 2015 to bring together a diverse range of scholars, researchers, artists, and advocates to work to transform the criminal justice system.

**Forming Relationships, Finding Freedom**

Beyond providing correctional institutions with curated collections, the project’s success will also be measured by the relationships it fosters between incarcerated people, artists, scholars and academic institutions, and corrections educators, administrators, and staff.

Betts recognizes the importance of
The Million Book Project: A Freedom Library

(continued)

building relationships with incarcerated people in his own career as a formerly incarcerated artist: “Since coming home, I’ve gone back into prisons dozens of times. I’ve given poetry readings, spoken at graduations, and taught college courses. I’ve talked to men and women who’d never met a published writer, didn’t believe it was possible to leave prison and get a law degree. They made me understand how important it is for people like me to return.”

The Million Book Project will foster relationships through its Literary Ambassador initiative, which will bring writers, poets, and playwrights into prisons to present their work and engage with prisoners and correctional educators and officers, with the goal of creating ongoing exchanges of art and story.

Thus, correctional educators will be key partners in the success of the Million Book Project. But that doesn’t mean it aims to replace or replicate the important work correctional educators or librarians are already doing. Nor will it create an additional strain on educator time or resources, tossing yet another curriculum or mandate into the juggling act of educating.

Instead, this project is a new, vital educational resource to give incarcerated people a direct line to the literary world and, through it, the liberatory promise of study, experimentation, and self-creation. The Freedom Collection will offer readers countless journeys of discovery and reflection, allowing them to reclaim mental space and dignity along the way. Correctional educators, who serve as guides on those journeys already, will find that the Freedom Collection creates another avenue to connect with students, expand both their horizons and their own sense of self, and walk alongside them on their path to freedom.

“The Freedom Collection is an ode to study, experimentation, and self-creation,” Betts says. “This project will build and sustain independent communities in prison around literature. While there are many reasons we read and study, chief among them is that when we do, we become – in the words of Frederick Douglass – ‘forever free.’”

The Fruits of Her Labor

Taneisha Spall

Throughout the years in the field of education, educators and administrators will often reflect on a handful of students who have remained etched in our minds and hearts for their tenacity, grit and demonstration of the power of education. One such student, Carlos, will undoubtedly be one of those students for Carolyn Martin, ABE/GED teacher at SCI Chester.

AnneMarie Swanlek, western field liaison, for the Division of Correction Education, is also in charge of statewide General Education Development (GED) testing for 25 state correctional institutions in Pennsylvania. Both Carlos’ teacher, Carolyn Martin, and I (Principal Taneisha Spall) had reached out to Swanlek asking for an exemption from our policy for GED testing in corrections. A student should have a 9th-grade reading and math level before they can take the GED-Ready practice test. They then must pass that test before they are permitted to take the official GED test. If they fail, then we recommend that they wait for a minimum of 30 to 60 days to retest so that the student can use the study guide of areas they are deficient. Carlos had already passed reasoning through language arts, science and social studies, but failed his GED-Ready math test two times before he passed, then failed the official math test. Martin sent Swanlek a passionate appeal to let him try again before he was released:

_I have been working with inmate [Carlos] since November 2018. When he first entered my class, [Carlos] struggled with focusing due to his Attention Deficit Disorder diagnosis. In August 2019, [Carlos] suffered some significant losses, became very depressed and stopped coming to class._
From September to October 2019, he spent 45 days in the RHU when he got a misconduct after getting into a physical altercation with another inmate. Security mistakenly identified a different inmate as the culprit, and [Carlos] could have easily gotten away with his actions. However, when he saw that an innocent inmate was going to suffer for his behavior, he confessed to Security that he was the culprit and took the consequences.

After fulfilling his RHU time, [Carlos] returned to class immediately in October 2019, determined to succeed. He began taking GED-Ready tests in the fall and soldiered on until he had completed all his tests except the Official Math which he missed by four points in August, 2020. He was incredibly disappointed with his score, but was able to identify immediately where he had erred. He said that he had spent too much time on certain questions as well he had entertained test anxiety. His knowledge that this was the final test that he had to pass before his release intensified his anxiety. He was aware that the 60-day mandatory waiting period to retest would extend beyond his October 7, 2020, release date.

Upon his release, [Carlos] will be going to a halfway house and after demonstrating his ability to function successfully within society. Once established, he wants to pursue college. He is foregoing his desire to be within easy access of his eight-year-old daughter, because he sees the need to sacrifice immediacy for long-term stability. This is significant because he adores his daughter, and they have a strong relationship. Since he failed the test in August, [Carlos] has been coming to my class at least once a day (sometimes twice a day) to get one on one assistance, and he has been working on the areas in which the GED test report indicated he was weak. He also has been working with a tutor on the block to prepare for the test. He is determined to “cover all his bases” and is investing in all the help offered to him.

I am requesting that you waive the 60-day mandatory waiting period for retesting and allow [Carlos] to be tested the last week of September along with other students being tested at SCI Chester. My request is based upon the following merits that I see in [Carlos]:

- has demonstrated tenacity in his pursuit of his diploma
- has negotiated his ADD, bereavement, RHU time and test anxiety
- has managed to pass all his tests (except math) with points beyond the required 145
- is focusing on his deficient areas and is investing significant time and energy in preparation to retest
- has invested in the additional one on one support offered to him
- has utilized the GED test report as a tool to hone in on his deficiencies
- has demonstrated character not only in taking responsibility for his actions
- that led to his RHU time but also showed initiative in returning to class immediately after his time served
- has a vision and step-by-step plan for success and is willing to make sacrifices to succeed
- has the strong support of his mother and daughter who are cheering him on to success

Upon his release, [Carlos] will have a myriad of responsibilities, decisions, deadlines, halfway house rules, transportation and financial issues etc. to navigate. I believe that taking a GED test to pursue those last four points has the potential to fall by the wayside in the midst of the stress of meeting all the other requirements of Parole. The GED is pertinent to his getting a long-term job that will provide the financial support needed to sustain [Carlos]. The GED is also a prerequisite for his going to college and pursuing his educational goals. Most importantly, I believe that earning the GED is the defining watershed moment that will significantly influence the level of confidence with which [Carlos] will face the world and successfully navigate to stability and permanent freedom. Those four points needed to pass the GED test, hang in the balance. I believe that one final opportunity to exit the prison doors with a GED could be the pivotal point in [Carlos’] life.

Martin’s plea was accepted by Swanlek, and the 60-day waiting period was waived for Carlos. September 30, 2020 at 1 p.m., Carlos arrived with confidence...
to take and pass the GED Math. As I proctored his exam, it was evident that he was utilizing the test taking skills and techniques as well as the recalling the math content he learned from both his teacher and tutors. 120 minutes later, he was finished. While we waited for the Remote Managing Access (GED processing) to complete, Carlos shared his next steps upon release as well as discussed why earning his GED was so critical to his future success for him and his daughter. At 3:35 p.m., the RMA finally cleared and we sprinted to my office to retrieve his score for standing count was only 10 minutes away and Carlos could not stand to wait until the next day for me to provide him his score. Seeing 146 appear on the screen and the green yes for credentialed, I belted out, “You passed [Carlos]! You did it!” He asked me to repeat it and when I did, he became silent and fell into the chair in my office. In this moment, I saw the years of setbacks, disappointment, and feeling that you were not good enough, dissipate. He earned his GED and his future is ahead of him.

He could not wait to share the news and informed Martin, who, like many corrections educators, dedicate so much time and energy to students. This is the fruits of her labor. Swanlek also emailed, “I knew what day and time he was taking the math test and when I checked his results and saw that he had passed and earned his GED, I emailed the education staff at SCI Chester and told them, you cannot see me, but I am doing my happy dance, tell [Carlos] congratulations!” Carlos and many incarcerated students who earn their GEDs despite adversity and obstacles are the reason that as corrections educators, we are committed to the work that we do on a daily basis.

**2021 Elections**

Starting January 1, 2021 we will accept nominations for the President-Elect, Vice President, and Treasurer positions for the CEA Executive Board. Our elections will take place in February 2021. We would love for all of our current members to participate by casting their votes in the upcoming election. Please contact the National Office or your Regional Director to ensure that we have your correct email address. Only members that have their membership current as of January 1st can participate in the election.

**Welcome to Our Newest Members!**

*September - December*

**Arkansas**
Phaedra Thompson
Ronald Russell

**Arizona**
Kymberly Richard

**California**
Willow Baker

**Colorado**
Jennifer Martin

**Kansas**
Bob Friesen

**Florida**
Courtney Hawk

**Illinois**
Joni Stahlman

**Michigan**
Mary Cusack

**Montana**
Stephanie Moore
Sharrie Berowski

**New Jersey**
Donna Peskin
Sally Weaver

**Pennsylvania**
Sara Fritz
Johnathan McGarvey
Ashley Kauffman
Mark Gensimore
Joshua Cannin
Jason Anders
Bridget Baker
Aaron Hicks

**Texas**
Angela Jones
Kevin Sawnick

**Virginia**
Helen McSweeney

**Wisconsin**
Amanda Boss

**Poland**
Hubert Skrzynski

Peggy Granger
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Save the date!

CEA 2021 Upcoming Events

- **CEA Leadership Forum & Training Event**: May 16 - 18, 2021 in Tucson, AZ

- **75th International CEA Conference & Training Event**: August 22-25, 2021 in Austin, TX

For details about upcoming events, go to [https://ceanational.org/conferences](https://ceanational.org/conferences)
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