

# Illiteracy

Continued from Page 2A

But states are only required to report on a set list of outcomes for this, said Sean Addie, director of correctional education for the U.S. Department of Education. And states are not required to use these federal funds for correctional education, so they wouldn't haven't have to report anything if that was the case.

"The short answer (to) what education is available to adults is 'it depends,' " Addie said. "It depends on the state or system and it depends on the individual prison."

## Funding for low-level readers

*After being suspended from elementary school, Cody Madrid, a prisoner at Snake River, went to another school and did well. He earned mostly Bs and Cs in middle school, he said, and with the help of his high school teachers, earned his diploma. In his free time, he likes reading about history.*

*But Madrid struggles to find text clues and understand what he's read in emails and memos, or detailed instructions – any large chunk of text.*

*"I just go super quick, then I don't look at it," he said. "And I get all the wrong answers."*

*To pass out of his reading level, Madrid, 23, needs to receive a score of 235 or higher on the CASAS exam. He's taken the test multiple times, with his highest score, as of June 10, reaching 232.*

*He expects to be paroled in 2024. He wants to enroll at Portland Community College, then figure out what comes next.*

*"Take your time," Madrid offered as advice for others working on their literacy skills. "And if you need any help, ask the question."*

While education programs are crucial for adults in custody, there is limited state funding.

The Oregon Department of Corrections operates on an approximately \$2 billion budget per biennium.

The department is responsible for a range of services, including addiction and mental health treatment, cognitive-behavioral programming and education.

About \$11 million of the department's budget — about 5.5% — is allocated to adult basic skills development education. This umbrella category covers everything from basic reading skills to GED prep.

There is no funding allocated specifi-

cally for low-level readers.

Corrections officials estimated the \$11 million covers about \$3,000 to \$3,500 per student for contracted adult basic education services. With COVID-19, they said, they have served fewer students this biennium than normal.

U.S. Census Bureau data show Oregon's per-pupil spending on K-12 students as of 2021 to be about \$12,450 per student.

Some states spent more, such as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's estimated \$176.8 million for "academic adult education," which includes but is not limited to basic literacy programs. California's prison population is about eight times larger than Oregon's. But state officials would not give a per-pupil estimate.

Jennifer Black, the acting communications administrator for the Oregon Department of Corrections, said the agency's executive team has not finalized its areas of focus for the next biennium.

"This is an ongoing discussion," she said. "Education is an important component of the programs provided in our prisons."

Liz Merah, press secretary for the office of Gov. Kate Brown, said the governor's priority remains to create a "seamless system of education from cradle to career," including expanding early learning programs for rural families, families of color and those with lower incomes.

"This work is important, but the criminal justice system does not have sole responsibility for many of the challenges facing our communities, including adult literacy," she said.

"By making these investments, combined with DOC's work to administer adult education programs for (adults in custody), Oregon is aiming to close the equity gaps in all our systems."

## Barriers to access

*Scott "Scottie" Smith is finishing his fourth prison sentence, following juvenile detention throughout his teens. The nearly 30-year-old said he's never stepped foot in a high school.*

*He didn't take education inside seriously. His mandatory classes were just a way to pass time, he said, until he started Heather Goldblatt's basic education course at OSCI in Salem and started to pay attention. Now, he's a graduate of that class, working to pass his final two tests before he earns his GED.*

*"It really put me forward," Smith said.*

*He now sees education as the key to getting out and staying out. Smith*

*wants to have an in-person graduation ceremony; he wants to start his own business.*

*"I used to be a high wire, like, active gang member out there," he said. "Now I'm focused on getting all that together."*

Students and educators in corrections face barriers uncommon in the K-12 setting.

Class rosters can change daily or weekly. Class times might not consider students' work schedules or counseling sessions. They may be interrupted if there is a lockdown due to a fight or they have to return to housing units for count. They disproportionately have past trauma and are dealing with other issues like gang politics and addiction recovery. Some classes are only available in wards with certain security levels.

As students entered Heather Goldblatt's classroom at OSCI one morning in May, they each grabbed the blue or black folder with their names on it from a table.

The group of students that day — some of whom have been incarcerated for a matter of months, others for decades — discussed the merits of driverless cars. The words "pros" and "cons" already were written and underlined on the whiteboard. As they debated their initial opinions, Goldblatt transcribed the ideas. They watched a video, read an opinion piece and debated again.

At the end of the class, Goldblatt asked the students to write a paragraph expressing whether they each thought life would be better with driverless cars.

Goldblatt said she adjusts her teaching and materials to fit the varying levels of students. She also works to create an environment in which students are willing to make mistakes, take risks and still feel supported, which can be especially challenging in a prison setting.

"A big part of what creates an 'institutionalized mentality' is the severing of human relationships," Goldblatt said, referring to an idea that incarcerated individuals should keep their heads down and 'do their time.' "Grey areas or complexities and layers and pros and cons and all those sorts of higher-level thinking skills are pretty challenging to sustain in here.

"They're not encouraged. They're not rewarded. They can get you in trouble."

Goldblatt said she worries most about what happens when her students are released back into a world that's filled with grey. And that's why she's adamant about creating a supportive atmosphere behind the fence.

"Education is almost the only place in the institutions where we can do something different. We are in a classroom,

together," she said. "Yes, we're developing literacy skills, which are so important ... but almost more importantly, we're keeping those connections to human relations, to a bigger world that's outside of this dreary world that we're in."

Hundreds of Oregon prisoners are waiting to get into these classes.

Social distancing and other COVID-19 safety requirements are among a long list of reasons for wait times. Resources and available space were cited by Hightower as the primary reasons.

Most prisons were not built with education as the main focus, and rooms are used for multiple purposes. Classrooms also are used for substance abuse treatment and religious services, for example. And when in use, these areas require security, which is limited by staff scheduling.

"Students may also be on the waitlist because they have medical or mental health issues that are taking precedence," she said. "(Placement) in a disciplinary unit may also keep them on the waitlist."

In Washington, their waitlist of more than 1,700 is about the same as the number of students enrolled. Corrections officials there said waitlists have decreased during the pandemic, as the prison population also has decreased.

Oregon's prison population has been roughly stagnant in the last year. However, there was a decrease from more than 14,000 in Jan. 2020 to about 12,000 in June 2021.

There's a disparity statewide for who is waiting the longest.

The Statesman's analysis of Oregon Corrections data found about 7% of those testing below the eighth-grade level are women, matching the portion of women in the total state prison population.

But more than 67% of these low-literacy female prisoners have never been enrolled in the proper education program. About 44% of men who are low-level readers have never been enrolled either.

More than half of the state's Black prisoners assigned mandatory literacy education have never been enrolled.

Corrections officials said the state has not looked into the reasons for the disparities.

## 'They're going to be our neighbors'

*Kristina Landrum makes answer keys, grades assignments and works with students on particularly tough*

See ILLITERACY, Page 4A

# IT'S OUR BEST WINDOW SALE!



COMFORT 365 WINDOWS®

**BUY 2 WINDOWS GET 2 FREE\***

PLUS 60 MONTHS LOW-INTEREST FINANCING\*\*

- Energy efficient windows to help lower your utility bills
- Our exclusive Comfort 365® glass creates a more comfortable home year-round
- Backed by our best-in-class limited lifetime warranty†

OFFERS EXPIRE 7/31/22



We design, build, install, and guarantee it.™

FACTORY DIRECT

LIMITED LIFETIME WARRANTY

BOOK YOUR FREE IN-HOME ESTIMATE ONLINE OR CALL TODAY!



# 971-332-8813

\*40% national windows discount applies to white double-hung and hopper windows with standard installation. Minimum purchase of 4 Comfort 365 windows® required. Earn an additional 10% off with participation in the YES! Program (up to \$2,000), making your window discount a total of up to 50% off. YES! Program valid only on the date of your initial free in-home estimate appointment and once per residence per term. All prices include installation. All discounts apply to the MSRP cost. No adjustments can be made on prior sales. \*\*Subject to credit approval. Fixed interest rate of 6.99% for 60 months. Payment example assumes one-time \$10,000 purchase on approval date (APR 7.15%) with 1 payment of \$236.96 followed by 59 amortized payments of \$197.96. Payments assume Account Activation charge of \$39 applies and is due with first required payment. Financing for GreenSky® consumer loan programs is provided by federally insured, equal opportunity lender banks. †The Champion Limited Lifetime Warranty applies to Comfort 365 Windows® and qualifying Champion products as long as the original purchaser owns the home. See website or a Champion representative for details. Offer subject to change. Offer expires 7/31/22. ©Champion Opco LLC, 2022