

## Why We Teach In Prison

By: Kim Medders

There have been times in my career I have been called upon to rationalize education for inmates and otherwise defend the vocation of educator. The majority of teachers who enter the profession do so because of a sense of giving back to the world by lighting the lamp of learning. Some thrive on the challenges and new experiences each day of teaching brings. The reward of being an integral part of a child's life and development is a teacher's ultimate compensation. The salary is secondary. No one gets into the education game to get rich. Many correctional educators I've talked to over the years, tell me teaching in a prison is not what they thought of when they entered the profession. Most wanted to teach children in elementary or high schools. Few of us pulled on our mother's skirts when we were children and said, "Mommy, when I grow up I wanna be a teacher in a prison!"

Those who trouble themselves to ask why we teach here are often curious about what it is like to teach behind walls. Some think it is a misuse of State money to educate inmates and want me to understand I am wasting my time in doing so. Several people feel we don't do enough. They tend to complicate the issue of penal education by assuming they have the answers instead of asking those who actually do the work how to fix it. The following is a story I read a few years ago that illustrates an attitude teachers face:

There was a party several years ago where a man was deriding education. He argued: "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?" He reminded all those who were listening that it's true what they say about teachers. "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." To corroborate, he turned to someone he knew to be a teacher and said, "You're a teacher, Susan. Be honest. What do you make?"

Susan, who had a reputation for honesty and frankness replied, "You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional Medal of Honor and an A- feel like a slap in the face if the student didn't do his or her very best. I can make kids sit through an hour long study hall in absolute silence. I can make parents tremble in fear when I call home.

"You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder. I make them question. I make them criticize. I make them apologize and mean it. I make them write. I make them read, read, read. I make them spell hard words over and over and over again, until they don't have to rely on a computer spell checker ever again. I elevate them to experience music and art and the joy in performance, so their lives are rich, full of kindness and culture, and they take pride in themselves and their accomplishments. I make them understand that if you have brains, then follow your heart... and if someone ever tries to judge you by what you make, you pay them no attention. By the way, what do you make?"

With the advent of AB 900, attitudes in California's correctional system are changing. Yet, I still have to get "missionary" every now and then and try to explain what those who don't teach have trouble appreciating. I usually start out by saying it isn't the money or the benefits, though both are good in CDCR and getting better. It isn't any thanks we get from our students because that happens so rarely. It isn't because we are bleeding hearts and empathize with their condition. Most teachers here realize that this is the last chance these guys will get to turn their lives around. We must change the failure they experienced in their previous educational (and life) performance and make them realize there is hope and value to being a productive and contributing member in our society.

Teachers, in prison, public and private schools MAKE A DIFFERENCE! We try to leave the world a better place than we found it.

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