

SUBJECT: Requirements for inmate education, training programs, Project RIO

COMMITTEE: Corrections — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 4 ayes — Madden, R. Allen, Hochberg, McReynolds

0 nays

3 absent — D. Jones, Haggerty, Noriega

WITNESSES: For — Joan Burnham, Texas Inmate Families Association, Inc.; Penny Raefield, Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable

Against — None

On — Luis Macias, Texas Workforce Commission

BACKGROUND: The Windham School District operates educational, vocational, and life skills training programs in Texas prisons. The district is governed by ch. 19 of the Education Code and is a separate entity from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ).

Under Education Code, sec. 19.004, the district must develop educational and vocational programs for persons who are not high school graduates to be paid for with money from the foundation school fund. If space is available, the district's programs and services may be offered to high school graduates.

Labor Code, sec. 306.002, establishes the project for reintegration of offenders, called Project RIO. It is a statewide employment referral program designed to reintegrate into the labor force people in TDCJ's correctional institutions and youth committed to the Texas Youth Commission (TYC). The program is administered by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) in cooperation with TDCJ and the TYC and operated under a memorandum of understanding among the agencies. In fiscal 2004 Project Rio served 20,000 ex-offenders.

DIGEST:

CSHB 2837 would establish new requirements for Windham School District's education and vocational programs, requiring that Windham contract for an evaluation of those receiving its services and that TWC, TDCJ, and TYC to establish a data interface to provide TWC information about offenders released from correctional facilities who might benefit from Project RIO services.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2005.

Windham programs. CSHB 2837 would require the Windham School District to ensure that the programs it develops, such as GED and ESL programs, were integrated with an applied vocational context leading to employment. The vocational programs it developed would have to be designed for non-high school graduates and prioritized so that the programs resulted in certification or licensing with consideration given to the impact that a previous felony conviction had on the ability of an inmate to be certified, licensed, and employed.

Evaluation of Windham training. Windham would contract with an outside organization to compile and analyze information for each person receiving its training services so the effectiveness of the services could be evaluated. The information would include an evaluation of the kind of training services provided, the kind of employment a person obtained on release, whether the employment was related to the training, the difference between a person's earnings when a job was obtained and one year later, and the retention factors associated with the job.

TDCJ would submit to the governor and the Legislative Budget Board an annual report evaluating the training service. The report would be prepared by the outside organization under contract with Windham.

Windham would be required, rather than authorized as under current law, to coordinate vocational education and job training programs with a local workforce development board. This coordination would ensure that Windham students were equipped with the skills necessary to compete for current and emerging jobs.

Data sharing. TWC, TDCJ, and TYC would establish a data interface providing TWC detailed information about those released from correctional facilities who might benefit from post-release Project RIO services and referral information from TDCJ and TYC necessary to

implement post-release services. The detailed information about former inmates would include demographic and identifying information, offense history, educational and work history, information about participation in TDCJ's "work against recidivism program," and other services received.

The data interface would be designed to give parole officers information about the person's participation in employment services and entry into the workforce.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

CSHB 2837 would refocus the state's educational and vocational programs for prison inmates and its job training programs for the reintegration of offenders so that the state could get the highest return on its investment and see the most offenders employed. The bill would place that focus on preparing offenders for jobs that are in demand and would ensure that state agencies involved with the program were communicating. Improving Texas' Project RIO is important because studies show that offender recidivism could be reduced if offenders were employed.

CSHB 2837 should help more offenders obtain jobs by requiring that Windham's educational, vocational, licensing and certification programs focus on and lead to employment. This could ensure, for example, that inmates being paroled to a specific area were trained or certified in jobs available in that area, rather than inmates taking whatever Windham class or program was available. The bill would require Windham vocational education and job training programs be coordinated with local workforce development boards to help Windham students prepare for in-demand jobs. Windham could shift the funds it now uses for training and vocational programs to new or retooled programs and to the evaluation study.

The bill would help the state analyze Windham's performance by requiring an outside evaluation of its training and other services and how it affected a person's employment and wages. This could help the state make long-term plans and decide what changes, if any, were needed in Windham's programs.

The data interface required by the bill would help create ties between inmates and the outside employment world so that offenders on parole would have continuity of services. This could help ensure that inmates were trained for jobs that were in demand. The data-sharing also would ensure that good communication between parole officers and TWC. Parole

officers could verify if a parolee were attending TWC training or if that person had obtained a job. TWC would know who was supposed to be reporting for training and when.

According to the fiscal note, TWC could absorb with its existing resources the one-time cost of \$100,547 for the data interface and the bill should result in no significant impact on TYC and TDCJ. The benefits of the system should far outweigh any small cost to an agency.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

It is unclear how Windham School District would pay for any changes in their programs that would result from the bill. The 78th Legislature in 2003 cut the district's budget by about 19 percent, resulting in about 288 lost positions and the closing of several vocational shops. This session the district is facing a proposed cut of about 5 percent. It would be difficult to refocus existing programs or to start new programs without new funding. While the district may be able to shift some existing funds into new or retooled programs, this type of change likely would need funds for new equipment. The bill also would not provide any funds for Windham to contract for a private company to evaluate its services.

The fiscal note estimates a one-time cost of \$100,547 for the data interface system, and it is unclear how the state agencies involved in the project would pay for it.

NOTES:

The committee substitute put the original bill into a Legislative Council draft form.