

An Open Letter
To Men and Women Currently or Formerly Incarcerated

From Anthony Tassi
Executive Director, Mayor's Office of Adult Education

September 2010



September 2010

Dear Friends:

When I talk to men and women behind bars about education and career planning, they usually have good questions about the options available. But, I often get the feeling that they also have other more profound questions that they keep to themselves:

“Who am I to think that I can go from incarceration to college?”

“Who am I to expect a good job after I’m released, with good pay and health benefits?”

Experience has taught many people to be discouraged. Lots of people who’ve been incarcerated have had to struggle their whole lives and have been told many times and ways – even by friends, family, and teachers – not to get their hopes up. The system is unfair and has treated them poorly. They’ve made mistakes themselves.

These feelings of hopelessness have been reinforced by the attitudes and prejudices they’ve encountered in the criminal justice system and in the school system. Somewhere along the way, many incarcerated people started to believe it. They started to internalize the discouraging message: “No reason to feel that things will ever improve.” “No reason to feel that I deserve any better.”

Discouragement is toxic, because it can leave you with a distorted picture of who you really are. It can lead you to believe you are less intelligent than you really are. It can make you underestimate yourself and not recognize your full ability to do new things and to succeed. With discouragement, good programs and resources seem a million miles away – up a steep hill and out of reach. “It’s not for me.” “It won’t work.” “What’s the point?” “It’ll take too long.”

I completely understand why people behind bars would feel discouraged, but I also know that doesn’t need to be the end of the story. Whatever your current situation is, feelings of discouragement need not be permanent. I think you can overcome them to develop a more realistic understanding of yourself. The reality is that incarcerated men and women are smart, capable, and able to help and lead others. Any time you think of yourself as less than that, you are selling yourself short – you have an inaccurate picture of your true self.

Getting rid of discouragement and gaining an accurate picture of yourself (e.g., smart, capable, and able to help and lead others) is a key step in the education process. Giving up discouragement and daring to be hopeful is not an easy thing to do – especially when the road ahead is long and difficult. But, it is usually the first step on that road and the one that will make all the other steps a little bit easier.

You might be asking why do I think that incarcerated men and women are “smart, capable, and able to help and lead others”? I have learned this through experience. It has been true of people I’ve met through the Fortune Society, Osborne Associates, Getting Out and Staying Out, the DOE Fund, the Center for Employment Opportunities, the East River Academy on Rikers Island, the College Initiative,

the College and Community Fellowship, and other organizations helping formerly incarcerated individuals.

This has also been my experience in overseeing the Mayor's Office Internship for Adult Education Students and Alumni. We look for highly motivated learners who are pursuing college degrees, natural leaders who have the ability to help their peers. We seek individuals who can make the adult education system work better for everyone. We often find these individuals in programs serving the formerly incarcerated. Of the 21 interns we've selected since the program began two years ago, seven are formerly incarcerated. The same is true for our Calvin Miles Award for Student Leadership – nearly half the 18 award winners last year are formerly incarcerated.

All of these men and women have made a big difference by sharing their skills and experience to help fellow students do better in adult education programs. As a group, they have rejected discouragement, reclaimed a more accurate sense of themselves, and have helped other students to do the same.

We know there are many other people in jails and prison who can accomplish big things and make a positive difference in other people's lives. Because of our confidence in these individuals, the Mayor's Office recently committed \$1,650,000 over a three-year period to expand reentry education programs for these individuals. This money will expand several outstanding programs helping men and women coming back home from Rikers Island to finish their GEDs and go on to college or to enroll in a job training program. We know the participants in these programs will do outstanding work and will help other people to succeed as well.

In addition to these programs, New York City has free classes throughout the City for adults who never completed high school and for those who are trying to learn English. We serve approximately 60,000 people each year. Formerly incarcerated individuals are welcome at every program. There are some programs that specialize in working with people coming out of prison and jails.

These classes are important because earning a GED dramatically reduces the likelihood that an inmate will return to prison or jail. Going to college almost guarantees that someone won't be going back to prison or jail. People with a college education rarely find themselves living in poverty – unlike people without a high school education, who are three times more likely to experience poverty. Every step of education adds to your income potential, especially if you also continue to develop your skills by enrolling in a job training program.

Lack of success in school is passed on from generation to generation. Children of parents without high school education usually don't do as well in school as children of parents with a college education. In fact, this gap in school performance is greater than the so-called "achievement gap" based on race or income. Getting a degree after being released is a great way to break this cycle for your children.

People being released from prison or jail back to New York City can call 311 and ask for "after jail" services to find out about education programs and other kinds of help that is available.

I know that some people currently incarcerated will hear about these educational opportunities and think to themselves: “They’re not talking about me.” In this case, I am talking about you.

So, if you find yourself silently thinking – “Who am I to reach for something higher?” – I would respectfully challenge you to answer a different question this time:

“Who are you NOT to expect great things of yourself?”

I wish you the best of luck in continuing your education.

Sincerely,

Anthony Tassi
Executive Director
NYC Mayor’s Office of Adult Education

A version of this letter previously appeared in *The Fortune News*. Thanks to Katy Taylor.