

## Career and Vocational Education in Prison -a Case of California Charter School-

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices of vocational and career education in prison of a California charter school. This study focuses on how charter schools use the resources in order to help prisoners learn various skills through vocational education while incarcerated. This study discusses Many of them are minor offenders without high school diplomas. This study aims to elucidate how educational activities within correctional facilities, designed to facilitate their rehabilitation, are implemented and contribute to their careers upon reintegration into society. The findings are listed below.

- 1) Not only through support from public institutions but also utilizing a variety of resources from many organizations, they have achieved certain outcomes such as the solidification of basic levels and obtaining high school diplomas.
- 2) Educational and vocational education practices are expanding within state.
- 3) They also actively provide career guidance and support to parents.
- 4) There can be conflicts between a charter school career education and vocational trainers.

**Keywords:** Charter Schools, Career Education, Education in Prison, Reintegration into Society

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices of vocational and career education in prison of California charter school in California. Since the first charter school law in 1991, the numbers of schools and students have been increasing. Public charter schools currently serve more than 3.4 million students and 7,700 schools in 2022-23. Compared with school year 2005-06, the number of schools has more than doubled, while charter school enrollment has more than tripled. The demand for charter school system spread owing to inefficient public schools and low grades of students. The charter school system allows people (charter applicants) to establish or open public schools; however, they must obtain permission (charters) from the state or school district (charter authorizers). Although charter schools are public schools, they are not restricted by public entities such as the state, county, or school district (Nathan, 1996). Supported by government (both Democrats and Republicans), the number of charter schools has been expanding, and they play a crucial one of the only options of education available to the American public.

The charter school system allows people (charter applicants) to establish or open public schools; however, they must obtain permission (charters) from the state or school district (charter authorizers). Although operation or deployment of charter school system is different between states (see <https://edreform.com/2021/03/just-the-faqs-charter-schools/>)

One of the most remarkable traits of charter schools is that they are out of the jurisdiction of states, school districts, or counties. Although charter schools are public schools, they can improve or promote their educational practices (for example, school mission or goals, curricula, personnel, class-size, and teaching materials) according to their responsibilities, so much so that the charter schools are seen as “hybrid schools of public and private” (Robertson et al., 2012, Ravitch, 2013). That is, they are able to operate autonomously. According to Wohlstetter et al. (1995,2004), the autonomy of charter schools is defined as: 1) free, 2) school-based decision making, 3) different, and 4) innovative.

California charter schools provide diverse education services such as professional organizations for school management, curriculum development, or fund-raising. In many cases, charter schools face difficulties in school management or financial risk due to a lack of support from public entities (Ferguson, 2012; Lake, 2010; Finn et al., 2000). Among these, it is believed that prison charter schools have made a significant

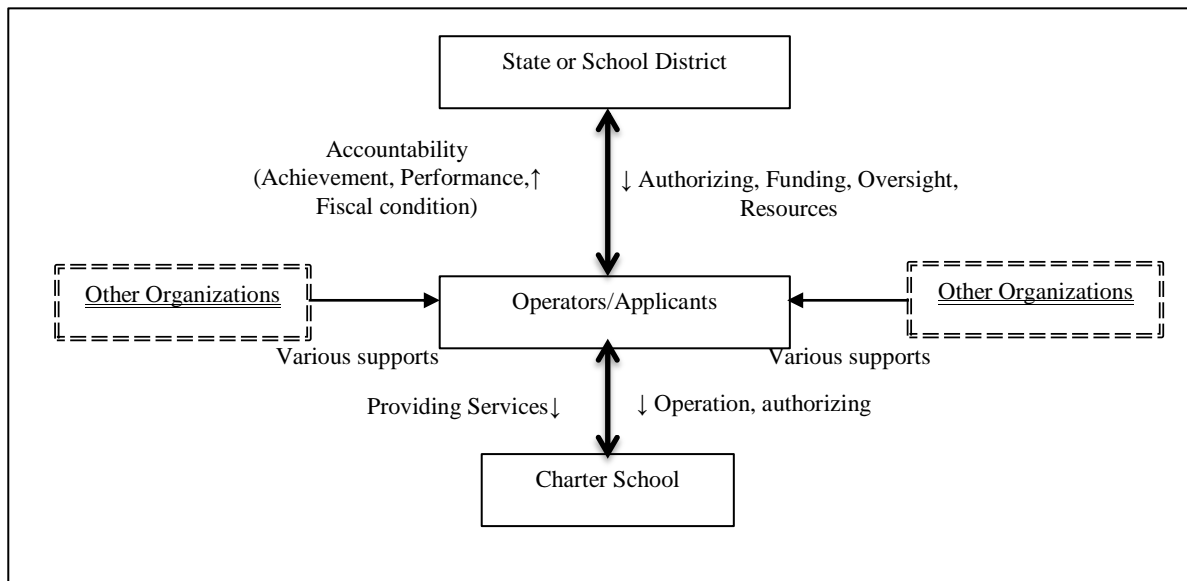
contribution within the state in recent years. Correctional education has been in place within prisons until now, but the introduction of charter schools’ education in prison is a relatively recent practice.

In order to examine charter schools’ career and vocational education in prison, this study have to consider to relationship between several organizations such as state or district, school operators, policy of prison. Therefore, this study uses the theory of social tie (Granovetter, 1982, 1995) as its framework. Through the examination of educational practice and their relationship with social tie, this study will show how their services influence for prisoners or their career after release.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DATA**

As described above, in order to progress this research, the theory of social tie (Granovetter, 1982, 1995) is supposed to be used as its framework. Generally, the social tie is divided into strong and weak ties. A strong tie means a sturdy relationship, such as that involving family or friends (people we frequently meet). Contrarily, a weak tie means a fragile relationship such as that involving business partners or colleagues (people we meet only on business). Subsequently, Granovetter (1982,1995) discussed the strength of weak ties, which has a critical impact on people making a decision, for example, regarding (changing) a job, problem-solving, or deciding one’s direction.

This research uses the fieldwork data collected in San Francisco, California in 2011 and data collected by the continuation survey.



Amendment by Horai (2020,p.211)

Figure 1: Social Ties Among Charter School Operation

Considering to the relationship between charter authorizer and operator in terms of A Charter School operation (see the Figure1), the vertical arrows a strong tie of direct involvement in school operation or management. In that case, state or school district allocates public fund for school operations. On the other hand, the horizontal arrows means weak tie. Although these weak ties would not affect whole school operation, it enriches and empower educational practices in not only vocational and career education but also other school practices.

Table 1. Data Overview

<p>1. A Charter School (Est.2003) in San Francisco</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of students : 337(almost Hispanic, female:43%, male:57%)</li> <li>• Number of teachers : 23</li> <li>• Grade: NA (18 years old to 25 years old who do not hold high school diploma)</li> </ul>
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• Interviewees: ①principal(53), male, ②a chief of employment division (44), male

2. School Missions:

- To change people’s lives through focusing Education, Employment, Social Justice, Housing, and Revitalization Communities.
- To obtain high school (or similar ) diploma/certification

Insight Prion Project (IPP) Missions:

- To working towards a future in which the tools of Restorative Justice are available to victims and incarcerated people so that we can all better address the problems of crime and violence.
- To bridge the gap between punishment and parole through transformation, allowing prisoners to break the cycle of incarceration. We are also dedicated to giving crime survivors a voice in this process.

From interview data in 2011 and Insight Prison Project Homepage

This school does not have grade level because the ages of prisoners vary widely. So, this school focuses on only 18-25 years-prisoners who do not hold high school diploma. First of all, the inmates in this prison have typically committed minor offenses such as theft and assault, and many of them are sentenced to serve around three to five years. Moreover, a significant portion of them has not even completed middle school, and their academic achievements are extremely low. The area they reside in often has poor safety and high crime rates. As a result, the local industries are also limited, and they are believed to be in an environment with a high potential for crisis. This charter school (described as “A charter school” in this paper) especially focuses on inmates who do not hold high school diploma, then tries to let them get diploma or applicable credentials to use after release from the prison and in addition A charter school assist with or facilitate job placement. In order to accomplish those aims, A charter school established two missions above.

In addition, Career education is practiced as part of IPP, with a variety of support services being provided. IPP is a program that offers support for education in prisons as a whole, encompassing not only career education but also volunteer activities, assistance to people with disabilities, and correctional education, among others.

Table 2. Percent of High School Diploma and Career Education Courses in IPP

	2010 school year N=337	2022 school year N=495
High school diploma	279 (83%)	435 (88%)
Housing/Furniture	138 (41%)	217 (44%)
Transportation	111 (33%)	148 (30%)
Computer Engineering	74 (22%)	188 (38%)
Agriculture	107 (32%)	108 (22%)
Business (office work)	57 (19%)	113 (23%)

From interview data in 2011 and continuation survey.  
\*many of “students” choose two courses.

It is evident that many students obtain a high school diploma. Additionally, with regards to IPP, students have the option to choose from the programs offered, and some students choose to participate in two programs. Over 80% of them acquire a high school diploma, and many also receive vocational training in fields such as Housing/Furniture such as (construction industry or gardener, housekeeping) and Transportation ( shipping, driving, and sorting of cargo ) A Charter School was established in 2003 through the efforts of parents and community members. in order to operate a charter school in prison, they needed a huge help or suggestion from California Charter School Association and State. California was one of the proactive states to open and operate charter schools. Their approach was a new practice even on a national level, and expectations were high. In terms of career education which is called Insight Prison Project, members of A charter school were expressing following.

Interviewee①

Insight Prison Project (IPP) offers unique and effective programs at seven California state prisons and one juvenile institution. Our core program is the 18-month long Victim/Offender Education Group (VOEG), which includes a curriculum that was designed by licensed mental health therapists in collaboration with survivors of violent crimes and people incarcerated for previously violent behavior (22th of August, 2011).

Interviewee②

IPP provides highly trained facilitators and creates a space with VOEG that allows victims and incarcerated people an opportunity to work together, which dramatically aids in the healing process for everyone involved, and enhances public safety by greatly reducing recidivism (22th of August, 2011).

As described above, IPP has been expanding within state and as other programs, A Charter School provide several career educational courses such as “Housing/ Furniture”, Transportation”, ” Computer Engineering”, ” Agriculture”. Including high school diploma, when “students” get released,

## **RESULTS ANS DISCUSSION**

### **Educational Outcomes as Charter School Approaches**

It is evident that many individuals obtain their high school diplomas after their release. In this school, which is predominantly attended by immigrants (especially Hispanic or Latino), holding a high school diploma is considered to hold relatively significant importance. Due to the unique nature of prison charter schools, the participation in statewide standardized tests, typically required, is not mandated, and because the students' ages vary significantly, it is difficult to make a straightforward comparison with the academic performance of their peers. In subjects like English and socialization, regular teachers employed by the school are responsible for daily educational activities. There is no requirement for correctional education or instruction in prison work, and they hold the status of regular public school teachers, with clear distinctions between the roles of teachers and correctional officers.

In this sense, teachers can spend a significant amount of time on the establishment of basic skills and enhancing education in various subjects, despite the prison environment. Such unique initiatives align with the expected roles in the charter school system and are considered challenging practices within the usual context of prison education.

In additions, described Table 2, “students” choose one or two fields to study. In general, students have the freedom to choose the fields they want to learn within each field, activities are planned and implemented in cooperation with external organizations to lead to vocational education. For example, in the case of 'Housing/Furniture,' training is provided at a furniture factory to prepare for employment after release, while in 'Agriculture,' students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills by working on a farm and learning on-site.

Regarding the core subjects and career education, the staff has made the following statement:

Interviewee②

Although the students are predominantly in their early twenties, their foundational skills are quite challenging. These young adults come from environments with very limited opportunities for study to begin with. Basic tasks like simple calculations and reading and writing take time. However, it is believed that being a charter school has a significant impact, allowing the teachers to focus on 'teaching,' which is a crucial aspect. (26th of August, 2011)

For vocational education, community collaboration is essential for its success. Particularly, the instructors are actual workers employed in each field. However, this school's practices have gained support from an increasing number of companies and organizations (=horizontal arrows in Figure 1), and there is no shortage of human and material resources. In some fields, students becoming more proactive in their learning is also a significant change when considering their lives and career (22th of August, 2011)

As interviewee ② mentioned, The efforts towards academic improvement are led by the teachers, and it is

evident that they are working to ensure a minimum level of foundational knowledge and skills. Additionally, in the realm of career education, there is a strong connection and collaboration with the local community, and

there is a clear understanding and support for the educational practices of this school. He also mentioned as following.

IPP requires a lot of understanding and cooperation to function effectively. It is likely quite challenging to rely solely on overnight support. Especially in recent years, there have been program changes and restrictions on the courses students can choose due to the impact of COVID-19. However, many graduates find employment in companies and factories where newly released individuals also work, and there seems to be a strong sense of connection among the students (email: 3rd of May, 2023)

One of the traits of charter school system is almost free from public entities about whole school operation or management, such as curriculum or personnel, fund raising. The expectation is to promote unique and autonomous practices that are different of traditional public schools. From that perspective, the strong collaboration with the local community in the practice of vocational education is highly commendable. When it comes to the education of core subjects, regular teachers are primarily responsible and are employed by the school. In this sense, it can be considered that the administrators and teachers are connected by a strong tie. However, in the context of career education practices, various external organizations and individuals from different fields take the lead. In this sense, career education practices can be seen as having a weak tie connection between the administrators and individuals responsible for different fields. Charter schools are known for their uniqueness in policy, and school-based fund raising is essential for better school management and the delivery of high-quality educational practices. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of introducing similar programs within the state, leading to an increase in the number of prison charter schools. A network of prison charter schools has been formed, allowing for the possibility of offering even more comprehensive and high-quality career education programs than before.

## CONCLUSION

Education within prisons differs significantly from conventional school education, given the unique circumstances and purposes involved. It is easy to imagine the challenges both as a school and as part of the community, dealing with individuals who have engaged in delinquent or criminal behavior. However, this school has a clear goal of obtaining a high school diploma upon release, while also providing education with the reintegration into the community in mind. Gaining the understanding of the local community while developing career education may not have been easy, but the fact that this school has been in operation for 20 years is an indication that it has achieved success. For the core subjects, specialized teachers handle each subject, while career education is carried out through collaboration with external stakeholders. This clear division of roles is considered a significant characteristic. Moreover, the spread of IPP practices within the state indicates the effectiveness of career education. Interviewee① assessed IPP as career education like below. However, challenges have also been pointed out regarding IPP.

Interviewee①

The evaluation of IPP is generally positive. We are also considering introducing more diverse programs in the future. However, there are several challenges that need to be overcome. One of them is the selection of institutions and workplaces that are receptive to career education. (email: 26th of May, 2023)

Those responsible for the training are not educators/teachers, and in some cases, there have been concerns raised about inappropriate instruction or discriminatory interactions. It's certainly not wrong for students to work and earn wages, which can be challenging, but we also found out that there is a certain number of students who have negative experiences (email: 26th of May, 2023)

These statements highlight the relationship between school education and vocational training. It is natural that not all those responsible for vocational training have received educational training. If there are plans to expand IPP in the future, careful consideration will be required. Similar programs are now offered in 25 counties prisons within the state of California. While there may be regional variations, it can be assumed that a variety of programs are being provided. To expand career education, weak ties are essential, and

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diversification of the network may be desirable. Moreover, It is beneficial for everyone who have received vocational training successfully to reintegrate into society. In that point, charter school education in prison

plays a crucial role for specific students, especially hard and at-risk students. Obtaining a high school diploma and entering a profession hold significant importance, both for the individual's career and for purposes like recidivism prevention. Charter schools have aimed to provide better education for students in challenging environments, fostering innovative practices distinct from traditional public schools. There is substantial research and data regarding their achievements, including academic performance and student satisfaction. However, it is also evident that charter schools contribute to education for students in the unique environment of prisons.

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