

April 9, 2025

To: House Committee on Corrections

Re: House Bill 1515

Position: ON

Honorable Chair Harless and Members of the House Corrections Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on HB 1515. I serve as a Texas Policy Analyst for Ed Trust in Texas. I am also a system-impacted woman who obtained my associate and bachelor's degree while serving 19 years flat in TDCJ. Higher education has profoundly impacted my life by equipping me with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to overcome challenges, broaden my perspectives, and pursue opportunities that were once beyond my reach. Most recently, I earned my master's degree in business from Texas Woman's University.

We very much appreciate that HB 1515 includes improved data-sharing to help monitor postsecondary programs within Texas Department of Criminal Justice. As the bill moves forward, we look forward to working with the author and committee to codify the transfer of administration and management of these programs to Windham School District through a Memorandum of Understanding with TDCJ in statute, rather than relying upon a budget rider to do so.

In 1999, when I first began taking college classes, Windham oversaw higher education in prisons. There was a college counselor on the unit, class schedules were designed to provide ample access and opportunities for students, and every classroom in the education building was utilized.

However, in 2011, administration of higher education programs shifted to TDCJ's Rehabilitation and Programs Division (or RPD). As postsecondary education was subsumed within a broader umbrella of programs — encompassing chaplaincy, recreation, and volunteer services — the once bustling halls became quiet, the college counselor went away, and classes dwindled to just one per week, marking a stark decline in educational offerings and access. As time went on, of the 644 ladies assigned to my unit, the number taking classes fell to single digits. While I persisted with my studies, it took me years longer to earn my credentials due to limited or repeated course offerings.

What I witnessed firsthand is supported by the data. Since the transfer of administration from Windham to TDCJ in 2011, postsecondary enrollment and credential completion has declined by nearly 50%.¹ The Sunset Staff report consistently found that RPD lacked the dedicated resources, and that Windham is “well-suited to offer postsecondary education instead of TDCJ.”²

As cited in the Sunset report, individuals who participate in higher education while incarcerated are 43% less likely to reoffend and have a 13% higher likelihood of obtaining employment upon release than non-

¹ Texas 2036, Opening Doors: The State of Higher Education in Texas Prisons, Nov. 2024: https://texas2036.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Opening-Doors-Higher-Education-in-Texas-Prisons_11-13-24-FINAL.pdf

² Sunset Advisory Commission: Staff Report With Commission Decisions, 2024-25: <https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/2025-01/Criminal%20Justice%20Entities%20Staff%20Report%20with%20Commission%20Decisions.pdf>

participants.³ Postsecondary education and training programs have also been shown to enhance prison culture, creating safer and more stable environments for both residents and staff.⁴

Given their demonstrated impact, these postsecondary programs are simply too valuable to be governed solely by a budget rider that allows oversight to flip-flop between state entities. Establishing this administrative agreement between TDCJ and Windham in statute will secure the future of postsecondary education in our correctional system, transform the lives of incarcerated Texans, strengthen our workforce, and benefit local communities across our state for years to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 1515, and I look forward to continued partnership as the bill advances.

Sincerely,

Alexa Garza
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EdTrust in Texas



³ Ibid.

⁴ Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, The Effects of Postsecondary Correctional Education: Final Report, May 2009:
<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/30626/411954-The-Effects-of-Postsecondary-Correctional-Education.PDF>

