

A Second Chance at Learning: Education at the Montana State Prison

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Montana State Prison: The name elicits uncertainty, hesitation, and ambiguity. MSP: A new acronym was learned, as I toured the facility for the first time in May 2013. As a seasoned literacy educator, I often pondered what it would be like to teach at a prison. Then, at the October 2012 Montana State Reading Conference, one of my former students walked up to me and said, “Professor Rhea, remember me? Tasha. I was one of your students who enrolled in children’s literature. I am now teaching at the Montana State Prison.” After a big hug and basic conversation, Tasha invited me to visit her and her *convict* students at the prison.

October portends winter, and a 2-hour drive on Interstate 90 from Missoula to Deer Lodge would have to wait until spring 2013. Tasha and I communicated via email and set the date for May 7. Soon, the time arrived. I reviewed Tasha’s messages concerning prison protocol:

1. Send the following personal information to the prison 2-weeks before visiting:
 - Full Name
 - Birthdate
 - Social Security Number
 - Address

(Background checks are required for all visitors.)

2. Some important rules to follow:

- Dress for the weather, but no low cut shirts, shorts, open-toed shoes, or tank tops;
- Don't bring anything inside the compound except your car keys, identification, and sunglasses, if necessary;
- Hats are permitted;
- Logos on clothing are not permitted;
- Comfortable walking shoes are recommended;
- No dangle jewelry is permitted.

3. Directions: From Missoula take the first Deer Lodge Exit and go straight to the light.

Turn right at the light. Keep on that road for a couple of miles. Drive over the hill and see the landscaping that spells "Montana State Prison" on a hill. Pull up to check point. The guard provides directions to the parking lot.

Tasha concluded her final message by writing, "You will be surprised at how gorgeous it is up here! Have a great day!"

[insert photo 594 here]

The drive to the prison was gorgeous. I followed the directions, cleared the check point, and parked in the outsized cement lot surrounded by double fencing with curled barb wire on top. I entered the large concrete complex and introduced myself to the guard. As Tasha had an unexpected emergency, Tina, another teacher who has taught at the prison for 9 years, served as my guide. The tour began.

[insert photos 138 and 729 here]

The prison compound is huge and encompasses more than 40,000 acres. There are approximately 700 employees and 1200 inmates. Adult male offenders are classified to one of six custody levels (Max, Close, Medium I, Medium II, Minimum I and Minimum II). The physical plant consists of three compounds, Max, High Side, and Low Side, which are contained within a 68 acre double fenced perimeter. Outside the fenced perimeter is a 192-bed Work and Reentry Center, which houses minimum-custody inmates that work on a 35,000-acre ranch and dairy program operated by Montana Correctional Enterprises. We toured the Vocational Complex and the Educational Center. Tina included visits to the High Side and Low Side compounds where the inmates live. These ranged from dark cells where 1-2 men lived to the Low Side that looked like dorm rooms on a modest college campus.

The Vocational Complex was impressive. Classes and employment are offered in agriculture, industries (furniture, print and sign, upholstery, sewing, marketing, CAD design, license plate factory), vocational educational, food factory, bakery, canteen, business development, and accounting. Offenders apply for classes and, if accepted, are paid starting a \$1.26 per day. Employment salaries range from \$.30 to \$.90 per hour.

Education focuses on passing the General Educational Development (GED) test. Teachers instruct two 90-minute classes per day and emphasize reading, language, and math. Life skills are also taught. The maximum class size is 10. Currently, 62 students are enrolled, and 30 inmates are on the waiting list. Only inmates from the Low Side are eligible to apply for the educational program.

Teachers must be certified. They have a 12-month contract and earn approximately \$35,000 annually. They are members of the Montana Teachers' Retirement System.

Tina likes her job. She wrote the following:

The education department at the Montana State Prison is a unique place to teach. The youngest student I ever had, thus far, was a 16 year old. He was a typical teenager with a typical attitude and view of the world. The eldest was 68 and was told by his case manager he had to go to school and complained the whole time. "I went this long without a GED; I can die without one." Most of the students are 30 to 40 years old and have volunteered for school. They are ready for a change, and one place they are starting is school. The main subjects are math, language, and reading.

MSP has 5 classrooms and 8 teachers in the department. One is the General Educational Development (GED) coordinator and administers the GED at the site, one teaches life skills, and the rest teach GED classes. The reading levels of the students range from non-readers to 12th grade level equivalency. Some students just need to refresh their skills before taking the GED tests. The classes are kept small by design for security, as well as for instructional considerations.

Each teacher has her unique way on how the class is run, which is true anywhere. One teacher works only with non-readers; therefore, the material in her room is very different from the others. She is also stricter with her students, but this helps them focus and is better than a more laid back approach.

The students are tested with the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) test before they enter school. The results assist in teacher assignment. As stated above, there is a class for low

level students. The middle to advanced students are split up amongst the other teachers. The student and the teacher decide which subject to focus on first and which GED tests to strive for.

My day at the Montana State Prison was informative and overwhelming. I learned that inmates do more than make license plates. Furthermore, Tina is another example of Montana's amazing educators. I applaud her and the dedicated teachers who strive to make a difference in their students' lives, no matter who they are.





