

Forum hears of problems with gaol education privatisation

October 02, 2018

A public forum on prison education has examined the effects of privatisation on the provision of education in NSW gaols and to evaluate the quality of that education.

The Community Justice Coalition has campaigned for many years for improvements in education opportunities for prisoners and organised the forum, held on 26 September.

Forum coordinators, former federal attorney-



general and NSW Supreme Court Justice John Dowd and former Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia Elizabeth Evatt, and the audience, heard from speakers who agreed about the important role education plays in reducing recidivism.

NSW Minister for Corrections David Elliott was unable to attend, but was represented by Assistant Commissioner, Offender Management and Programs Dr Anne-Marie Martin, who spoke to the forum about the prison education reforms implemented in 2017.

A keynote speaker, Federation Post Schools Deputy Secretary Maxine Sharkey outlined the many problems the Department of Corrective Services had introducing the privatisation model.

These included delays to the tender process after 138 teaching and education positions were deleted in December 2016. The private company did not begin delivery of Language Literacy and Numeracy classes until August 2017.

Other speakers included NSW Labor MP and shadow minister for corrections Guy Zangari, Engagement Leader at the University of Southern Queensland Stephen Seymour, Mr Shoebridge, who is the Greens justice spokesperson, and Dr Jedidiah Evans from the Australian Catholic University.

A number of speakers highlighted that the private training does not employ any tertiary-qualified teachers and only uses trainers with a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, the minimum qualification required to deliver VET courses.

Before the privatisation, art and music teachers provided education that was not only therapeutic but also provided a gateway to general education.

The privatisation reforms deleted those art and music teaching positions and the focus now is Language Literacy and Numeracy programs. Mr Zangari and Mr Shoebridge both criticised this narrow Language Literacy and Numeracy focus as not broad enough to engage all prisoners.

Federation will continue to campaign to reinstate highly qualified teachers, education officers and senior education

officers. The union is critical of the privatisation model of education in NSW prisons and profit-oriented considerations that drive private decision-making.

The forum was held at NSW Parliament House, sponsored by Greens MLC David Shoebridge.

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