

# San Quentin adult school named 1st 'Distinguished School' in state corrections

**Robert E. Burton Adult School wins out over 12 other schools at state prisons**

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For a correctional facility, San Quentin State Prison singularly — and some would say famously — sits on the bay with a view of Mt. Tam, houses the state's only condemned population and is California's oldest prison, established in 1852. It's also unique in another way.

As of this month, the adult school at San Quentin was named the state correctional system's first "Distinguished School." The Robert E. Burton Adult School at San Quentin was chosen for the award out of 12 prison adult schools that entered the competition.

"We're really proud of our education department," San Quentin Warden Ron Davis said Thursday during a tour of the school and an award ceremony. "It shows the rehabilitation culture of San Quentin. Everybody understands the importance of rehabilitation."

The state has 35 prisons in the system, all of which have their own adult schools that are each at various levels of development. Some of the keys to the San Quentin school's success, officials said, are a dual track for both academic learning and vocational training and a collaborative teacher team model where each student's progress and education needs are identified and discussed by a group of teachers embedded in that specific program.

"It's a partnership with lots of players," school Principal Michael Wheeless said. "We're fortunate to have a lot of education volunteers and resources — it's hard to replicate." Of the current population of 4,320 incarcerated men, 1,180 are enrolled in some level of academic education or training. Of those, 379 are currently in college programs, including 30 condemned men.

All inmates are required to complete at least their high school education. Beyond that, they may take college classes via distance learning, leading to an associate's degree, or work toward certificates in machine shop, electronics, building maintenance, plumbing or computer literacy.

The prison offers incentives of up to six months off of their sentences for successfully completing various programs. If they choose not to go on with education past high school, they are sent back to their regular prison work detail, such as in the kitchen, in the laundry or on maintenance.

"Education is power," said Edwin "Zakee" Hutchinson, who has been at San Quentin since March 2009. "The more you know, the more you're expected to do better." Hutchinson, 59, of Los Angeles, successfully lobbied to be transferred to San Quentin because of its college degree program, he said. In 2016, he received his associate's degree in liberal arts through Patten University at San Quentin, part of the Prison University Project. He will be eligible to apply to a University of California campus or other four-year colleges when he is released. His "initial suitability" parole board hearing is in December.

"I want to get a bachelor's degree in sociology," Hutchinson said Thursday. "I'm a political and social activist. I want to work as a court-appointed juvenile advocate for at-risk youth so that I can help young people stay out of places like this."

Diane Searle, who teaches the high school equivalency, or G.E.D. program, at San Quentin, said education is the key for many men to build a new life once they are released — and so avoid returning to prison. Searle, a Marin resident, said she has worked at San Quentin for 12 years and has had 30 years education experience.

“I have taught at private schools, charter schools and public schools — and at the college level,” said Searle, who was the lead teacher in developing San Quentin’s collaborative team model — also known as a professional learning community. “I really feel that this has been the most rewarding experience.

“It’s an overlooked population group. I have a real passion to see how they can have a positive impact in their communities (when they go home), rather than be discarded or overlooked,” she added.

Of the “Distinguished School” award, Searle said: “The passion for education is contagious. The bar has been raised.”

Shannon Swain, superintendent of the state’s Office of Correctional Education, said the “Distinguished School” program, which is judged by a set of 10 rigorous criteria, is a way to continue to strive for excellence.

“It is our hope that the time they (incarcerated people) spend in our institutions can truly be transformative for them,” she said.

Trevor Bird, an inmate who has gone through multiple levels of training in the San Quentin machine shop over the last four years, now assists other men to become teaching assistants in the program. In 2016, he helped prison staff and contractors remodel the shop so it is now at a professional technical level where students can replicate machine parts at top quality. The shop has been assisting locally at various public agencies that may need emergency parts, according to Bird.

“I’m the question guy. I was the first guy to go through all the curriculum,” he said. “And now I’m helping other guys.”