

## Illiteracy and Mental Disorders in Texas Prisons: A Policy Framework for Accountability and Recidivism Reduction

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### Abstract

Illiteracy and untreated mental disorders represent persistent and interrelated challenges within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), undermining rehabilitation efforts and increasing recidivism risk. National estimates indicate that a substantial proportion of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level, and emerging Texas-based research suggests high rates of dyslexia and undiagnosed mental health conditions among justice-involved populations. These deficits impede meaningful participation in correctional education, vocational training, and therapeutic programming, thereby weakening reintegration outcomes and straining public resources. This policy analysis evaluates two reform pathways: a legislative mandate model requiring enforceable reporting and funding provisions, and an administrative oversight model grounded in judicial compliance and institutional accountability. The findings suggest that a dual-track strategy, immediate administrative implementation reinforced by subsequent legislative codification, offers the most effective and sustainable approach. By institutionalizing systematic screening, transparent reporting, and measurable performance indicators, Texas can strengthen constitutional compliance, reduce recidivism, enhance workforce participation, and promote long-term public safety.

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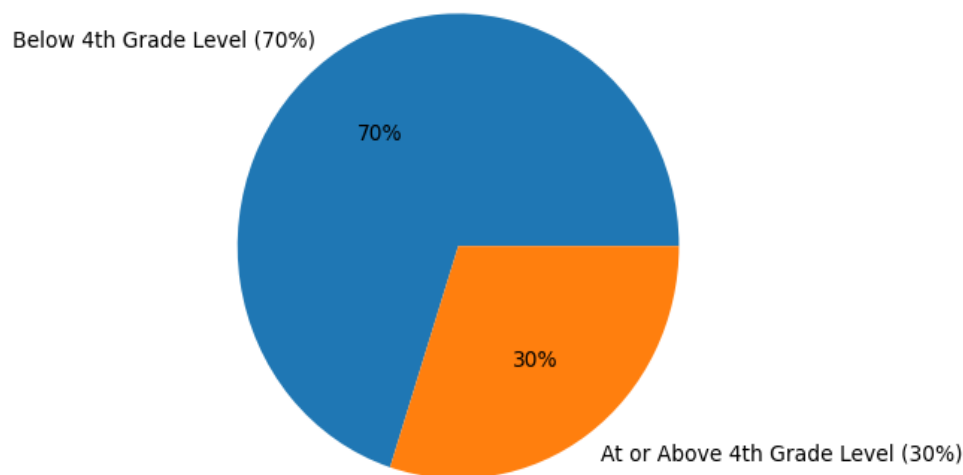
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### 1. Introduction

This policy brief addresses the crisis of illiteracy and undiagnosed mental disorders among incarcerated individuals within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Illiteracy, dyslexia, and undiagnosed mental disorders severely hinder the rehabilitation of past behaviors and impede successful reintegration into society. A focus on legislative and judicial measures used is derived from statutory mandates, legislative materials, and reports from the Windham School District and policy advocacy organizations, demonstrating a clear, redressable, underserved need within the Texas state criminal justice system, which aims to improve the quality of life for all Texans (Daramola & Osho, 2017). The intersection of illiteracy and untreated mental disorders within the Texas correctional system presents a profound public policy challenge, one that directly implicates public safety, constitutional rights, fiscal responsibility, and human dignity. Although incarceration is intended to serve punitive and rehabilitative functions, the presence of widespread literacy deficiencies and undiagnosed cognitive and psychological disorders undermines the rehabilitative mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). The TDCJ formally articulates its mission as providing public safety, promoting can inform systemic reforms within Texas prisons and increase employment throughout the State of Texas.

The data positive behavioral change, and facilitating reintegration into society (Texas Government Code § 493.003, 2025). Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of

incarcerated adults reading below a fourth-grade level, highlighting the structural relationship between low literacy and incarceration (Adams *et al.*, 2022).



**Fig 1:** Literacy Deficits Among Incarcerated Adults in the United States

However, these objectives become structurally unattainable when a significant proportion of incarcerated individuals lack the foundational literacy skills necessary to participate meaningfully in educational programming, vocational training, or mental health treatment. Research consistently demonstrates that low literacy and incarceration are closely intertwined. National estimates indicate that approximately 70% of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level (Literacy Mid-South, 2016) [22]. Within Texas, recent analyses suggest that literacy struggles are even more pronounced, with substantial evidence that many incarcerated individuals exhibit characteristics consistent with dyslexia and related learning disorders (Adams & Pitre, 2024; Moore & Osho, 2017) [1, 23]. Dyslexia, often misunderstood as merely a reading delay, is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects phonological processing and decoding abilities. When left unidentified and untreated, particularly during formative educational years, it significantly increases the likelihood of academic failure, school disengagement, and eventual contact with the criminal justice system. For many individuals, incarceration represents not the beginning of systemic failure but the culmination of years of unaddressed educational and psychological needs (Osho *et al.*, 2016) [30].

The problem is compounded by the prevalence of untreated or inadequately diagnosed mental health disorders. Advocacy organizations have documented constitutional concerns arising from the denial or delay of appropriate mental health services in correctional settings (Disability Rights Texas, 2024) [14]. Courts have long recognized that incarcerated individuals retain certain constitutional protections, including meaningful access to legal and educational resources (Johnson v. Avery, 1966) [19]. When literacy deficits and mental disorders coexist, they create layered barriers that hinder individuals' ability to access rehabilitative programs, understand institutional rules, comply with treatment plans, or prepare for successful reentry. The resulting cycle perpetuates institutional dependency and increases the probability of recidivism.

From a fiscal standpoint, the failure to address literacy and mental health within prisons carries high costs. Texas

allocates substantial resources to public safety and corrections (Texas Legislative Budget Board, n.d.) [36], yet evidence suggests that investments in correctional education yield measurable returns. Texas 2036 (2024) reports that participation in educational programming during incarceration can reduce recidivism rates by as much as 43% (Texas 2036, 2024) [35]. These reductions translate into long-term savings in incarceration costs, court expenditures, and social service burdens (Daramola & Osho, 2017) [11]. Thus, literacy instruction and mental health screening are not ancillary services; they are evidence-based public safety interventions (Amadi & Osho, 2025) [6].

Despite this evidence, systemic accountability gaps remain. The Windham School District, which provides educational services within TDCJ facilities, plays a central role in literacy remediation. However, reporting limitations and insufficient transparency in educational outcome data complicate efforts to evaluate program effectiveness (Windham School District, 2023) [45]. Reliable baseline measurements of literacy levels, completion rates, and diagnostic screening outcomes are essential to crafting targeted reforms. Without consistent screening protocols and public reporting standards, policymakers lack the data necessary to assess whether constitutional and statutory mandates are being fulfilled (Uwakonye *et al.*, 2020) [43].

Public opinion within Texas further underscores the urgency of reform. Survey findings indicate strong voter support for dyslexia screening and educational investment, including within justice-involved populations (Barbara Jordan Public Policy Research and Survey Center & TSU, 2025) [9]. This alignment between empirical evidence and constituent preference presents a unique policy opportunity. Texans recognize that public safety is enhanced not solely through incarceration but through effective rehabilitation that reduces repeat offenses and strengthens workforce participation (Espinosa *et al.*, 2008) [15].

The broader socioeconomic implications also warrant attention. Illiteracy functions as a structural barrier to employment, stable housing, and civic participation. Upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals must navigate complex legal documents, employment applications, housing

agreements, and healthcare forms, tasks that presuppose basic literacy (Ojumu *et al.*, 2025; Ononugbo *et al.*, 2010) <sup>[26, 24]</sup>. When reading skills remain at or below elementary levels, these bureaucratic processes become insurmountable obstacles. The inability to secure lawful employment or stable housing increases vulnerability to recidivism, perpetuating a costly cycle that affects families, communities, and state institutions alike (Osho & Daramola, 2011; Adams *et al.*, 2008) <sup>[27, 4]</sup>.

Moreover, the convergence of literacy deficits and mental illness disproportionately affects marginalized communities, reinforcing long-standing educational inequities. Adams and Pitre (2024) <sup>[1]</sup> note that systemic disparities in early identification of learning disabilities contribute to unequal educational outcomes. By the time individuals enter the correctional system, these inequities have crystallized into measurable skill gaps. Addressing literacy and mental health in correctional settings, therefore, represents both a remedial and preventative strategy, one capable of mitigating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. This policy brief situates literacy and mental health reform within the broader constitutional and administrative framework governing Texas corrections. Rather than viewing education as a peripheral prison service, this analysis treats it as a central mechanism through which the TDCJ can fulfill its statutory mandate. Effective screening for dyslexia and mental disorders, transparent reporting mechanisms, and structured oversight are not merely programmatic enhancements; they are foundational to achieving behavioral change and reducing recidivism (Osho & Ebalunode, 2019) <sup>[34]</sup>.

Thus, the crisis of illiteracy and untreated mental disorders in Texas prisons is neither incidental nor isolated. It is systemic, measurable, and redressable. The evidence demonstrates that literacy improvement and mental health treatment are among the most powerful tools available to reduce recidivism and enhance public safety. The policy question is no longer whether these interventions matter, but how Texas can implement durable, accountable, and constitutionally sound mechanisms to ensure that every incarcerated individual receives the screening, instruction, and treatment necessary to reenter society as a productive and capable citizen (Arungwa & Osho, 2012) <sup>[7]</sup>.

## 2. Problem

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) is charged with protecting the public, promoting positive behavioral change among incarcerated individuals, and supporting successful reintegration into society (Texas Government Code § 493.003, 2025) <sup>[38]</sup>. However, a structural contradiction exists within the system: a significant proportion of incarcerated individuals lack the basic literacy skills and mental health support necessary to benefit from rehabilitative programming. When individuals cannot read at a functional level or suffer from undiagnosed learning and psychological disorders, the rehabilitative mission of the correctional system becomes aspirational rather than operational (Osho & Grant, 2011) <sup>[28]</sup>.

Low literacy is not a marginal issue within correctional institutions; it is pervasive. Nationally, an estimated 70% of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level (Literacy Mid-South, 2016) <sup>[22]</sup>. Evidence specific to Texas suggests that literacy deficits may be even more severe, with a substantial share of incarcerated individuals exhibiting

characteristics consistent with dyslexia and related learning disorders (Adams & Pitre, 2024) <sup>[1]</sup>. Dyslexia is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects reading fluency and comprehension, and when it goes undiagnosed in childhood, it often leads to long-term academic disengagement. Many individuals who enter the correctional system have experienced repeated educational failure, disciplinary exclusion, or early withdrawal from school, outcomes often linked to unaddressed learning differences (Adams *et al.*, 2022).

Compounding this challenge is the prevalence of untreated or inadequately managed mental health disorders within correctional facilities. Advocacy reports and legal scrutiny have highlighted deficiencies in mental health screening and service delivery in Texas institutions (Disability Rights Texas, 2024) <sup>[14]</sup>. Individuals struggling with depression, anxiety disorders, trauma-related conditions, or cognitive impairments face additional barriers in accessing educational programming and complying with institutional requirements. Courts have long recognized that incarcerated individuals retain certain constitutional protections, including meaningful access to resources that affect their legal and rehabilitative opportunities (Johnson v. Avery, 1966) <sup>[19]</sup>. When literacy limitations and mental illness intersect, individuals are effectively prevented from exercising those protections.

Gaps in reporting and accountability mechanisms further intensify the problem. The Windham School District, which administers educational services within TDCJ facilities, plays a central role in literacy remediation. However, public reporting on literacy baselines, screening rates, and measurable progress has been limited (Windham School District, 2023) <sup>[45]</sup>. Without consistent screening for dyslexia and mental disorders and transparent reporting of outcomes, policymakers cannot accurately assess whether correctional education efforts are meeting constitutional and statutory obligations. The absence of standardized oversight creates an environment in which literacy deficits remain underdiagnosed and under-addressed (Knox *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>. The consequences of this systemic failure extend beyond prison walls. Research indicates that participation in correctional education programs can significantly reduce recidivism (Texas 2036, 2024) <sup>[35]</sup>. Conversely, when literacy and mental health needs are neglected, individuals are released without the foundational skills required to secure employment, navigate housing applications, understand employment contracts, or comply with probation requirements. Illiteracy transforms routine bureaucratic tasks into insurmountable obstacles. In such conditions, recidivism becomes not simply a matter of personal choice, but a predictable outcome of institutional neglect. Moreover, this issue carries substantial fiscal implications. Texas invests billions annually in public safety and corrections (Texas Legislative Budget Board, n.d.) <sup>[36]</sup>. Failing to remediate literacy and mental health deficiencies during incarceration increases the likelihood of repeat incarceration, thereby perpetuating avoidable costs to taxpayers. Preventive intervention through screening, targeted instruction, and treatment offers a more cost-effective strategy than repeated confinement (Knox *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>.

Ultimately, the central problem is not merely that illiteracy and mental disorders exist within Texas prisons; it is that systemic processes to identify, monitor, and address these

conditions remain inconsistent and insufficient. Without mandatory screening, transparent reporting, and structured oversight, the correctional system cannot reliably fulfill its mission of promoting behavioral change and ensuring safer communities. The persistence of widespread literacy deficits and untreated mental illness within TDCJ facilities represents a correctable policy failure, one that demands immediate and coordinated administrative action grounded in constitutional principles and empirical evidence (Uwakonye *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[43]</sup>.

Sociocultural gaps exist between the literate and illiterate, and the mentally competent and incompetent. Presently, in the state of Texas, 80% of Texas prison inmates who struggled with literacy skills were likely dyslexic. (Adams & Pitre, 2024; Osho & Hyde, 2013) <sup>[1, 32]</sup>. The Windham School District, which operates the prison's educational services, failed to provide precise dataset references for the number of students served, the literacy levels completed, and the diplomas earned in its June 2023 Self-Evaluation Report. (Windham, 2023) <sup>[45]</sup>. Due to failures in reporting and adequate screening, statistics reflect an underserved population with an unmet right to proper special education. Presently, no mandated systemic processes exist. An intervention is necessary because current institutional actions have failed to improve literacy, thereby failing to bridge the sociocultural gap and facilitate reintegration into society.

**3. Policy Options**

**3.1. Policy Option 1 is a legislative approach that requires new mandates and ensures accountability for noncompliance**

This rationale provides ramifications for the inability to report results. Ramifications may include fines or further increases in stricter mandates. This option includes reviving legislation similar to the failed H.B. 786 (88th Leg., 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>, which would have required the Windham School District to identify and report to the Governor and the Legislature all incarcerated youth under 22 with dyslexia or illiteracy. (Tex. H.B. 786, 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>. The failure of H.B. 786 proves that relying on the legislative process to secure basic screening and reporting requirements for an underserved population is highly susceptible to political failure. The high rates of illiteracy and mental disorders demand immediate, guaranteed action.

**3.2. Policy Option 2 implements administrative oversight and judicial compliance**

This option bypasses the unpredictability of the legislative process by establishing an Administrative Oversight Committee within the Windham School District and the TDCJ, while also mandating adherence to existing judicial precedents and fostering partnerships with advocacy organizations.

The rationale for Policy Option 2 is to secure constitutional

remedies that are more reliable than those achieved through the legislative process.

**4. Analysis**

Addressing the intersecting challenges of illiteracy and untreated mental disorders within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) requires policy solutions that are both immediate and sustainable. The evidence indicates that literacy deficits and mental health conditions significantly hinder rehabilitation and increase recidivism risk (Literacy Mid-South, 2016; Texas 2036, 2024) <sup>[22, 35]</sup>. However, institutional reform in a correctional setting must navigate constitutional constraints, fiscal realities, and political feasibility. Two principal policy pathways emerge: a legislative mandate approach and an administrative-judicial oversight approach. Each offers distinct strengths and limitations.

**4.1. Policy Option 1: Legislative Mandate with Enforceable Reporting Requirements**

The first option relies on statutory reform through the Texas Legislature. This approach would revive and strengthen proposals similar to H.B. 786 (88th Leg., 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>, which would require the Windham School District and TDCJ to conduct mandatory dyslexia and mental health screenings, publish standardized literacy outcome data, and allocate dedicated funding streams. Legislative mandates would codify obligations, create enforceable reporting deadlines, and establish consequences for noncompliance. Under this model, the Legislature would amend the Texas Government Code to require systematic intake screening for literacy disabilities and mental health disorders, quarterly performance reporting, and public transparency measures. Dedicated appropriations would accompany the mandate to prevent unfunded implementation gaps, which have historically undermined educational reforms (Adams, 2025). Enforcement provisions could include fiscal penalties or corrective action directives if agencies fail to comply with statutory requirements.

The principal strength of this option lies in its permanence. Once enacted, statutory requirements are less susceptible to administrative turnover. Legislative codification also signals a strong institutional commitment and can stabilize long-term funding. However, legislative reform is inherently subject to political negotiation and delay. The failure of prior bills addressing dyslexia screening demonstrates the vulnerability of this pathway to partisan gridlock (H.B. 786, 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>. In the context of urgent constitutional concerns related to mental health access (Disability Rights Texas, 2024) <sup>[14]</sup>, delay may prolong systemic deficiencies. Table 1 assesses the legislative reform model across key dimensions, including legal authority, implementation speed, funding stability, enforcement strength, and the risk of delay (Knox, Adams, & Osho, 2017) <sup>[21]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Evaluation Framework for Legislative Mandate Approach (Policy Option 1)

Evaluation Criterion	Assessment of Policy Option 1
Legal Authority	High (statutory codification)
Speed of Implementation	Moderate to Low
Political Feasibility	Variable
Funding Stability	High if appropriate
Enforcement Strength	High if penalties are included
Risk of Delay	Significant

Figure 3 presents the phased timeline for legislative action, including drafting, passage, rulemaking, and implementation. The extended timeline is typically associated with legislative

reform, reflecting drafting cycles, committee review, floor votes, rulemaking, and phased compliance.

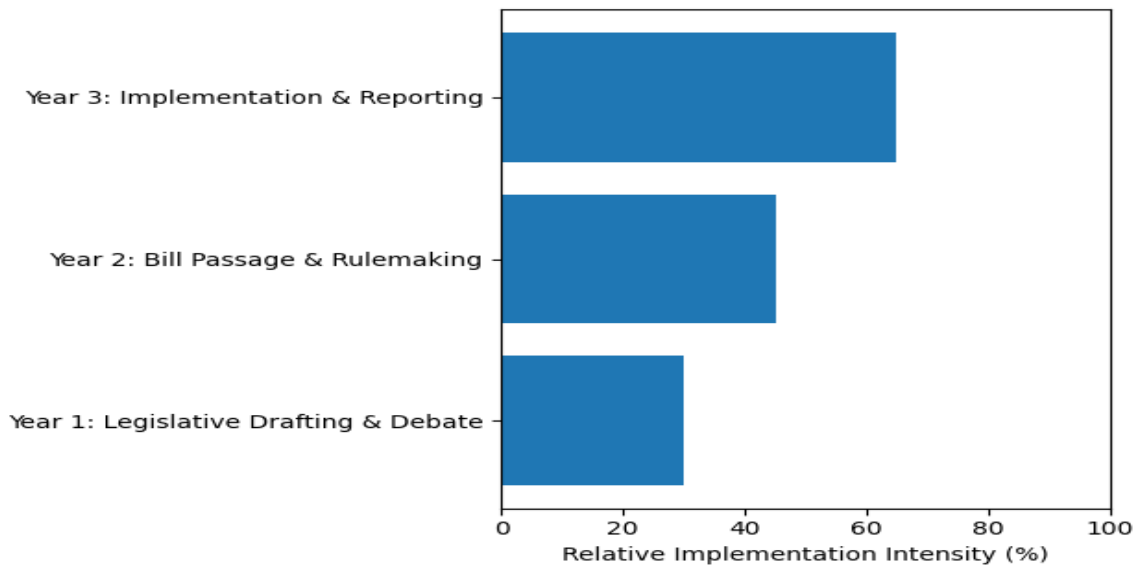


Fig 2: Projected Legislative Implementation Timeline for Correctional Education Reform

**4.2. Policy Option 2: Administrative Oversight with Judicial Compliance**

The second option emphasizes immediate administrative action supported by existing legal authority and judicial precedent. This pathway establishes an Administrative Oversight Committee within the TDCJ and the Windham School District to coordinate screening, instruction, access to treatment, data reporting, and monitoring of constitutional compliance.

Unlike the legislative model, administrative oversight can be implemented under existing statutory authority governing correctional management (Texas Government Code § 493.003, 2025) [38]. The committee would standardize dyslexia screening protocols, require baseline literacy assessments, mandate mental health evaluations, and publish performance metrics. Partnerships with advocacy organizations would

provide external accountability and ensure adherence to constitutional standards recognized by courts, including access to meaningful rehabilitative resources (Johnson v. Avery, 1966; Scott & Osho, 2015) [19, 39]. This option prioritizes immediacy. Administrative directives can be issued within months rather than years. Given the documented prevalence of literacy deficits and mental disorders among incarcerated populations (Adams & Pitre, 2024; Literacy Mid-South, 2016) [1, 22], speed is a critical variable. However, administrative frameworks are potentially vulnerable to leadership changes and budgetary constraints unless later reinforced through legislative action. Table 2 compares the administrative oversight model across implementation speed, legal

authority, political feasibility, enforcement capacity, and funding reliability (Osho *et al.*, 2006) [33].

Table 2: Evaluation Framework for Administrative Oversight Approach (Policy Option 2)

Evaluation Criterion	Assessment of Policy Option 2
Legal Authority	Moderate to High
Speed of Implementation	High
Political Feasibility	Relatively Stable
Funding Stability	Dependent on Appropriation
Enforcement Strength	Moderate (internal oversight)
Risk of Delay	Minimal

Table 3 outlines the structured timeline for reform, detailing sequential phases from committee formation through evaluation and policy adjustment.

**Table 3: Phased Implementation Plan for Administrative Oversight and Legislative Integration**

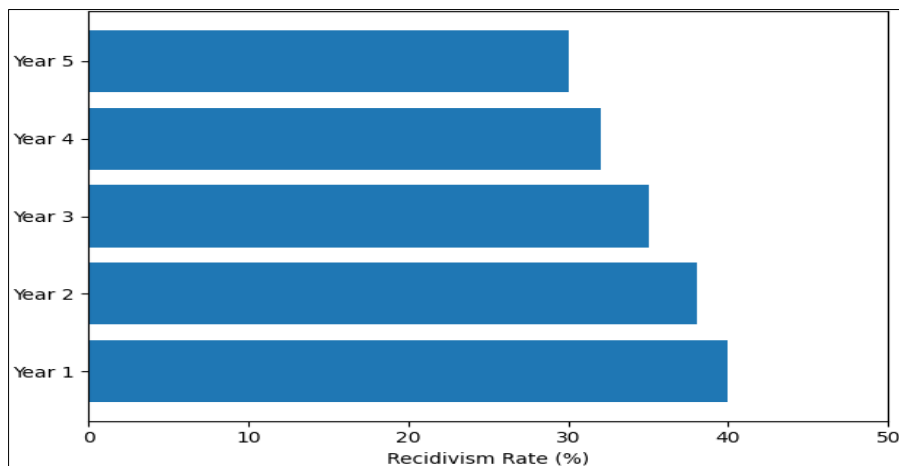
Phase	Timeframe	Key Actions
Phase 1: Immediate Action	0–3 months	Establish an Administrative Oversight Committee within TDCJ and the Windham School District. Identify committee members and define roles and responsibilities. Begin formal partnerships with advocacy organizations, including Disability Rights Texas. Implement mandatory screening protocols for dyslexia and mental disorders. Develop reporting procedures aligned with judicial mandates.
Phase 2: Screening & Reporting	3–6 months	Implement standardized screening across facilities. Accumulate baseline data on literacy levels and mental health status. Formalize reporting mechanisms to ensure transparency and compliance.
Phase 3: Legislative Integration	6–12 months	Revive legislative efforts similar to H.B. 786 to mandate reporting requirements and secure funding allocations. Introduce accountability measures, including fines or stricter compliance mandates for non-adherence.
Phase 4: Program Rollout	12–18 months	Launch targeted literacy intervention programs and structured mental health treatment initiatives. Begin systematic monitoring of performance outcomes, including grade-level literacy improvements and mental health treatment compliance rates.
Phase 5: Evaluation & Adjustment	18–24 months	Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of program effectiveness using data-driven performance indicators. Publish an annual report to the Governor and Legislature. Adjust policies and funding allocations based on empirical findings and implementation feedback.

This visual demonstrates the comparatively accelerated timeline of administrative reform.

**4.3. Comparative Outcome Projections**

Both policy options aim to improve literacy outcomes and reduce recidivism. Research indicates that participation in

correctional education reduces reoffense rates significantly (Texas 2036, 2024) [35]. The effectiveness of either option depends on implementation fidelity and resource allocation. Also, Figure 3 models the projected decline in recidivism rates over five years under structured literacy remediation and mental health programming.



**Fig 3: Hypothetical Five-Year Reduction in Recidivism Following Literacy and Mental Health Intervention**

The downward trajectory illustrates potential recidivism reductions under structured literacy and mental health intervention. While precise outcomes depend on empirical implementation, existing evidence supports the expectation of a measurable decline (Texas 2036, 2024) [35].

**4.4. Structural Considerations**

The legislative option provides durability and funding security but carries substantial political risk and slower deployment (Uwakonye *et al.*, 2022) [42]. The administrative option provides rapid execution and immediate alignment with compliance requirements, but may require subsequent statutory reinforcement to ensure permanence. From a

constitutional perspective, both approaches must ensure access to educational and mental health resources sufficient to satisfy judicial scrutiny (Johnson v. Avery, 1966; Disability Rights Texas, 2024) [19, 14]. Fiscal analysis further distinguishes the options. The legislative route requires upfront appropriations, while the administrative route may initially reallocate existing resources. However, both approaches should incorporate performance-based metrics to evaluate the cost savings resulting from reduced recidivism and improved workforce integration. This table synthesizes both policy pathways, contrasting their relative strengths in speed, durability, flexibility, constitutional safeguard capacity, and budget predictability.

**Table 4: Comparative Institutional Analysis of Legislative Mandate and Administrative Oversight Models**

Dimension	Legislative Mandate	Administrative Oversight
Speed	Slower	Faster
Durability	High	Moderate
Flexibility	Moderate	High
Political Exposure	High	Lower
Constitutional Safeguard	Strong	Strong
Budget Predictability	High (if funded)	Variable

The policy decision confronting Texas is not whether literacy and mental health reform are necessary; the evidence makes that clear (Adams & Pitre, 2024; Literacy Mid-South, 2016) <sup>[1, 22]</sup>. The decision concerns institutional strategy. Legislative reform offers permanence and enforceability, but risks delay. Administrative oversight offers immediacy and adaptability but may require future statutory reinforcement. In evaluating both pathways, policymakers must weigh urgency against durability. Given the scale of illiteracy and mental health needs within TDCJ facilities, delay carries measurable social and fiscal costs. Therefore, any final policy determination should consider the possibility of sequential implementation: immediate administrative action followed by legislative codification to ensure sustainability.

## 5. Recommendation

### 5.1. Rationale

The most prudent course of action for Texas is to implement an administrative oversight framework (Policy Option 2) and strategically integrate it with targeted legislative reinforcement (Policy Option 1). This combined approach balances urgency with durability. Administrative action provides immediate enforceability and operational clarity, while legislative reinforcement ensures long-term stability and funding continuity. Taken together, these measures align with constitutional mandates, fiscal responsibility, and the public safety mission of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) (Texas Government Code § 493.003, 2025) <sup>[38]</sup>. The central mechanism for reform should be the establishment of a formal Administrative Oversight Committee jointly housed within the TDCJ and the Windham School District. This committee must be empowered with clearly defined authority, data access, reporting obligations, and compliance review responsibilities. Its sole mandate should be to oversee literacy screening, dyslexia identification, mental health evaluation, instructional programming, and measurable outcome reporting for incarcerated individuals identified as educationally or clinically underserved. By concentrating responsibility within a single accountable body, Texas can reduce fragmentation, eliminate procedural ambiguity, and accelerate implementation timelines.

Administrative action is essential given the historical unpredictability of the legislative process. Previous attempts to mandate structured reporting requirements, such as H.B. 786, demonstrate the vulnerability of reform efforts to political delay (H.B. 786, 88th Leg., 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>. While legislative engagement remains essential for sustained funding and codification of standards, reliance solely on statutory reform risks prolonging inaction. In contrast, administrative oversight can be initiated under existing authority, leveraging current regulatory frameworks and judicial precedents to ensure constitutional compliance.

Judicial precedent reinforces the urgency of this recommendation. Courts have consistently recognized that incarcerated individuals retain certain constitutional protections, including access to meaningful rehabilitative opportunities (Johnson v. Avery, 1966) <sup>[19]</sup>. Where systemic deficiencies in mental health treatment or educational access exist, courts have not hesitated to intervene. Advocacy reporting further underscores the need for structured oversight to prevent constitutional violations related to mental health services (Disability Rights Texas, 2024) <sup>[14]</sup>. Establishing an oversight committee provides a proactive

compliance mechanism that reduces litigation exposure while affirmatively safeguarding rights.

Public support further strengthens the rationale for immediate action. Texas voters have expressed strong support for dyslexia awareness, screening, and investment in instruction (Barbara Jordan Public Policy Research and Survey Center & TSU, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. This alignment between public opinion and evidence-based correctional reform provides political legitimacy and reduces the risk of partisan resistance. Moreover, research demonstrates that educational participation during incarceration substantially lowers recidivism rates (Texas 2036, 2024) <sup>[35]</sup>. Thus, literacy and mental health reform are not abstract humanitarian initiatives; they are empirically supported public safety strategies.

Significantly, this recommendation reframes correctional education not as a discretionary program but as a structural pillar of rehabilitation. When approximately 70% of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level (Literacy Mid-South, 2016) <sup>[22]</sup>, literacy intervention becomes foundational rather than supplemental. Dyslexia screening and targeted instruction are necessary precursors to workforce readiness, vocational certification, and post-release employment stability. Without literacy remediation, other rehabilitative investments lose effectiveness. The proposed oversight structure should include interdisciplinary membership: correctional administrators, educational specialists, licensed mental health professionals, data analysts, and external advisory representatives from recognized advocacy organizations. Defined roles must include (1) standardized intake screening for dyslexia and mental disorders; (2) implementation of evidence-based instructional and therapeutic programming; (3) quarterly reporting of measurable outcomes; and (4) annual public reporting to the Governor and Legislature. This design ensures both internal accountability and external transparency. In parallel, legislative integration should focus on securing dedicated appropriations and codifying reporting requirements to prevent future administrative rollback. Texas previously enacted dyslexia screening mandates in public schools without allocating sufficient funding for implementation (Adams, 2025). To avoid repeating that oversight within correctional settings, fiscal provisions must accompany policy mandates (Uwakonye *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[43]</sup>. The legislative component should therefore formalize funding streams while preserving the operational agility of administrative oversight. In short, the dual-track strategy, administrative immediacy reinforced by legislative durability, provides the most balanced and practical pathway for reform.

### 5.2. Impact

The anticipated impact of this recommendation extends across constitutional, fiscal, public safety, and workforce dimensions. First, constitutionally, mandatory screening and oversight reduce the risk of systemic rights violations. By ensuring that incarcerated individuals with learning disabilities or mental illness are identified and served, Texas demonstrates compliance with established legal standards and minimizes exposure to costly litigation. Proactive oversight transforms reactive legal defense into preventative governance. Second, from a public safety perspective, literacy and mental health interventions help reduce recidivism. Educational programming during incarceration has been associated with significantly lower reoffense rates

(Texas 2036, 2024) <sup>[35]</sup>. Improved reading proficiency enhances employability, strengthens communication skills, and increases participation in structured programming. Mental health stabilization improves behavioral regulation and institutional compliance. Together, these outcomes reduce institutional disciplinary incidents and post-release criminal behavior.

Third, the fiscal implications are substantial. The Texas Legislative Budget Board (n.d.) <sup>[36]</sup> documents the significant expenditures associated with corrections. Recidivism perpetuates avoidable costs across incarceration, judicial processing, and supervision systems. The Oversight Committee should incorporate a cost-benefit analysis model to track the fiscal return on literacy and mental health investments. For example, performance metrics could calculate projected cost avoidance per participant based on documented recidivism reductions. Such data would allow policymakers to quantify the long-term savings generated by each dollar invested in screening and instruction (Arungwa & Osho, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>.

Fourth, the impact extends to workforce development and economic reintegration. Individuals released from incarceration must navigate employment applications, housing contracts, healthcare forms, and licensing documentation. Functional literacy is essential for these processes. By raising reading levels using standardized grade-equivalent measures, the oversight framework provides measurable evidence of skill acquisition (Osho *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[29]</sup>. These gains translate directly into improved workforce participation and reduced reliance on public assistance. Sustained reform requires more than program initiation; it demands a rigorous and transparent accountability structure capable of measuring whether the intended outcomes are being achieved (Hetherington & Osho, 2026) <sup>[17]</sup>. For this reason, the proposed Oversight Committee must ground its work in clearly defined and consistently applied performance indicators. At intake, every incarcerated individual should undergo standardized screening for dyslexia and co-occurring mental disorders, and the percentage of individuals successfully screened should be documented and publicly reported (Dieli *et al.*, 2026) <sup>[13]</sup>. Screening alone, however, is insufficient. The Committee must also track the proportion of those identified as needing support who actually receive targeted instructional services or clinical intervention. This linkage between identification and service delivery ensures that screening is not a symbolic exercise but leads to meaningful remediation (Tamez & Osho, 2025) <sup>[40]</sup>.

Beyond access to services, the Committee should evaluate measurable educational progress. Average grade-level improvement over designated intervals, such as six or twelve months, provides a quantifiable benchmark for literacy advancement. Monitoring completion rates for literacy courses and therapeutic programs further clarifies whether participants are enrolling and persisting through structured interventions (Estwick *et al.*, 2026) <sup>[16]</sup>. Together, these measures create a layered understanding of both participation and progress. Equally important is the long-term outcome of recidivism. Comparing re-offense rates between program participants and non-participants offers a practical indicator of program effectiveness and public safety impact. If literacy and mental health interventions contribute to measurable declines in reoffending, the data will substantiate continued investment and refinement. If outcomes fall short,

policymakers will have a factual basis for recalibration.

Transparency must accompany each of these metrics. Annual public reporting to the Governor and Legislature will strengthen institutional credibility, enable independent policy analysis, and promote informed appropriations decisions. When performance data are accessible and disaggregated by facility or population group, resource allocation can be more precisely directed toward areas of greatest need. In this way, accountability mechanisms do not merely document compliance; they serve as instruments of strategic governance, ensuring that investments in literacy and mental health reform translate into measurable improvements in rehabilitation and public safety.

Finally, the broader societal impact should not be underestimated. Correctional reform that prioritizes literacy and mental health strengthens families, stabilizes communities, and reduces intergenerational disadvantage. When formerly incarcerated individuals reenter society equipped with functional literacy and stabilized mental health, they are better positioned to obtain employment, support dependents, and contribute to local economies. Hence, the recommended approach establishes a durable, accountable, and constitutionally grounded framework for addressing illiteracy and mental disorders within Texas correctional institutions. By combining administrative oversight with legislative reinforcement, Texas can transform correctional education from a fragmented service into a strategic public safety investment. The result is a correctional system more aligned with its statutory mission, one that promotes genuine behavioral change, protects taxpayer resources, and enhances community well-being across the state.

## 6. Conclusion

The failure to address the widespread illiteracy and undiagnosed mental disorders within the Texas correctional system directly subverts the TDCJ's core mission and contributes to high rates of recidivism. While legislative action offers comprehensive reform, the history of failed bills, such as H.B. 786, makes it an unreliable path. The most effective policy is to mandate the creation of a powerful Administrative Oversight Committee within the TDCJ and the Windham School District, coupled with compliance checks grounded in judicial precedent. This approach aligns with Texas voters' preferences, is more reliable, immediately actionable, and ensures that incarcerated individuals receive the proper screening, education, and clinical care required to become safer and more capable contributors to the general welfare upon release. State policymakers and TDCJ leadership have a duty to their constituents. There is an urgent need to combat illiteracy that cannot be put off (Belshaw, Rodriguez, & Osho, 2009) <sup>[10]</sup>. Without action, illiteracy will further contribute to recidivism, harming Texas communities. By taking the action to establish the Administrative Oversight Committee, the mandate to promote positive change will become an active practice rather than an ideology.

The persistence of widespread illiteracy and untreated mental disorders within the Texas correctional system presents more than an administrative concern; it reflects a structural gap between institutional mission and operational reality. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice is statutorily charged with promoting public safety and fostering positive behavioral change among incarcerated individuals (Texas Government Code § 493.003, 2025) <sup>[38]</sup>. However,

rehabilitation cannot occur in a meaningful way when individuals lack the foundational literacy skills and psychological stability necessary to participate in educational programming, vocational preparation, and therapeutic intervention. The evidence makes clear that literacy and mental health are not peripheral considerations but central determinants of successful reintegration.

Research consistently shows that correctional education reduces recidivism and strengthens post-release outcomes (Texas 2036, 2024) <sup>[35]</sup>. Conversely, when individuals are released without functional literacy or untreated mental health conditions, they face immediate barriers to employment, housing, and compliance with legal obligations. The consequences extend beyond the individual, affecting families, communities, and state resources. National data indicating that approximately 70 percent of incarcerated adults read below a fourth-grade level (Literacy Mid-South, 2016) <sup>[22]</sup> underscores the urgency of systematic intervention. Within Texas, studies suggest that dyslexia and related learning disorders are significantly underidentified among incarcerated populations (Adams & Pitre, 2024; Ononugbo *et al.*, 2010) <sup>[1, 24]</sup>, reinforcing the need for structured screening and accountability mechanisms.

The policy analysis presented in this brief demonstrates that reform is both feasible and necessary. Administrative oversight provides a pathway for immediate action, allowing Texas to leverage existing authority to implement screening, reporting, and programmatic improvements. Legislative reinforcement can then secure funding stability and long-term institutional commitment. Together, these strategies align with constitutional principles, fiscal prudence, and the preferences of Texas voters, who have expressed support for dyslexia awareness and educational investment (Barbara Jordan Public Policy Research and Survey Center & TSU, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. By integrating literacy remediation and mental health treatment into the core framework of correctional operations, Texas can transform rehabilitation from aspiration to measurable practice.

Failure to act carries measurable costs. Continued neglect of literacy and mental health needs increases recidivism risk, strains correctional budgets, and undermines public confidence in the justice system. In contrast, proactive intervention offers tangible returns: safer communities, reduced incarceration expenditures, and expanded workforce participation. The question confronting policymakers is not whether reform is warranted, but whether the state will commit to implementing evidence-based strategies that honor both constitutional obligations and public safety priorities. Ultimately, addressing illiteracy and untreated mental disorders within Texas prisons is a matter of governance, equity, and responsibility. A correctional system that equips individuals with the ability to read, comprehend, and manage their mental health strengthens the state's social fabric. By establishing structured oversight, enforcing transparent reporting, and investing in targeted interventions, Texas can advance a model of correctional reform that reflects both accountability and humanity. Such action affirms that rehabilitation is not merely an ideological goal, but a practical commitment to improving outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

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