





Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison



# EDUCATION ACROSS THE PRISON WALLS: A CALL FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

A resource guide from educators,  
organizers, and students for  
teaching inside prison



**IL-CHEP**  
ILLINOIS COALITION  
FOR HIGHER ED IN PRISON

# ***Compilation and series organized by Heather Canuel, Sarah Ross, Larry Barrett, and Chez Rumpf***

## **Introduction:**

During October and November 2021, IL-CHEP hosted *Education Across the Prison Walls: A Call for Reflection and Action*, a four-part virtual panel series featuring educators, students, and organizers committed to expanding the reach of liberatory education in prisons and in our state.

The landscape of educational opportunities in prison has changed dramatically over the past 15 years, both nationally and locally. While more college programs are reaching people incarcerated in Illinois prisons, the availability of programs remains uneven across the state. The impending return of Pell grants for incarcerated students raises exciting possibilities for growth, as well as concerns about how universities will view this resource and the types of programs they will develop.

Collectively, the series engaged timely questions such as: What is the purpose of higher education in prison? What unique challenges and opportunities do students and educators face in engaging this work? What principles should guide our work? And what strategies can we develop when our principles are challenged? While we encourage people to watch the full series, each panel works as an individual event that focuses on a specific topic.

This guide, prepared by IL-CHEP Resource Coordinator Heather Canuel, provides an overview of each panel, key take-aways, and resources provided by panelists for continued engagement and learning.

The overall series, this guide, and the ASL interpretation provided for each panel were possible due to generous support from an Illinois Humanities Envisioning Justice grant.

To watch each video recording from the series, click the links below:

Freedom and Education: <https://vimeo.com/669956304>

Critical Pedagogy and the Prison Classroom: <https://vimeo.com/670057685>

Getting Programs Started: <https://vimeo.com/670296525>

Education for Everyone, Everywhere: <https://vimeo.com/670323099>

# Freedom and Education

Oct. 6, 2021



## **Video Link:**

<https://vimeo.com/669956304>

## **Description**

Teaching and learning in state prisons is often experienced as a paradox. How can education emancipate from behind bars? And what does one do with such transformative experiences with life or long sentences ahead of them? While discussing these questions, panelists challenged us to think about teaching and learning in prison as both the same and necessarily something quite different than our on-campus classrooms. Panelist Sandra Brown framed some of these concerns through the lack of African American history taught in school, both in and outside of the prison. She emphasized the importance of critical race theory in education. Cedric X Cal expressed what he called “the enlightenment of education from behind the walls.” Cedric stressed that the student needs to have a realistic view of history, because if you can't see yourself in education, you don't want to participate in it. He also cautioned that a positive rapport needs to be built between the student and the educator. Cedric also stressed the necessity of critical race theory in education. Johari Jabir echoed and expanded Cedric's and Sandra's responses by explaining that liberatory pedagogy requires a commitment to the art of mutual learning. He called on educators to recognize that the prison does not define students, it is just where students are currently, and education can break down the walls through imagination and ideas.

## **Recommended Reading:**

Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*. AK Press, 2021.

Cobb, Jelani. *The Man Behind Critical Race Theory*. New Yorker Magazine, 2021.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/20/the-man-behind-critical-race-theory>

The Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (Ed). *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*. AK Press, 2021.

Givens, Jarvis R. *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*. Harvard University Press, 2021.

Simon, Jonathan. *Mass Incarceration on Trial: A Remarkable Court Decision and the Future of Prisons in America*. The New Press, 2016.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel & Grau. 2014.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group 1988.

# Freedom and Education Continued



## Panelist Bios:

**Sandra Brown** is a visiting scholar at the Women's Justice Institute, a doctoral student at California Coast University, and an incarcerated survivor at the Fox Valley Adult Transitional Center in Aurora, Illinois. She earned multiple degrees from behind the walls, using only mail and a typewriter, throughout her 23 years of incarceration. She is the first incarcerated woman in Illinois' history to earn a master's degree while incarcerated and the second incarcerated woman to earn the Davis-Putter Scholarship. Sandra is a published poet and essayist whose body of works are included in *Critical Storytelling from Behind Invisible Bars: Undergraduates and Inmates Write Their Way Out*. Upon release, Sandra aspires to engage in teaching, advocacy, and public speaking in ways that promote social justice for justice-impacted women.

**Cedric X Cal** came from generational poverty. He is a descendant from sharecroppers who migrated to the North and was raised on the Westside of Chicago. When he was 17 years old, he was wrongfully convicted and served 28 years of a juvenile natural life sentence. While in prison, Cedric became a student and follower of The Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad under the leadership of The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. Cedric took classes under Dr. Margaret T.G. Burroughs in Poetry, as well as many other college courses in business management, marketing, communications, American history, poor people's movements, and Latin American history. Cedric now works in The Nation of Islam Prison Reform Ministry and goes to school at Daley College for Advanced Manufacturing.

**Johari Jabir** is an Associate Professor of Black studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). A musician, scholar, educator, cultural historian, author, and contemplative teacher, he has taught several classes at Stateville Correctional Center through the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP). His research, teachings, and writings focus on prison abolition, religion and spirituality in the African Black Diaspora, Black music and social transformation, and contemplative pedagogy and public education. His first book, *Conjuring Freedom: Music and Masculinity in the Gospel Army of the Civil War* (Ohio State University Press, 2017), is a cultural history of the nation's first Black regiment, the 1st South Carolina Volunteers. Johari also has enjoyed an extensive career in church music and musical theater.

**Chez Rumpf** (moderator) is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Benedictine University and a member of the IL-CHEP steering committee.

# Critical Pedagogy and the Prison Classroom

Oct 20, 2021



## **Video Link:**

<https://vimeo.com/670057685>

## **Description:**

Many educators and students experience a common assumption from guards, administrators, colleagues, and friends: that people in prison are less informed or less interested in the most critical issues of our time. In fact, we know this to *not* be true, as incarcerated students across the nation have written legislation, created policy, and formed inside-out organizations that impact their communities. Education scholar Henry Giroux says, “All education is an introduction to the future.” This panel asked what kind of future are we building inside our classrooms in prison and how does the framework of critical pedagogy shape what we teach and learn in these types of classrooms?

Heather Canuel’s comments highlighted the longstanding gender disparity in programming that is available in men’s and women’s prisons. Heather explained that, unfortunately, classes rooted in critical pedagogy were not offered while she was incarcerated at Dwight and Logan, two women’s prisons in Illinois. Most of the classes that were offered were skillset classes, including cleaning and baking.

Panelists and formerly incarcerated students Cragg Hardaway and Heather Canuel discussed the offerings of classes in prison. Heather highlighted the longstanding gender disparity in programming that is available in men’s and women’s prisons, explaining that the majority of classes offered in women’s prisons in IL focus on cleaning, baking and other skill sets. Classes rooted in critical pedagogy were not offered while Heather was incarcerated. By contrast, Cragg recalled a reading group he participated in while incarcerated that focused on poor people’s movements and critical pedagogies. Professors John Zeigler and Jason LaFountain shared how they teach with a critical pedagogical frame in classes such as Visual Criminology and Masculinity, Justice and Law – subjects that both examine and expand on students’ lives. For Professor Ruth Nicole Brown’s classes inside, she explained how critical pedagogy is rooted in lived experience and a commitment to questioning. Ruth asserted that critical pedagogy means to rearrange power. It means coming into a space and asking, “Who the hell set this up this way?” Critical pedagogy also creates conditions to be creative. Ruth shared examples from her work with Black girls in *Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT)* to illustrate the importance of centering lived experience and the power of critical pedagogy to recognize, express, celebrate, and create new ways of being.

## **Recommended Reading:**

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

Benos, Deanne. & Benedict, Alyssa. *Redefining the Narrative*. Women’s Justice Institute, 2021.

<https://redefine.womensjusticeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/WJI-Redefining-the-Narrative-Bro-L01.pdf>

Brown, Ruth Nicole. *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*. Peter Lang, 2009.

Brown, Ruth Nicole. *Hear Our Truths: Performance and The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Finney, Nikky. *Head Off & Split: Poems*. Northwestern University Press, 2011.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom*. Rowan & Littlefield, 2000.

Guevara, Ernesto Che. *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey*. Ocean Press, 2003.  
Racial Equity Tools. <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resources/fundamentals/core-concepts/theory>

# Critical Pedagogy and the Prison Classroom Continued

## Participant Bios:

**Heather Canuel** is a Bloomington stylist and a downstate organizer for the Women's Justice Institute (WJI). She also is a member of the Reclamation Project Board and a member of the Safe Housing Network Reentry Project through UCLA. Heather is the founder and organizer of Art from the Heart. As a trauma-impacted woman, Heather volunteers her time to get women in her community interview-ready by providing them with free haircuts and positive messages, as well as sharing her uplifting story with the women of Labyrinth House, a reentry home in Bloomington, IL. Heather also is a member of the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls.

**Cragg Hardaway** is an alum of the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana, where he earned a Bachelor Certificate in Educational Studies. He's also an advocate for juvenile rights and those of the disenfranchised. While incarcerated, he co-founded, along with fellow EJP (Education Justice Project) members, the anti-violence education program C.A.V.E. (Chicago Anti Violence Education). As a returning citizen, Cragg volunteers with several anti-violence education programs in the Chicagoland area that provide mentoring and life skills to juveniles and young adults who are trying to change the trajectory of their lives from one of crime to one of productive citizenship. Cragg's life mission has become one of advocacy, and he is dedicated to his faith.

**Jason LaFountain** is the Higher Education and Development Coordinator for the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP). Jason has been involved with PNAP for the past seven years. Trained in art history, he has taught courses at Stateville prison on theories and practices of imagination; the social history of American art; and, most recently, visual criminology (the latter two with Luke Fidler). Since 2019, he has also worked with Tim Barnett and Erica Meiners to help run PNAP/NEIU's University Without Walls program.

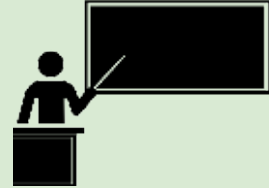
**John W. Zeigler Jr.** is the Director of DePaul University's Egan Office for Urban Education and Community Partnerships, where he provides guidance in advancing DePaul faculty and student engagement with public agencies, community-based organizations, and schools. John is a civil rights activist with a focus on promoting areas of advocacy in criminal justice reform. John received his Master's in Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago and is adjunct faculty at DePaul and faculty for the Asset Based Community Development Institute (ABCDI). John is currently finishing his doctorate in education at DePaul University.

**Ruth Nicole Brown** is Professor and the Inaugural Chairperson of the Department of African American and African Studies at Michigan State University. Her research documents, analyzes, and interrogates Black girls' lived experience and explores the gender and racialized power dynamics of collectivity, particularly as it relates to Black girlhood. Brown grew up in Park Forest and Chicago Heights, IL, nurtured by bold and determined practices of collective possibility. She continues to activate home truths and bring others to futures of radical creative power and praxis through Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT), a collective Brown founded in 2006 to celebrate Black girlhood by meeting Black girls face to face and heart to heart. Brown's Black Girl Genius Week (BGGW) exhausts the rituals of SOLHOT to widen the cipher and experience the imaginative worlds, knowledge, and artistry that only occurs when Black girls, women, and femmes are together as homegirls. BGGW has taken place in central Illinois, Columbia, SC, and Chicago, IL. Brown has published two books, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (University of Illinois Press, 2013) and *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward A Hip Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (Peter Lang, 2009), co-edited several anthologies and written numerous journal articles.

**Simone Waller** (moderator) is an Assistant Professor of English and Humanities at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. While a doctoral student at Northwestern University, Simone regularly taught courses with the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project at Stateville.

# Getting Programs Started

Nov. 3, 2021 (Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/670296525>)



## Description:

Higher education in IL prisons has had a long but inconsistent history starting in the 1950s. In person and correspondence classes have been offered through community colleges, theatre companies, individual artists, poets, and faculty at various universities and more. In 2008, the Education Justice Project (EJP) out of the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign began offering 3000-5000 level classes on top of an existing community college program at Danville prison in central IL. A few years later, faculty from DePaul University and from Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project started classes at Stateville Prison. Since that time, many other programs have started, and educators around the state are interested in learning more. What are the practical steps for developing a new higher education in prison program?

This panel coincided with the release of a new report authored by IL-CHEP members called “Steps to Consider When Starting a College-In-Prison Program.”

Panelists discussed the critical importance of student input when developing a program and the perseverance needed to see through all the hurdles, challenges, and difficulties along the way. Professor Tim Barnett emphasized that developing a program does not happen overnight and that educators would do well to understand the landscape and push the politics of the institution. Professor Sharon Varallo explained that each teacher needs to realize that while this process takes time, we also need to keep pushing, as it will make a difference in students’ lives. Panelists also noted the value of non-credit classes and courses that do not impose prerequisites such as a high school diploma or GED, as too many people in IL prisons wait years and years to gain entry into these classes. Thus, making classes open to everyone gives anyone a chance to experience classes and often lights the fire students need to continue their formal education. Finally, panelists discussed the importance of making education accessible to students on college campuses once they are released.

## Recommended Reading and Screening:

Read:

Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, Toolkits. <https://www.higheredinprison.org/toolkits>

Bernstein, Lee. *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Chamberlin, Janice M. *Locked Up With Success: A Prison Teacher’s Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap in Any Classroom*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform. 2010.

Ginsburg, Rebecca (ed). *Critical Perspectives on Teaching in Prison: Students and Instructors on Pedagogy Behind the Wall*. Routledge, 2019.

James, Andrea C. *Upper Bunkies Unite: And Other Thoughts On the Politics of Mass Incarceration*. Goode Book Press, 2013.

Kilgore, James. *Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People’s Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time*. The New Press, 2015.

Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe. *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison*. The New Press, 2017.

School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Learn & Unlearn: Anti-racism Resource Guide.

[https://libraryguides.saic.edu/learn\\_unlearn/foundations10](https://libraryguides.saic.edu/learn_unlearn/foundations10)

Screen:

College Behind Bars. <https://www.pbs.org/show/college-behind-bars/>

# Getting Programs Started Continued



## Panelist Bios:

**Dr. Tim Barnett** is Professor of English and Women's/Gender/Sexuality Studies at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) and a member of the leadership team of Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP). With Erica Meiners and support from PNAP and NEIU, he helped start the University Without Walls degree program at Stateville Prison in 2017. Eight incarcerated students have graduated from NEIU since that time, while five more are working on their degrees; the program will accept 8-10 new students in 2022. UWW awards credit for experiential learning at the college level, and Tim's interests include expanding on the PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) movement to explore more options for awarding credit to incarcerated students.

**Dr. Sharon Varallo** is the Violet M. Jaeke Chair of Family Life and the Executive Director of the Augustana Prison Education Program (APEP), which launched in Fall 2021. In that role, Dr. Varallo coordinates the grant-funded BA degree program to Augustana students incarcerated in the East Moline Correctional Center. APEP was implemented with generous startup monies from the Austin E. Knowlton Foundation. Dr. Varallo's academic interests include the study of higher education in prison, intercultural competence, cultural approaches to time, family communication, and social action research methods. During her career, she has published work on the scholarship of teaching and learning and on interpersonal and family communication topics. She has thoroughly enjoyed teaching and accompanying students in numerous off-campus programs, including in China, Japan, Peru, Mexico, Guatemala, and the wilderness of Holden Village in Washington's Cascade mountains.

**Vickie Reddy** is Assistant Director of the School of Restorative Arts, the prison education program at North Park University (NPU) in Chicago. NPU currently enrolls 80 inside students at Stateville Correctional Center and 20 students at Logan Correctional Center, a women's facility. Vickie also supports Northwestern University's Prison Education Program at both facilities. Vickie is motivated to change negative stereotyping and harmful narratives that perpetuate division and unjust systems in society and is passionate about the power of education, particularly in marginalized communities to effect change and empower individuals. This includes collaborating to create new and innovative pathways for those impacted by incarceration and seeing rehabilitation, reconciliation, and reentry as a community wide responsibility. Vickie is also pursuing a MA in Restorative Justice Ministry alongside a cohort of inside students at Stateville.

**Sarah Ross** is an educator and artist whose work uses narrative and the body to address spatial concerns as they relate to access, class, anxiety, and activism. She co-founded the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP), a cultural project that brings together artists, writers and scholars in and outside Stateville prison to create public projects concerning segregation, criminalization, and incarceration. She has also worked with local artists, activists, lawyers, torture survivors, and scholars on Chicago Torture Justice Memorials—a recent campaign for reparations for survivors of Chicago police torture. Her work has been exhibited in Los Angeles, New York, Montreal, Copenhagen, Rio De Janeiro, among other places. Sarah is a Soros Justice Media Fellow and the recipient of Leaders for a New Chicago, a collaboration between the Field Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation. She is an Assistant Professor in Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Dr. Christina Rivers** (moderator), is an Associate Professor of Political Science. Dr. Rivers' teaching and research interests include African-American politics and political thought, civil and voting rights law. Her current work is on mass incarceration, particularly felon disenfranchisement laws and prison-based gerrymandering. Chris teaches in the Inside/Out Program at DePaul University and Stateville Prison and facilitates a think-tank.



# Education for Everyone, Everywhere

Nov. 11, 2021

## Video Link:

<https://vimeo.com/670323099>

## Description:



Recent successful campaigns like “Ban the Box” (removing the “felony” box on student applications) have suggested that higher education could be more accessible to formerly incarcerated students. Yet access to funding, navigating technology, finding student housing, and confronting new classroom dynamics in the free world is not something prison prepares students for. This discussion illuminated barriers and showed us new models of ways to support students once released. Formerly incarcerated students Colette Payne and Pablo Mendoza stressed the importance of financial support for school once students get out, so students can focus on school and not lose sight of the degree with the pressures of work. Both are currently students in a Northeastern Illinois University program called University Without Walls, which provides comprehensive assistance with getting back into school, including how to enroll, how to attain books, how to pursue a major, and how to navigate challenging university systems. Rev. Courtney Carson discussed the EnRich Program at Richland Community College which also provides directly impacted people with financial support and resources in addition to training and education. Courtney explained that when people feel a sense of belonging and safety, they have the ability to master new skills. James Kilgore noted the first barrier is that the prison system only gives \$10 to people upon release. Material things, such as work and housing, are the foundation that allow people to get into educational programs. James explained how FirstFollowers builds community through reentry by putting people around others who have walked the path successfully and are not ashamed of where they’ve been. Gregg Gaither explained how the Woodlawn Community Re-Entry Project Chicago provides case management and works across systems to address the many barriers formerly incarcerated people face, from helping to meet material needs to dealing with delinquent student loans from before incarceration. Gregg, along with the other panelists, stressed the importance of recognizing the community as a critical part of the educational journey for people coming home.

## Recommended Reading:

Bell, Derrick. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. BasicBooks, 1992.

Butler, Paul. *Let’s Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*. The New Press, 2010.

Casella, Jean, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. The New Press. 2016.

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. *THICK: And Other Essays*. The New Press, 2019.

# Education for Everyone, Everywhere Continued

## Participant Bios:

**Rev. Courtney Carson** is Executive Director of External Affairs for Richland Community College and co-creator of EnRich, the award-winning trauma-sensitive workforce training. An ordained Minister at Antioch M.B. Church, Rev. Carson draws on personal experience and expertise to develop strong community relationships that promote dialogue, healing, and connection.

**Gregg Gaither** is the co-founder and executive director of the Woodlawn Community Re-Entry Project Chicago (WRPC), a community-based non-profit established in 2013 in response to education re-entry needs of youth and adult populations entering and exiting detention and corrections systems. After beginning a brief career as a corrections officer, Gregg later worked as a Chicago Public School social worker, developing transition programs re-engaging student enrollees re-entering local public schools from Cook County Juvenile Detention & Cook County Department of Corrections facilities.

**James Kilgore** is a formerly incarcerated activist and researcher who is the Director of Advocacy and Outreach for FirstFollowers Reentry Program in Champaign and the Director of the Challenging E-carceration Project at Media Justice. He has written widely on issues of mass incarceration, including the award winning *Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time* (The New Press, 2015) and *Understanding E-Carceration*, which will be published by The New Press in January 2022.

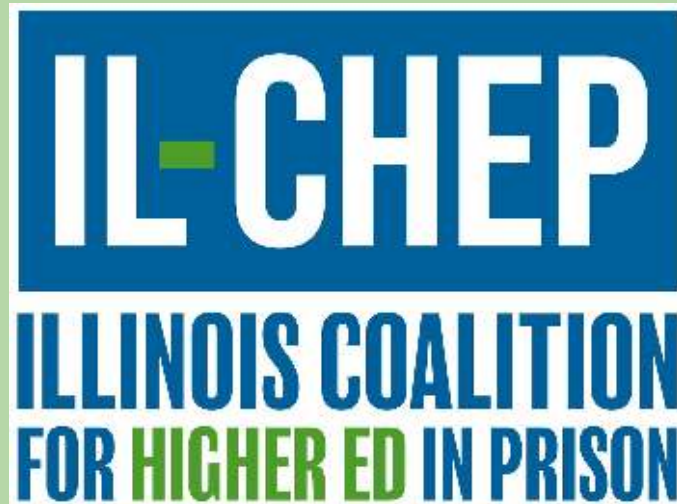
**Pablo Mendoza** is a proud father, community organizer, and aspiring researcher. He served 22 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections, where he managed to educate himself despite the endless challenges to access higher education in prison. The pinnacle of his academic career was with the University of Illinois's Education Justice Project (EJP) where he presented the concept of critical pedagogy and provided a platform with which to exercise his agency and advocate for change. Since his release, he worked with Parole Illinois as a Lead Organizer and Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP). Pablo volunteers with EJP as an advisor on the Reentry Guide Initiative; he is a steering committee member for the Freedom to Learn Campaign and works with Illinois Reentry Alliance for Justice. He is currently a student at Northeastern Illinois University.

**Colette Payne** is the Director of the Reclamation Project for the Women's Justice Institute (WJI). She is an organizer, leader, student, mother, and grandmother. Her passion is to educate families to build healthier communities. Colette has been the Coordinator of the Visible Voices program for CLAIM (Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers), a program of Cabrini Green Legal Aid. In her current role with WJI, she helps engage women directly impacted by the criminal legal system to become agents of change and to create solutions to end the incarceration of women and girls. In 2015, Colette joined the delegation to assess women's prisons in Illinois, becoming the first formerly incarcerated woman to serve in this role in the entire United States.

**Sarah Ross** (moderator) is an artist and Assistant Professor in Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2012 she co-founded the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP), a cultural project that brings together artists, writers and scholars in and outside Stateville prison to create public projects concerning segregation, criminalization and incarceration.

# Education Across the Prison Walls: A Call for Reflection and Action

A resource guide from educators, organizers, and  
students for teaching inside prison



**Thank you to *Heather Canuel* for  
creating this resource guide and to  
Alaina Hanke for design support.**

**If you have any questions or  
concerns, please reach out to us!**

Illinois Coalition For Higher  
Education In Prison

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