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GREENWOOD, SC – Behind the razor wire and steel bars of one of South Carolina's most secure prisons, female inmates are helping students who are blind get a better education. In return, the inmates are gaining job skills that will translate into employment once outside the prison gates.

The South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind (SCSDB) has partnered with the Department of Corrections to produce braille textbooks at Leath Correctional Institution in Greenwood. SCSDB serves as the statewide distribution center for all braille and large print textbooks used in South Carolina schools. An estimated 160 students in South Carolina school districts use Braille or large print.

While publishers mass produce books about reading, writing and arithmetic for public and private schools, they produce far fewer in braille, the coded language of raised dots embossed onto paper and read by hand. For example, if a teacher with a student who is blind selects a calculus text that hasn't been translated into braille, the state Department of Education relies on SCSDB to provide one.

The Corrections Department started working with SCSDB to develop the program several years ago, but the program has accelerated following reorganization. Almost 55,000 pages of braille were produced over the last six months and distributed to South Carolina's school districts.

The partnership between the two state agencies, in cooperation with the state Department of Education, was established to decrease delays in obtaining textbooks from out-of-state suppliers. "Now, students who read braille can receive their textbooks at the same time their sighted peers," said Elizabeth McKown, director of SCSDB's statewide vision outreach program.

Producing specialized texts for individuals who are blind is a time consuming process that requires exhaustive training and certification by the U.S. Library of Congress. So far, three Leath inmates have been certified to translate into braille and three others are working toward the same.

"The technical skills these inmates develop while in prison will enable them to get jobs and become competitive tax-paying citizens once they leave Leath," said Jon Ozmint, director of the Corrections Department. There is a nationwide shortage of braille transcribers. The American Foundation for the Blind estimates that 1,020 additional braille transcribers will be needed by 2012.

The project is a collaborative effort of the SCSDB, the Department of Corrections and the State Department of Education. "This project is a fine example of true educational improvements we make in South Carolina when we form partnerships," said SCSDB President Sheila Breitweiser who spearheaded the project. "Without true support of all the key agencies and organizations, this project would still be a dream today, rather than an exciting reality -- improving learning opportunities for some of South Carolina's most special children."

South Carolina's prison braille program is a model program according to Nancy Lacewell, manager of the National Braille Prison Program of the American Printing House for the Blind. "It contains all of the key ingredients for success: strong and committed partners, highly skilled and experienced staff, and capable transcribers."

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