

Windham district readies inmates for big changes

The Windham School District (WSD) is the educational arm of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and provides GED classes to inmates at Dominguez State Jail and 88 other prison sites throughout Texas.

At Dominguez, a staff of 18 teaches courses in math, science, reading and history as well as drafting and computer science.

"We have a 90 percent passing rate for GED," WSD Principal Joe Jones said.

"We're outcome-based here."

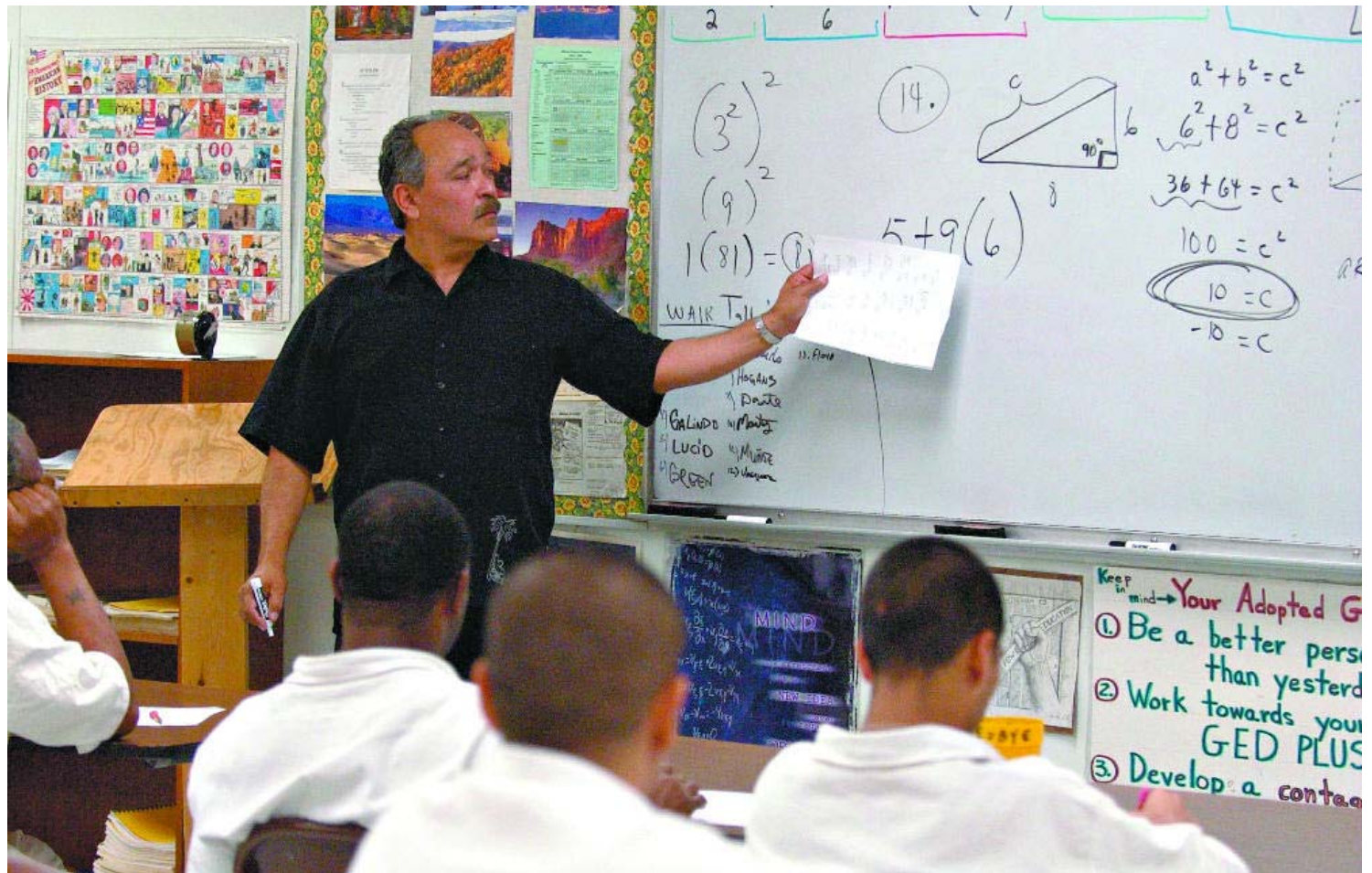
Inmates who are completing the last 24 months of their sentences also are required to take a course titled, "Changes."

"It helps them in the logistical transition back into the free world," Jones said. "The curriculum is oriented toward them being more conscious than ever before of the consequences of their choices and the impact."

According to the WSD Web site, its mission is to help educate offenders, ages 18 to 60, so they'll have the social and job skills necessary to find employment after being released. The average Windham student operates below the sixth-grade level.

"If we can do something to help them be successful to go back into the free world and be better skilled, qualified and, hopefully, go to school on their own, then we have served not only that individual, but also society," Jones said.

— RA



HELEN L. MONTOYA/CONEXION

Jorge Aleman uses math to help inmates at Dominguez State Jail see the bigger picture awaiting them outside after completing their sentences.

Life lessons start with math

Teacher uses class to help inmates prepare for a life without bars

RUDY ARISPE, Conexión

Jorge Aleman has been behind bars at Dominguez State Jail since 1995.

But unlike the people incarcerated there, he's never been convicted of a crime, and his sentence is self-imposed.

Aleman teaches math, science, reading and history to the inmates for the state-mandated GED classes each weekday from noon to 7 p.m.

On a recent Wednesday, the 50-year-old instructor stood at the chalkboard inside the jail, writing long equations that had the potential to exasperate the 27 students in the classroom. Many had never been challenged to solve such intimidating math problems before.

"I create long equations to

show them obstacles and opportunities," he said. "Even after they leave here, they're going to face their long equations — getting divorced, getting remarried, having more kids, paying bills. I teach them to simplify, and they can see the simplification by working the problem."

During a spelling lesson, Aleman called several inmates to the board, telling them to think of it as a job interview. He had them spell words, such as clandestine, acrimonious, and audacity, and explain what each meant.

"Public speaking is a big fear, not just mathematics," he said.

Aleman said he wants to instill in the offenders something more than education: wisdom.

"Smart is one thing. Wise is

'Smart is one thing. Wise is another. If they were so smart, they wouldn't be in here.'

JORGE ALEMAN
educator

another," he said. "If they were so smart, they wouldn't be in here."

The Lanier High School graduate also teaches math at Palo Alto College part-time and has a daily column in the San Antonio Express-News — Jorge Aleman's Math Minute — involving long equations.

"Mr. Aleman has a real passion about what he is doing," said Joe Jones, principal of Windham School District,

which oversees educational programs at Dominguez jail. "He's a real math guru and ties in solutions to math problems to issues of life. He wants them to have a global view about their world and emphasizes some very strong things within social studies and sciences. He's very successful with that."

Aleman said he's never feared for his personal safety being among the prisoners, whose crimes involve assault, robbery and theft, among others.

"I feel safer in here than out there," he said. "Outside, you have to deal with things like road rage."

He jokes that he'll be eligible for parole, or retirement, in 2010.

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