COLLEGE INSIDE
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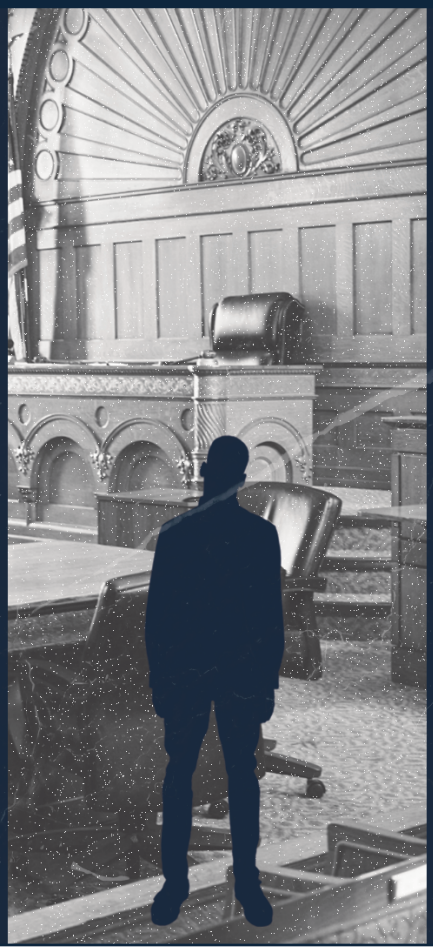

Parole boards say education matters. Their denials tell a different story.

By Charlotte West

Illustration by Emily Jenkins

After 24 years in prison, a 58-year-old woman went before California's parole board for the first time with what looked like a strong case for release. She had earned an associate's degree and was working toward a bachelor's at a public university. She had completed years of programming, earned praise from correctional staff, and hadn't had a violent disciplinary infraction in more than two decades.

At a hearing in the fall of 2023, a parole commissioner started with some good news: "You've done everything objectively speaking that we want you to do." Unfortunately, there was a problem: "the subjective part of you hasn't quite gotten to the surface that you've addressed it to the depth that you need to." Figuring out exactly what those words meant was confusing, but the final decision was clear. The board denied her parole.

The exchange reflected a conundrum familiar to many incarcerated people seeking release—meeting every official requirement isn't always enough when decisions hinge on something much harder to pin down.

California is one of 35 states that allow people to appear before a parole board, which decides whether they should be released before their sentence ends based on factors such as conduct, rehabilitation, and perceived risk. California granted parole in only about one in five cases in 2024, according to the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative, or PPI.

The California woman's case echoes findings from a new two-part analysis by the organization examining how parole boards operate. The remaining states have effectively eliminated parole altogether—a trend that continued in 2024 when Louisiana became the 17th state to abolish it.

The report describes a parole system that's politically motivated, under-resourced, and often dysfunctional—with declining approval rates and fewer hearings despite