

New mentoring scheme pioneered at Portland and Dorchester prisons

PRISONERS in Dorchester and Portland are being read more than their rights in a pioneering new prison mentor scheme.

A group of literate inmates have volunteered to become mentors so that they can share their reading and writing skills with other inmates.

The Toe by Toe scheme has only been running for five weeks at Dorchester prison and already they are seeing impressive results.

The inmates taking part in the scheme give up 20 minutes a day to spend with their pupil working through a workbook called Toe by Toe.

Inmate Steven Phelps, 39, could not read at all five weeks ago and now he is reading books out loud in class.

He said: "I couldn't read at all before and I didn't have the nerve to ask anyone.

"I jumped at the chance to get on this scheme and even though it was really hard to start with I have learnt so much.

"It means when I get out of here I can fill out job applications and write letters - which is never something I thought I'd be able to do."

Mr Phelps said the course has changed his life by boosting his confidence and enhancing his job prospects on release.

Mentor Mark McDonagh, 26, said he had never been involved with anything so rewarding.

"It is all about helping other people and giving someone the confidence to read and write," he said.

"I mentor my cell mate so it works out perfectly and it has taught me a lot too, like how to be patient."

Deputy governor Guy Pidduck said the course showed how keen the inmates were to learn new skills.

"Our job is fundamentally to serve the courts and public but by doing things like this and engaging with the Toe by Toe scheme it means the prisoners have a chance to go out as better people."

The Toe by Toe scheme aims to provide inmates with skills so they can read to their own children when they visit.

Now the scheme will continue at HMP Dorchester as well as the HMP Verne on Portland.

This article was written by Arron Hendy and Miriam Phillips and appeared on 26 March 2009 in the Dorset Echo online news www.dorsetecho.co.uk .