

Youth at risk hurdle barriers to education via B.C.'s alternative schools: report

A study of alternative education programs in seven B.C. communities shows that youth who may have suffered unacceptable levels of violence, homelessness and instability in their lives are succeeding in British Columbia's alternative schools.

The study was conducted from December 2006 to June 2007 by the Vancouver-based McCreary Centre Society and was primarily funded the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

“The findings may surprise some people,” says Annie Smith, Executive Director of the McCreary Centre Society and co-author of the report. “Many of the youth are disadvantaged by the effects of poverty, such as hunger, unstable housing and the need to secure income, yet they still want to connect with school, continue their education, and work towards a career.”

Called Making the Grade, the study surveyed the experience of 339 students, aged 13-19, from 34 alternative education programs in communities across B.C. There were also interviews with community stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, social workers and probation officers.

Designed to meet the needs of students struggling within a mainstream school setting, alternative education programs may be operated by school districts outside or within a mainstream school, or at a youth or community centre. Some have been operating since the 1960s. Alternative programs are characterized by small class sizes, life skills instruction, an individualized approach to teaching and emphasis on developing healthy relationships with teachers, peers and the community.

All programs studied were serving youth considered to be at risk – marginalized by factors such as abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use, bullying, discrimination, mental health problems or street involvement.

“These students reported positive connections with their teachers and other adults within the alternative education system, and draw tremendously on support from their peers attending the same programs,” says Smith.

Key findings include:

- Students who have struggled in traditional school settings are supported and engaged in a variety of innovative and responsive ways, such as offering shower and laundry facilities as well as food and employment programs.

- Youth reported high levels of school connectedness and positive relationships with teachers and support staff. They liked school considerably more, and skipped school considerably less, compared to their previous education experience.
- Forty per cent of youth surveyed felt they were gaining skills and knowledge necessary to pursue post-secondary education. There was 68 per cent of youth who expected to have a job within five years; only four per cent expected to be on the street.
- Peers play a pivotal role in keeping youth engaged in their education – 39 per cent were attending an alternative education program because their friends were there. It was reported that peer mentor training and peer support groups helped them to build healthy, supportive relationships and remain engaged with their program.
- Youth reported and stakeholders concurred that many students face unstable home environments. For example, 33 per cent reported a family member had attempted suicide; this event had happened within the last 12 months for a third of these youth. Many schools offer counselling and other support to families as well as youth, but adult respondents felt more support is needed.
- Aboriginal youth (36 per cent) and youth in government care in the past year (14 per cent) were disproportionately represented among youth surveyed.
- Adult respondents cited specialist programs – such as parenting programs for youth – community connections, and additional supports as particularly important because many students face challenges such as sexual abuse and exploitation, problem substance use, and debilitating health conditions or disabilities.
- In addition to housing and special education programs, youth identified more job training as the most needed service in their community.

The McCreary Centre Society is a non-profit organization concerned with the health of young people in British Columbia, and since 1977 has conducted community-based research and projects addressing current youth health issues.

The report may be found at www.mcs.bc.ca. A backgrounder is attached.

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Backgrounder

Communities surveyed were: Abbotsford, Kamloops, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, Prince George, Prince Rupert, Surrey and Vancouver. Adult stakeholders were interviewed in Victoria.

The group surveyed was 49 per cent female and 51 per cent male.

The majority (57 per cent) identified as having European ancestry and 36 per cent identified as Aboriginal.

More than half (58 per cent) reported attending an alternative education program run by the school district outside of a mainstream school; 25 per cent were attending a program located at a youth, drop-in or community centre; and 13 per cent were attending a program located within a mainstream school.

Thirty-one per cent of respondents had been in their alternative education program for more than one academic year.

Twenty-five per cent of student respondents referred themselves to a program. Some students were referred by more than one source, including: school counselors (23 per cent); teachers (20 per cent); family (18 per cent); social workers (10 per cent) and youth and family support workers (8 per cent).

The study incorporated data from the McCreary Centre Society's 2006 survey of marginalized and street-involved youth, which is available at www.mcs.bc.ca.