

## Provincial axe falls on last recourse for troubled teens

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#### Youth counsellor fears for youths



he young people Katrina Kiefer works with are at risk in any number of ways. For many of them, Kiefer and the alternate school program she leads have offered the last chance to remain in the education system and begin building a successful life.

Katrina Kiefer Youth Counsellor / Alternate Program Team Leader SHARE Family and Community Services
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-They come to us from the school district not having been successful in a regular school classroom for many different reasons," she says. -The more typical ones would be referred for poor attendance, inability to stay focused in class, behavioural concerns, or poor social interactions with their peers. Some of them might be referred for being in conflict with their teachers, or for violence issues."

Sound daunting? Kiefer, whose students range in age from 13 to 15, clearly enjoys the challenge. -Its great! Theres never a dull moment. Ive usually got approximately ten students, and I get to teach ten challenging kids what I see they need at any given moment," she says.

-Three-quarters of the time we do behaviour and life-skills training, and the rest of the program is academic. The program is run jointly by SHARE Family and Community Services and School District 43, in Coquitlam, so we have a teacher on-site from the school district who teaches English and math," she explains. -Theres one other youth worker and myself, and we do the life-skills training and supervise the social studies and science aspects of the program."

The ultimate goal, Kiefer explains, is for these youths to be reintegrated back into the regular school system. -The objective is to improve the behaviours, and hopefully improve their academic success ... and definitely improve their self-esteem and confidence. So at the end of five months, they go back with our teacher, and have an interview with the school," she says. -Hopefully, they will have an adapted schedule that meets their requirements and also a better ability to assert themselves and speak up for their own needs, to advocate for themselves."

In approximately twenty weeks, students learn a staggering amount of material, in addition to gaining invaluable insights into themselves. -We cover ~youth and the law, self-esteem and self-awareness, anger management, conflict resolution, communication, peer and family relationships, dating safety, suicide prevention and awareness, sexual / personal harassment, and decision-making. We do a whole human sexuality

component. I have a lot of fun with that. We also do a whole drug and alcohol component that takes about three weeks."

Kiefer explains that although gauging success of the program can be difficult, approximately 85 per cent of students are still in school after six months to a year after leaving the program.

Kiefer could easily pass as a calm, cheerful older sister to the youths she works with. Her youthfulness, however, belies her fifteen years of experience as a youth counsellor. After getting her Child and Youth Care Counsellor Diploma at Douglas College, Kiefer began with street work. -Then I worked in a residential setting for many years," she says. -I worked with street kids in a residential setting, and with extremely at-risk youth in Vancouver.

-I love these kids," she says. -Other people see them as difficult, but I see them in a completely different light. These kids make you laugh like you wouldnt believe; theyre hilarious, and theyre spunky. I love spunky kids!" It must be true ... just talking about them makes her laugh.

-Theyre strong, and they dont even know it," she says. -These are survivor kids, and whats not to love about that? There isnt one child whos been through this program that hasnt had a light inside of themselves; they just needed the door to be opened so it can shine. They needed a welcoming place that accepted their differences and provided them an opportunity to succeed for maybe the first time in their lives."

Social service cuts short-sighted

Kiefers alternate school program is a life-affirming, life-changing experience for troubled and at-risk youths, transforming them into self-confident people ready to engage with school and community. So whod want to eliminate such a successful, cost-effective program? The provincial Liberal government, thats who.

Kiefers program recently fell victim to the Liberals indiscriminate cuts to social services. -Im being laid off. The last day well see students is June 21st, and then were having an open-house / close-out party on the 25th, and then were just packing up," she says.

-I cant even describe how this feels. Im not even sad for myself. My first and probably my last response will be the sadness for the kids and the opportunity that theyve now lost for these students to have a very, very unique program that is no longer available to them," she says.

-There was nothing like it, there was never a co-run program in this school district, and there was never a program that spent so much time on behavioural and social changes, and personal self-esteem issues along with the academic portion with the school district," she says. -We had the best of both worlds."

No one wants to see these students end up on the streets, or worse, in the criminal justice system. However, now with no other recourse, this might be where some of these youths find themselves starting next year. And at an estimated cost of \$60,000 per year to incarcerate just one juvenile offender, cutting Kiefers program seems senseless.

-This has been such a welcoming program," she says. -On a daily basis you can see the difference here. In five months, the changes are amazing; from when a student walks in the door to when they leave, its night and day ... when a child has found success for the first time, academic or in any institution for the first time," she says.

-They come back many years later and tell us, "this is the best thing that ever happened to me, and without this I wouldnt be anywhere; I wouldnt be back in school. That is hugely gratifying, just to have this program to have existed for as long as it did, and to have helped so many kids." 

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