

Community Outreach at the Cornwall Alternative School

Introduction

Cornwall Alternative School in Regina is a nongovernmental organization offering an alternative academic education to students who are experiencing difficulties in a traditional educational setting. The school provides an opportunity to obtain an education in a small, friendly environment. Classes are offered to a maximum of 34 students in Grades 7 to 9. It is a small school that makes a big difference!

The curriculum has been enhanced over the years in response to the special needs of our students. Our goal is to maintain a supportive learning environment in which students are encouraged to take active responsibility for their education. Regular attendance, the completion of work assignments and appropriate behaviour help ensure success and are evaluated on a weekly

The Caledon Institute is collaborating with the National Crime Prevention Centre's Community Mobilization Program to create the Crime Prevention series. The goal of this series is to document initiatives that build safe communities. The series seeks to enhance public awareness of and support for community-based partnerships on crime prevention through social development.

basis. Cornwall Alternative School (CAS) strives to have students experience academic success and personal growth with a corresponding increase in their confidence and self-esteem.

The target populations are students aged 12 to 16 years who are referred to our school for various reasons, including poor attendance, behavioural issues, drug or alcohol related problems, recent release from an institution or other personal difficulties.

Philosophy

The Cornwall School believes in an holistic approach to education which facilitates lifelong learning by addressing the various needs of the individual (physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual). Models such as Reality Therapy and Restitution form the foundation for the approaches used at CAS. Reality Therapy is based on Choice Theory which states that we are internally motivated to choose our behaviour to get what we want and that all behaviour is purposeful. Restitution is a Reality Therapy technique for helping people become self-directed, self-disciplined and self-healed. The emphasis



Staff at the Cornwall School emphasize the importance of positive extra-curricular activities. Teachers and students are pictured here during a 'Medieval Feast.'

in restitution is not on behaving to please others but to become the person one wants to be. Counsellors and teachers use these models as a basis for their interaction with students.

Because relationship-building is a key factor in the program, it is essential to create a nonconfrontational and preventive approach. The small student-staff ratio fosters improved academic and social achievement, and the development of positive relationships between students and adult role models. Students are treated in a respectful manner enabling them to regain trust in adults. In this environment, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour in a noncoercive, nonconfrontational manner. In addition to being successful with our clientele, we have established rapport and built a solid working relationship with the community.

Our school has partnered with various agencies and developed programs which have contributed to the well-being of the community. School activities include a Counselling Program

which provides individual, group and family counselling services including crisis intervention, and a Lunch Program which teaches meal preparation and nutrition. Computer Literacy courses for adults and children are sponsored by the Regina Housing Authority, and Parenting and After School Programs are supported by the City of Regina.

The Cornwall Alternative School's main objectives are to teach social and educational skills required to reenter mainstream educational institutions and to strengthen family involvement in each student's education. The school encourages students to make positive choices and acts as an advocate for students and their families. Students learn self-evaluation skills and awareness of different cultures.

Need for an outreach worker

The Cornwall School was established in 1972 as the community's response to the need

for an alternative learning environment in Regina for youth who were not attending mainstream schools due primarily to poverty-related issues. CAS wanted to hire an Outreach Worker who would develop a formal bridging program for students not currently enrolled in an educational program in an effort to help break the generational cycle of violence, illiteracy and poverty. This individual also would assist those students making a transition from CAS back to the mainstream school system. The ability to offer the resources of a Community Outreach Worker to help students stay in school was also a means of addressing the issue of youth crime. The Outreach Worker would act as a resource person and provide direct support and services to individuals, families and schools for students returning to school.

While 65 percent of Cornwall School's students return to the regular system, 35 percent do not have the support and/or resources required to ensure success. This latter group is composed of the students who are most likely to resort to criminal activity or become the victims of crime. Having students in school rather than on the street reduces crime and fosters healthy lifestyles. The program lessens the need for more costly and intrusive services, such as foster care and young offender custody. It also places emphasis on the importance of education to children and their families in an attempt to return children to school and therefore break the generational cycle of violence, illiteracy and poverty.

The Cornwall School received funding to hire an Outreach Worker from the Ottawa-based National Crime Prevention Centre's Community Mobilization Program which supports projects to help communities develop and implement solutions to problems contributing to crime and victimization.

This six-month pilot project assessed the needs of students not currently attending an educational facility through a youth survey. The survey identified the various reasons as to why youth were not attending school. Armed with this information, the Outreach Worker acts as an advocate on behalf of these students to return to school. The worker also assists those attending CAS in the transition back to the mainstream educational system.

"The Outreach Worker has saved my family. Before her [involvement], it was nothing but crisis after crisis. We were always fighting. Now we get along better, we don't fight as much, we are happier, and that's because she cared."

– An appreciative parent

The Outreach Worker builds a relationship with street youth based on mutual trust and respect with the intention of encouraging adolescents to begin the process of returning to school. For many of these kids, school is not a comfortable place; they need to establish positive relationships in order to feel they can be part of the education system. The Outreach Worker works intensively with those students and their families to emphasize the importance of a high school education. Transportation to and from the school is provided at first, but once the student is comfortable in the educational environment, he or she is encouraged to be more independent. The worker continues to monitor the student to ensure that the placement is effective and the parents are involved in the entire process. If necessary, the Outreach Worker acts as an advocate for the parents at school meetings and activities.

The Outreach Worker is also available to intervene in family conflicts which may prevent the student from being successful. This interven-

tion includes offering crisis and short-term counselling as well as referral to other agencies. It also involves acting as an advocate for parents in courts or with the Department of Social Services. Cornwall School currently facilitates regular parent/family group meetings to provide extra support for the families in order to foster healthy, happy relationships. We observe less conflict between parents and their children when youth are successful at school.

Conclusion

Since beginning this project in January 1999, we have been successful in meeting our objectives. The Outreach Worker has assisted 34 youths and their families. Of the 14 students who have graduated from CAS since June 1998, 11 still are attending mainstream schools with support of the worker. Ten youths who have had difficulty staying in school (other than CAS graduates) are enrolled once again in an academic

program. Since the project began, only three of the 21 students currently enrolled in school and actively working with the Outreach Worker have been involved with the criminal justice system.

The Cornwall School's Outreach Program is helping to keep students off the streets and in school to further their education, breaking the cycle of poverty and the social problems related to this cycle. This extra support for the students and their families has been important to the students' overall well-being. The project has reached out to more than just the students; it also has touched and transformed the lives of the parents, thereby improving all the relationships within the family.

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