



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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## Rite of Passage

**G**raduating from high school is a rite of passage, but for students at risk, high school can be an oppressive and intimidating place. Programs like the Gordon Bell Senior Off Campus program (GBSOC) however, offer an alternative to the mainstream school system, allowing students to work at their own pace, away from the barriers they experience in the mainstream system.

To better understand these dynamics, the CCPA worked with five at risk students in the GBSOC program, and made a film about their experiences. The project also became an opportunity for one of the teachers to express his frustrations with the prevailing view that devalues the need for programs like these. The number of teenagers who need these programs is increasing, but the programs are vulnerable to funding cuts.

Participants in the film confirmed studies showing that most students at risk come from inner city poverty. This, and related factors like racism, anger, depression, anxiety issues, pregnancy, learning disabilities and family challenges, also contributed to their inability to conform to the mainstream model. Many had dropped out before enrolling at GBSOC, a program that provided the personal supports and flexibility needed to balance school with other life issues.

First Nations youth are especially vulnerable in the mainstream system. Their low educational attainment has been the focus of much research highlighting three barriers to finishing high school; 1) socio-economic, since lower incomes limit educational opportunities, 2) geographic, since many

youth are forced to move off-reserve to finish school - as one participant in the film explained, school on her reserve ends at grade nine, and she dropped out from sheer loneliness when she was sent away from her family - and 3) cultural, since there is a dearth of supports and culturally sensitive resources.

Research also reveals a substantial gap in educational attainment for First Nations youth who are two and a half times more likely to not complete high school - as well as four times less likely to attain post secondary education.

Numbers also confirm what educators already know, that students at risk fare badly in the mainstream, a reality also informed by the negative health consequences of living in poverty. It is concerning that the prevalent view is that all youth have similar access and choices. In *Rite of Passage* Brock Brown expresses the opposite view: alternative programs are needed to provide at risk students with the choices they need to succeed.

*These kids are the products of the world we are in. These kids are the products of history, the social forces out there and I'm here trying to make sure that those social forces don't destroy the experiences of those kids.*

Shielding students from these social forces is a challenge, because beyond helping motivate students to attend school, and/or renegotiating the curriculum when needed, there is only so much even alternative educators can do. Every day, these teachers are forced

there is an alternative.

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to make tough choices. This can be a very messy process.

Another challenge, according to Brown, is that society is turning away from these students, and programs like this one are increasingly easy targets for funding cuts. These programs are also forced to compete with the mainstream system, for much smaller amounts, when funding for alternative programs has a higher impact because the need is greater. He worries about this fight for survival because of its repercussions.

*We are in a stage now, where we are reinforcing the worst behaviours in people by not investing in them when they are young and giving them no hope... Nobody's talking to the kids nobody is saying "what is it that you need? ... I've got to try to ensure that the kids... come out of here with a little bit more confidence, feeling they can go somewhere..."*

Contrary to the mainstream, programs like the GBSOC program create hope and opportunities in large part because they are built on relationships and trust. Research by the Manitoba Research Alliance confirms that investing in students as individuals leads to transformation (see Koshyk, 2012 and Kristjansson, 2011). Simply finishing high school is often enough to create a sense of pride; this impacts the students and their families alike. That many GBSOC students enrol in post secondary education confirms this research.

*These kids, you know, they just keep coming and you only have them or a short period of time and I think that's really the hardest part. You care about people and you realize that you are limited in your power to help them... But, even if they're struggling with the school part, if they start to trust you and feel you're not out to get them, then maybe they will hang on a little bit longer.*

Given that education is the most important predictor of moving out of poverty, as well as a social determinant of health,

it becomes clear that alternative schools like the GBSOC program are essential to ensuring a healthy future for these youth and for society, as a whole. An increasing number of educational institutions are trying to respond to the powerful and structural socio-economic forces that systematically marginalize students at risk. But there is only so much they can do.

*Rite of Passage* is an argument for the need for institutional transformation. New discourses are needed that emphasize education as an investment, not a cost to society. The role politicians can play in addressing the current educational disparity is to ensure funding is available for alternative programs - since they cannot and should not need to compete with mainstream programs. Policies aimed at facilitating partnerships between educational institutions could also address the inherent inflexibility in the system by creating new opportunities. Providing supports to these programs would also demonstrate a needed and critical societal ethic of care.

*We need to have programs that show that we actually care and love each other. And that shows through your funding, it shows through your policies... That's what I'd want people to say: "You know what, these are important programs"...*

**Carole O'Brien, MCP (Masters in City Planning), filmmaker, and CCPA-mb board member.**

**Brock Brown** who was quoted in this piece is a teacher who worked at Gordon Bell Senior Off Campus program. He is the one who approached the CCPA to do this project. He now works at the Winnipeg Adult Education Centre on Vaughan street.

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