



*I would make more programs like Alternative schools for youth – they need something to keep them off the streets. [It] helped me get back on track with school.*

*Made me like school. – 16-YEAR-OLD STUDENT*

Education plays a key role in young people's healthy development. Research conducted by the McCreary Centre Society (a British Columbia non-profit organization concerned with youth health) has shown that even the most vulnerable youth who feel connected to school are more likely to report better health and above average marks, and to engage in fewer risky activities, than youth who feel less connected to school. However, recognizing that not all youth thrive in a mainstream academic setting, many school districts offer a range of alternative education programs aimed at serving not only the academic but also the vocational, social, and emotional needs of their students.

What are the experiences of young people attending alternative education programs? We set out to address this question by canvassing youth in B.C. communities with a high prevalence of youth street-involvement and sexual exploitation. The focus was on youth in alternative education programs designed for students considered at "high-risk" for educational disengagement, as defined by the Ministry of Education – the challenges to education that these youth face and how alternative education programs address these challenges to meet their needs.

This study complemented McCreary's marginalized and street-involved youth study (*Against the Odds*, 2007) and aimed to explore the experiences of youth who attend alternative education programs and to look at the role alternative education programs play in the lives of youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The same nine school districts that took part in the street-involved youth study were invited to participate in the alternative education study. Of those, seven participated in a youth survey and adult stakeholder interviews, one participated in the interview component only, and one declined participation. Over 300 students aged 13 to 19, in 34 alternative education programs, completed the pencil-and-paper surveys. Sixty-two interviews were also carried out with key adult community stakeholders, including alternative education program staff, parents, social workers, and probation officers with clients in alternative education programs.

MAYA PELED AND ANNIE SMITH

## ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN B.C.:

### Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Students

#### THE STUDENTS

Although most students who completed the survey identified as having European ancestry (57 percent), a large proportion identified as Aboriginal (36 percent) – an over-representation relative to the percentage of Aboriginal students who completed a similar survey in mainstream schools across B.C. (7 percent). This rate can be partially explained by the fact that some of the participating school districts had programs designed specifically for Aboriginal students. There was also a disproportionate percentage of youth who reported living in government care in the past year, 14 percent compared to only 2 percent in mainstream schools.

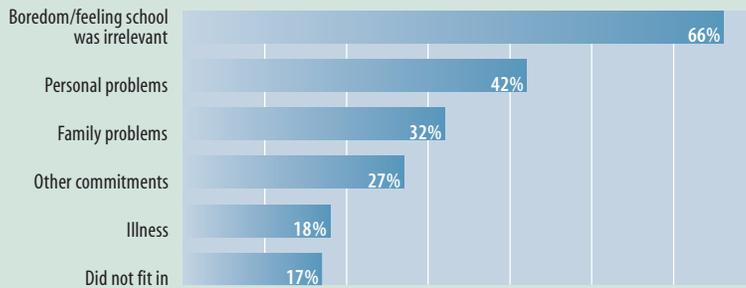
#### *Educational disengagement*

Students identified a number of factors as contributing to their disengagement from mainstream school. The most common included boredom, feeling that school was irrelevant to their lives, and personal and family problems.

Thirteen percent of youth who completed the survey were currently attending an alternative education program within a mainstream school; 58 percent were in a program run by the school district outside of a mainstream school; 25 percent were attending a program located in a community setting; and 5 percent did not know what type of alternative program they were attending.

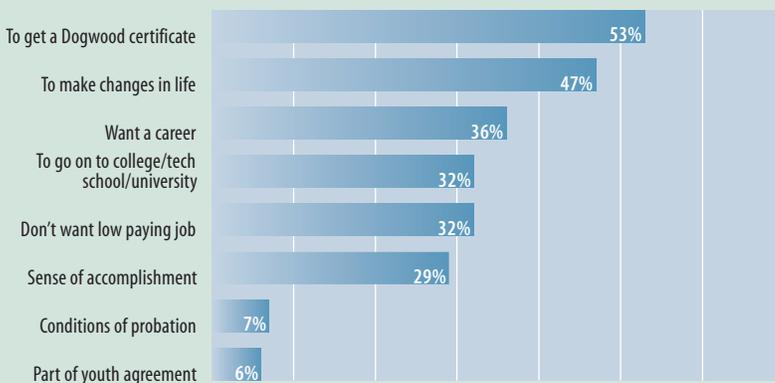
**EN BREF** Cette étude visait à explorer l'expérience vécue par des jeunes inscrits à des programmes d'éducation alternative et à examiner le rôle joué par ces programmes dans la vie des jeunes sans abri ou à risque de le devenir. L'étude constate que, malgré les obstacles que ces élèves rencontrent, la majorité d'entre eux sont attachés à leur école et ont des aspirations scolaires positives. L'objectif ultime de nombreux programmes d'éducation alternative est de réintégrer les jeunes à l'école ordinaire, mais cette transition ne convient pas à tous. Seulement le tiers des élèves de l'étude ont affirmé désirer retourner à l'école ordinaire. Toutefois, sur le plan des aspirations scolaires, 94 pour cent prévoient finir leurs études secondaires et 36 pour cent prévoient être diplômés d'un collège, d'une école technique ou d'une université.

**FIGURE 1: Youths' most common reasons for having left school in the past (among those who left)**



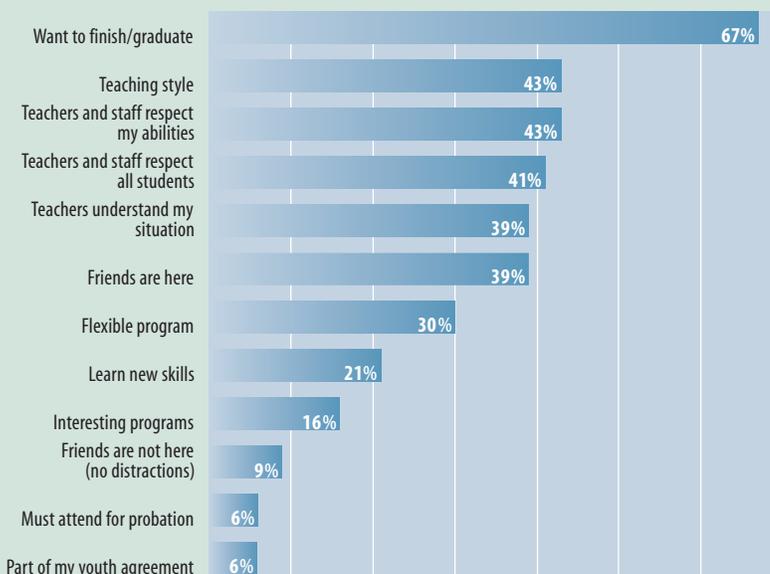
Note: Youth could choose more than one response

**FIGURE 2: Youths' reasons for returning to school**



Note: Youth could choose more than one response

**FIGURE 3: What keeps students coming to their current alternative education program**



Note: Youth could choose more than one response

### Educational re-engagement

Students who enrolled in an alternative education program after previously leaving school provided a number of reasons for doing so, including wanting to get a high school diploma ("Dogwood" diploma in B.C.), wishing to make changes in their lives, and wanting a career. Relatively few indicated that their return was mandatory, such as a requirement of their Youth Agreement or probation.

A range of services has been established to assist youth through the potentially difficult transition process either into alternative education or from an alternative program back into mainstream school. Although some alternative education programs have designated intake sessions throughout the year, most have a continuous intake process, allowing youth to reconnect with their education whenever they are ready to do so. This process not only allows for a timely response but also can ensure that individual support is available during the transition.

### Staying engaged

The most common reasons youth cited for continuing to attend their alternative education program included wanting to graduate and factors associated with the teachers and other school staff (see Figure 3). Another factor for staying engaged is flexibility of the program, including flexible attendance requirements that can be worked around students' other needs and commitments.

## THE CHALLENGES

### Housing and family stressors

*How are they supposed to prepare for exams, how are they supposed to finish courses when they don't know where they're going to sleep?* – TEACHER, ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Students in alternative education programs face many challenges to their education. For instance, about one third reported living in precarious housing at some point, including on the street, in abandoned buildings, or in a car. We know from previous studies that unstable housing can have a negative impact on educational engagement and success at school.

Students also reported challenging family situations. For example, one in three had a family member who had tried to commit suicide, and over half had witnessed someone in their family being abused or mistreated. Despite these experiences, students generally reported feeling connected to their families, and more than three quarters had turned to their relatives for support in the past year.

Alternative education staff recognized that connecting with a student's family can be instrumental in helping a youth stay engaged at school. For example, one program has a built-in family support component in which young people learn to cook by preparing a meal for their families, and their parents have a chance to attend workshops and socialize with one another.

### **Poverty and hunger**

*Students coming to school without lunch, without having had breakfast... That's an impediment on their ability to learn.* – TEACHER, ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Poverty and its symptoms, including hunger, can negatively affect learning and concentration. Stakeholders reported that some youths' families struggle to provide their children with enough food and appropriate clothing for school. The resulting shame and humiliation that these students experience can contribute to their disengagement from mainstream school.

Hunger was a reality for more than one in five students. Among those who experienced hunger, almost half went hungry once a week or more. Classroom staff explained that sharing a meal is one of the most rewarding and important aspects of their program because it not only addresses a basic need but also provides an opportunity for staff and youth to connect over an activity that is unrelated to academic work. For example, one program provides a warm meal every day with a consistent weekly menu. The students enjoy the meal but also appreciate the consistency and predictability that it entails.

### **Mental health**

*[A student who] has significant depression and anxiety tends to have high absenteeism... Sometimes they just can't bring themselves to come.* – YOUTH SUPPORT WORKER

Many students reported serious mental health issues. For example, 14 percent tried killing themselves in the past year, with females more likely than males to have attempted suicide (19 percent vs. 10 percent). In addition to diagnosed disorders such as ADHD, anxiety, or depression, some students have problems that go un-diagnosed, making it difficult for the school to understand and address the youth's behaviours and school performance.

Many programs have developed strategies for addressing their students' mental and emotional health needs. For example, one program provides educational, social, and emotional support for students who need it. The course components include adapted academic programs to meet individual needs with an emphasis on helping youth to develop tools for coping with intense emotions and focusing on and identifying their strengths. Another program involves an educational psychologist who sees youth at intake to assess learning difficulties. This process ensures that necessary supports are put into place from the start of the program.

### **Substance use**

*Drug culture – it's a huge issue – it takes youth away from schooling and a large number of students come from homes where parents are using.*

– VICE PRINCIPAL, ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Students reported high rates of substance use and many started using at a young age. Almost half (46 percent) had tried marijuana by age 12, and 75 percent had tried it by the time they were 14. Around half of the students (51 percent) reported using marijuana the day before they completed the survey. Among students who had tried alcohol, 67 percent of males and 70 percent of females binge drank in the past month (defined in this study as having five or more alcoholic drinks within a couple of hours).

Students who reported using marijuana or other drugs in the past month felt less connected to school than students who did not use these substances.

Some alternative education programs are designed to reduce substance use and to provide students with more adaptive coping techniques. For example, in some programs an individual treatment plan is developed for each student, with the goal of reducing high-risk behaviours and enhancing self-confidence. Youth have access to parent-teen mediation, individual and group counseling, recreational activities, and academic courses. Teachers work with students' previous teachers and the students themselves to develop an academic plan to meet their needs.

### **Abuse and sexual exploitation**

A high percentage of youth had been physically abused (61 percent of females and 40 percent of males) or sexually abused (44 percent of females and 10 percent of males). Six percent reported being sexually exploited, meaning that they engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money or goods. Studies have shown that sexual exploitation is a barrier to education, in that youth who have been sexually exploited are less likely to attend school than those who have not been exploited.

Therefore alternative education programs that address sexual health and positive relationships, and help students to recognize when they are being sexually exploited, can assist in keeping youth in school and fostering their healthy development.

### **Pregnancy and parenting**

Almost a quarter of students reported either having been pregnant or causing a pregnancy (34 percent of females, 12 percent of males), and 7 percent had children.

Students with the experience of pregnancy or parenthood face additional challenges to their education. For example, students with pregnancy experience were more likely than those without to report extreme depression in the past month and to have been sexually abused or forced to have sex. Parenthood can be especially challenging for young people who are disconnected from their families, and young mothers who want to continue their education are often forced to stay home because many day-care centres do not accept infants or the young parents cannot afford the fees.

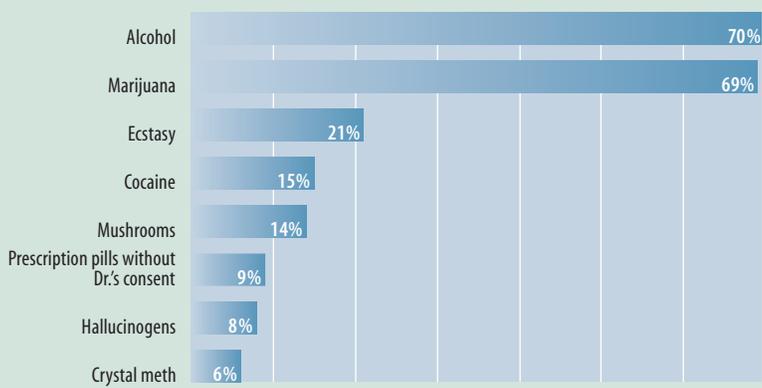
Some alternative education programs are designed specifically for pregnant or parenting youth. These programs provide support with life- and career-skills in addition to providing an academic curriculum, and some have access to outreach services in the same facility. A few programs have an on-site daycare.

**Students were asked to identify services that they felt were needed.**

**In every community, the most commonly identified pertained to job**

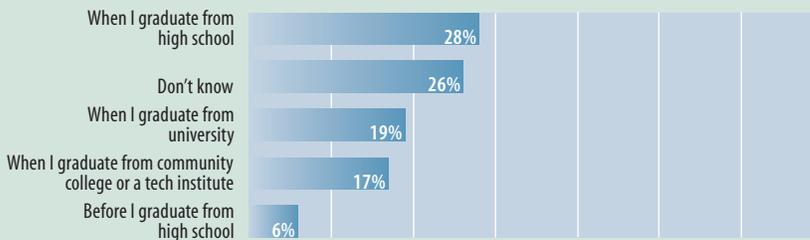
**training, work experience, and safe and affordable housing.**

**FIGURE 4: Most commonly used substances in the past month**



Note: Youth could choose more than one response

**FIGURE 5: "When do you expect to finish your education?"**



### Community connections

*It's that collaborative approach...it's like this kid is the centre of a wheel and all these agencies are spokes feeding into the centre of that wheel, and the more spokes the more likely that wheel is going to turn. – POLICE LIAISON OFFICER*

Stakeholders highlighted the fact that schools' partnerships with community agencies and government departments are critical for supporting vulnerable youth because they facilitate a wider range of services and opportunities for these students. A number of alternative education programs are offered through community centres, which are particularly effective for young people in need of additional supports such as addictions counseling and pre-employment training, as well as services to meet their basic needs (e.g., showers, laundry facilities, food programs).

Students were asked to identify services that they felt were needed. In every community, the most commonly identified pertained to job training, work experience, and safe and affordable housing. These responses were consistent with those provided by the marginalized and street-involved youth study.

### MOVING ON

The ultimate goal of many alternative education programs is for youth to return to mainstream school. However, this transition is not appropriate for all students, and only 36 percent of students in this study stated that they wanted to return to mainstream school. In fact, 44 percent reported that they would not go back if they had the choice, and 20 percent were unsure.

In terms of educational aspirations, only 6 percent reported that they did not expect to graduate from high school, whereas 36 percent expected to graduate from college, a technical institute, or university.

This study highlights the fact that students in alternative education programs face many challenges, yet most feel connected to school and have positive academic aspirations. Alternative education programs are assisting youth academically as well as vocationally and socially. However, as McCreary's study of street-involved youth demonstrated, many of the most vulnerable youth are still not connected with any of the education programs available to them. If alternative education programs and communities build on their successes, they could reach out to even more high-risk youth. |

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The authors would like to acknowledge the co-authors of the original report on which this article is based: M. Albert, L. MacKay, D. Stewart, E. Saewyc and the McCreary Centre Society. The full report, *Making the Grade: A Review of Alternative Education Programs in B.C.*, is available at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca)

## SUPPORTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

### Professional and peer supports

*A good peer group [is important]. We see kids help one another to get better rather than dragging each other down. – TEACHER, ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION*

In addition to academic support, many students in alternative education need a significant amount of emotional support, given their histories of trauma and chaotic home environments. Many teachers feel it is their responsibility to be positive role models to their students, particularly to those who do not have such role models in their lives.

Students reported seeking support from a range of professionals, including teachers (70 percent), school counselors (61 percent) and school support workers (52 percent). Students who accessed professional supports reported finding them helpful.

Having friends in the same program is another factor that students and teachers identified as helping to keep youth engaged. Training students as peer mentors and incorporating a peer support model into programs has proven successful in helping youth to stay engaged at school.

### School connectedness

*[What keeps me coming is that] I feel safe and comfortable. – 14-YEAR-OLD STUDENT*

School connectedness is essential for keeping youth engaged in their education. School connectedness includes relationships with teachers, feelings of safety, and a sense of belonging at school. The majority of young people felt a part of their school (69 percent), were happy at school (72 percent), and felt safe there (78 percent). Eighty-one percent reported liking their current program, whereas only 41 percent had liked their previous school.

Youth with high levels of school connectedness were more likely to report better health, post-secondary educational aspirations, and positive feelings about their lives.