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Peer to peer research explores why some kids drop out

Every new school year brings unfamiliar faces, budding friendships, fresh challenges and exciting opportunities. But it's not always all positive. There are also hundreds of youth who won't walk the halls, take part in classes or even bother to register for school.

The question as to why prompted Dr. Gord Miller, founding Chair of the Community Youth Group in School District #62, to initiate a one of a kind study.

Over the last year, more than 350 youths from School District #62 participated in discussions around what motivates and supports local youth to stay in school. The project, *Staying in School*, is unique to Canada and was carried out in five Sooke schools by youth trained as researchers.



Staying in School graduate Kyle Louie shows off his certificate.

Interviews and focus group sessions took place in two middle and three high schools in May and June. There has never been a study of this magnitude in British Columbia, much less Victoria or the Capital Region.

A grant from the Victoria Foundation was used to assist with the development of effective promotional materials to gain trust, encourage staff interest, outline the benefits of staying in school and produce a participant consent package in conjunction with the school district.

A total of 18 student researchers participated in nine training sessions to prepare them for conducting the necessary peer interviews and focus group sessions.

The findings of the student researchers as to why students drop out were broad in scope. Students attributed things like feeling unconnected to their school, high stress levels, feeling unsafe at school and falling behind in their work as factors for leaving school.

Ninety per cent of those interviewed said that parents and relatives support and motivate them. More than 75 per cent of middle school youth polled said teachers, counsellors and administration provided support and motivation, while only 30 per cent of high school kids felt the same way. Seventy per cent said support and motivation came from friends.

According to the findings, the most important element of positive youth development was identified as a sense of belonging, something around which many of the youth interviewed had issues. Comments ranged from schools seeming big and overwhelming, feeling unimportant because of big class sizes, feeling unwanted and uncared for by anyone within the school to not feeling connected to others and their teachers and not knowing how to change that.

Other key elements identified as part of positive youth development include supportive relationships, emotional and physical safety and meaningful youth engagement.

There were many unanticipated benefits to the participants of this unique project, including a broad interest within the community. The youth experienced powerful civic engagement when mayors, school trustees, an MLA, an MP, superintendents, members



Spectrum school videographers share a break and a laugh.



Students show off their Staying in School t-shirts.

of the teachers' union, school staff, parents and representatives from charitable organizations attended their summation presentation.

"What was interesting was that the presentation did not go as planned," said Miller. "Rather there were bi-directional spontaneous exchanges between the audience, the youth and the adult partners. This resulted in many interesting and valuable ideas for follow-up which we had not anticipated."

"The youth surprised us with their ability to articulate the results of the study and the impact of this process upon them personally and also upon the youth they interviewed."

Next steps and plans for continuing the project include working in more schools in the Sooke area of School District #62, as the pilot program this year was limited to five school sites. Talks with members of the school community within Sooke are under way to implement the program again in the current academic year, funding permitting.

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