

# YOUTH, CRIMINAL JUSTICE & LITERACY

A FRONTIER COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG COLLABORATIVE STUDY

*“These kids are in a high risk group for gang or criminal activity. Many are also extremely behind in their reading capabilities ... it has amazed me how much these youth are eager to improve their reading skills ... [they] feel a real sense of accomplishment as their reading improves, and that gives them motivation to keep trying.”*

- Tutor, Youth Advocate Program, Halifax

In 2008, over 191,000 criminal charges were laid against youth in Canada<sup>1</sup> at the cost of \$100,000 per year per incarcerated individual.<sup>2</sup>

Studies show literacy programming can be a successful component in preventing criminal involvement for youth, and for reducing criminal involvement for youth already involved in crime.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Frontier College hosted **Critical Crossroads: Youth, Criminal Justice and Literacy** in 2012, a conference held concurrently in Winnipeg, Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto and Halifax to discuss the issue of **youth at risk** of being or currently **in conflict with**

*“We work with youth to help them understand what a successful future looks like, it is very individualized – working with them one-on-one to help them realize their goals.”*

- Touchstone Family Association, Richmond BC

---

<sup>1</sup> Milligan, S. (2010). Juristat: Youth Court Statistics 2008/2009. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (2009). House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre- Budget consultations: Investing in Youth Crime Prevention. Markham, ON: Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, p.4; St. Thomas University Centre for Research on Youth at Risk (1998). *Myths About Youth Crime in Canada: Fact Sheet*.

<sup>3</sup> Frontier College. Critical Crossroads Discussion Paper (2012), p.2

**the law.** By engaging in a broad-based discussion, participants in Critical Crossroads explored the crucial role literacy plays in the lives of at-risk youth.

Among the conclusions drawn from the 2012 conference was the need to establish and **share best practices** with those who police, sentence, monitor and support youth before, during and after incarceration, so that they are aware of the **importance of literacy** and have strategies they can use to **support literacy development** and **reduce the impacts of low literacy.**<sup>4</sup>

Now Frontier College is focusing on ways to establish best practices for bringing literacy to at-risk youth, pre-, during and post-incarceration by collaborating with the University of Winnipeg on researching the work being carried out by youth organizations. Most of these organizations employ **wraparound supports** to benefit youth at risk of involvement in criminal activity or currently involved in the criminal justice system. These include:

- giving the individual and his/her caregivers' perspective primary importance
- making plans which are relevant to the individual
- ensuring that activities are strengths-based

By identifying the best practices of organizations engaged in helping at-risk youth, we can establish the importance of literacy in:

- **preventing** youth from participating in criminal activity
- **reengaging** individuals with education
- **reducing** the recidivism rate
- **reestablishing** individuals as active citizens in the community

*“The literacy skills (academic, social, financial and relational) help individuals be confident and healthy human beings. It is a holistic view of literacy. When you put those things in place those are the foundations for achieving the education/career goals and transformational life goals. ”*

- The HYPE program, Toronto

## LITERACY IN PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Defining literacy is an ongoing and evolving task. UNESCO offers a good starting point, explaining it as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.”

At Frontier College, an increased comfort with reading, writing and mathematics is at the heart of youth programming. Using **best practices** like **collaboration, learner-centered methods and a belief that every place is a learning place**, Frontier College aims to make Canada a nation of readers, leading to greater community participation and confidence in its citizenry. Youth programs like Literacy and Basic Skills, GED preparation and the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Microsoft Office Specialist program help youth who have left school early attain their education and employment goals.

With the intent to establish and share best practices, Frontier College and the University of Winnipeg conducted interviews with 19 organizations working with youth in Canada. The majority of these organizations have a clientele comprised of young people (on average, but not limited to, 12-20 years old) who are at risk of, or already involved in, criminal activity. Other commonalities include working with underserved communities, and having clients who are disengaged with standard education systems.

Core literacies, which are a goal common to wraparound programs, are integral to individualized student and client goal-setting and planning processes and are learned through both focused instruction and within the broader dynamic environments of integrated program activities. Some of the organizations (e.g. the HYPE program) indicated that education was their primary concern, while other organizations focus on issues like restorative justice, employability and crime prevention. Many organizations indicated that their programming includes identifying the learning styles of the youth they work with: visual, auditory and/or kinesthetic (tactile). This helps the youth experience learning in a way that is less stressful than those in the past.

Many programs describe how literacy is woven into their work, giving at-risk youth the space to re-engage with education. A common characteristic of the youth enrolled in wraparound programming is that they have become disenfranchised from the traditional education system; most have not done well in school or have been suspended or expelled from school. For these youth, targeted, individualized literacy programming would give them the tools to imagine and plan a life outside of the criminal justice system. At the most basic level, literacy includes having the ability to read, write and perform simple mathematics. Attaining these skills allows youth to move forward to higher education, apprenticeships or better employment opportunities.

Winnipeg's Intensions program believes that "traditional academic literacies of reading, writing and arithmetic, as necessary as they are, are no more necessary than the wide array of literacies commonly referred to as survival skills and life skills which embrace physical, emotional, psychological, family, street, work and institutional literacies." Located within a traditional school, Intensions offers a full range of academic options for students aged

The Helping Youth Pursue Education (HYPE) program at Toronto's Centennial College is among the most education-focused programs of those interviewed. HYPE is an access program to help individuals aged 13-29—especially those from underserved neighbourhoods—**transition to post-secondary education**. "We make every decision to support the career and personal development of our learners. Our curriculum, teaching and services demonstrate that we value the diverse profiles of our learners." 25-35% of HYPE graduates apply to college.

Using a **flexible, relationship-based** model, HYPE helps youth feel secure in returning to education. Many of the individuals attending HYPE are "extraordinarily sensitive to failure", so the staff and mentors at HYPE do what they can to ensure success within the program, and, if the individual is forced to withdraw, they help him/her negotiate the process with no penalty to the individual. They also use a pass/fail system for the transition program, thus avoiding the rigours of a standard evaluation or grading system, while still providing a challenge to help prepare enrolled youth for post-secondary education.

*“... nurturing a solid tutor/student relationship is essential.”*

*“If you give kids a taste of success, it turns them on to learning.”*

*– Desta Youth, Montreal*

14 – 18, so they are delivering a “welcoming, flexible, strength-based learning environment” for students who are not working up to their potential.

In Toronto, the School Away from School (SAS) program offered by Promoting Education and Community Health (PEACH) works with “youth who are at risk of not completing high school, who have had some form of involvement with the criminal justice system [or] who are transitioning from the justice system”, including offering support for students who become incarcerated while participating in the program, and their families. Working

with teachers from the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board, SAS gives youth the space to work on their school credits, while also offering wraparound supports and life skills workshops.

The majority of these programs function with limited staff and limited budgets. It is problematic to suggest stretching resources further to add another component, even one as important as literacy. However, encouraging partnerships with, and referrals to, literacy organizations—making literacy an intrinsic part of the holistic support system for at-risk youth—is a step that can, and should, be taken.

## FEATURES OF WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Numerous organizations in Canada are working to support youth at risk of being, or currently involved in, the criminal justice system, pre-, during and post-incarceration by using wraparound programs. These exhibit the following features:

- **Emotional support and positive relationship formation** – all the interviewed programs reported that emotional support is essential to creating a welcoming, safe and affirming environment where youth feel trusted and respected. For example, the Youth Advocate Program in Halifax works with some of the youngest (9 – 14) clients of all the programs, using a model designed for early intervention and aimed at reducing making negative choices. **Literacy activities – such as a volunteer and learner reading together – can contribute to positive relationships and support.**
- **Creative problem-solving** – organizations that use creative problem-solving attribute critical thinking, self-restitution (i.e., reflecting on personal behaviour in order to accept responsibility for one’s actions), capacity building, brainstorming and increasing self-esteem as important to the problem-solving process.

*“The Youth Advocate works with the general philosophy at PEACH that education is a priority. Once the immediate crises have been stabilized, the conversation always reverts to education. All counselling sessions are done in a space that is conducive and present youth the opportunity to freely express and digest information. Role play, art and other visual concepts are employed to conceptualize the benefit of education to youth.”*

*- PEACH, Toronto*

Often these can extend beyond the program’s walls, and include teachers going to homes to find out why clients aren’t attending class, and then brainstorming solutions to the problem. **Developing their literacy skills can help youth approach problem-solving in increasingly creative ways.**

- **Mentoring** – Not every organization has a formal mentoring program, but modeling pro-social, non-judgmental behaviours is common. Mentors may focus on educational or career goals, but are more often also available to offer social and emotional support. Mentors are often the link to the adult world for kids who do not have a lot of contact with adults in their lives. Sometimes they are the only source of encouragement for the students. **Literacy program volunteers and staff can be important mentors for youth, demonstrating the value of literacy in an increasingly complex world.**
- **Occupational goal-setting** – A number of the interviewed organizations have employment as the target for their clients; for them, occupational goal-setting (both long- and short-term) is a key objective. Connections are made with employers who have a nurturing environment, and all efforts are made to connect youth with work that is interesting to them. **Improved literacy skills will help to make these goals possible.**
- **Portfolio creation** – Creating a file of the client’s work, goals, certifications and accomplishments happens less often than the other best practices used at the interviewed organizations. In programs like Winnipeg’s Intensions, academic portfolios are kept and reviewed regularly; Toronto’s HYPE uses portfolios as a “tool kit for increased employability or for application to post-secondary educational institutions.” **Enhanced literacy skills will ensure that these portfolios become a valuable tool that youth can use to demonstrate their accomplishments.**

*“We are sincerely grateful to Frontier College for providing us with the volunteer tutor program. Not only does it provide assistance with literacy and numeric skills, but it also gives learners an excellent example of intellectual skill and strength of character, which our clients need to step out into society.”*

- Stan Daniels Healing Centre  
Prison Literacy Program,  
Edmonton

## INCLUDING LITERACY IN WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

Many organizations supporting at-risk youth focus on components like:

- anger management
- restorative justice
- crime prevention
- self-expression
- attaining employment

Each of these elements is part of the holistic solution to reducing youth involvement in the criminal justice system, **a solution that would benefit from the inclusion of literacy support for all at-risk youth.**

As previously stated, Frontier College offers programs to help youth who have left school early attain their education and employment goals. Literacy development amongst at-risk youth is not only critical to their positive growth and development; it is critical to the growth and development of a healthy society.

Literacy helps individuals negotiate the world around them, from bus schedules and medication instructions to creating a weekly budget. While there is still work to be done to show at-risk youth that a life outside of the criminal justice system is desirable and, more importantly, attainable, the costs of ignoring or abandoning at-risk youth far outreach the costs of supporting youth in their quest for literacy and rewarding futures.

It is necessary to consider the role literacy education and literacy play in youth organizations, and to see where strengthening literacy programming would be beneficial to include as part of the holistic, wraparound support systems. At the same time, it is useful to consider where best practices for wraparound supports can improve literacy programs.

Literacy is a natural fit with wraparound supports. At the least, the ability to read and write (and, even better, enjoy reading and writing) makes self-expression, planning and problem-solving easier. Literacy organizations would benefit from incorporating wraparound methods into their work. It should also be posited that learner-centered literacy programs become part of the wraparound supports offered by organizations working with at-risk youth. But when organizations serving at-risk youth are already stretching the limits of their resources, how can literacy be included in the mandate?

## WHAT TO CONSIDER NEXT

### **Questions to consider include:**

- Why isn't literacy more central to the programs working with at-risk youth?
- What are the barriers to making literacy more central to these programs?
- Should literacy and wraparound supports be integrated or presented separately?
- What are the best practices we should be implementing?

## APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPATING PROGRAMS

- Beat the Street, Frontier College, Toronto
- Breaking the Cycle (BTC), Toronto
- Circle of Courage School, John G. Stewart School, Winnipeg
- Desta Black Youth Network, Montreal
- Four Directions Centre for Social Health, Winnipeg
- HYPE Program, Centennial College, Toronto
- Mentoring At Risk Youth, Faculty of Education, the University of Winnipeg
- Offender Programs, Halifax
- Promoting Education and Community Health (PEACH), Toronto
- Resource Assistance for Youth (RAY), Winnipeg
- Student Assistance Centre (SAC), Winnipeg
- Success Beyond Limits, Toronto
- Supervised Alternative Learning Program, Hamilton-Wentworth School District
- Touchstone Family Association Day Program (Restorative Justice and Street Smart Youth Programs), Richmond, B.C.
- Winnipeg Education Centre (ACCESS), the University of Winnipeg
- Wrapping Abbotsford Youth with Support program (WAYS), Abbotsford, B.C.
- Youth Advocate Program, Halifax
- Youth Justice Education Initiative at the Manitoba Youth Centre, Winnipeg

## REFERENCES

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (2009). House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance Pre- Budget consultations: Investing in Youth Crime Prevention. Markham, ON: Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada.

Colenutt, A. & Toye, M (2012). Critical Crossroads: Youth, Criminal Justice and Literacy.

Leone, P. E., Krezmien, M., Mason, L., & Meisel, S. M. (2005). Organizing and delivering empirically based literacy instruction to incarcerated youth. *Exceptionality*, 13(2), 89-102.

Milligan, S. (2010). *Juristat: Youth Court Statistics 2008/2009*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

St. Thomas University Centre for Research on Youth at Risk (1998). *Myths About Youth Crime in Canada: Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.stthomasu.ca/research/youth/myths.htm>

**Great-West Life**  
THE  
ASSURANCE COMPANY



 **Canada Life**

STRONGER COMMUNITIES TOGETHER™