

## **At-risk students find education, hope at school** A local school provides a safe place for at-risk teens.

**Poonam Bains**  
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A Langley school is home to several students from the Fraser Valley who weren't cut out for public system.

The Youth Futures Program (YF) and the Whytecliff Continuing Program (WC) are home to about 30 students who need extra assistance or a little push to stay on track at school and in life.

Both programs are open to students aged 13-19, and it is specifically for those students who struggle at regular public school.

Principal Tara Webber said the students in the YF program have all come into the program through referrals.

"They're mostly at-risk kids," Webber said. "They're referred through youth workers, the RCMP, social worker or MCFD [Ministry of Child and Family Development]."

The WC program is more of a long-term continuance of the YF program. Once students have finished one year at YF, they have the option to move on to WC.

Both programs have the same vision statement, and that is part of what makes the school so different from any public high school.

"The staff here work from the vision," Webber said. "It is a more holistic approach to education."

The staff, made up of four teachers, three youth workers, and three family workers, combine their efforts and help the students.

"We help them with family and life issues and with personal support," Webber said.

Most of the kids that come to the school have slipped through the cracks.

"A lot of the kids have been suspended or unsuccessful at school. It is a group that drops off and no one notices," Webber said.

Many of the students deal with family issues, addictions and learning disabilities. According to Webber they get dropped and they have nowhere to go.



CREDIT: Poonam Bains/Langley Advance  
Tina Brooks, 18, Betty Bustin, 17, and Anjali Pillay, 18, are all graduating from the Whytecliff Continuing Program in 2008.

Teacher Dana Reaume has been at the school for one year and says she loves her job, because of the support students receive which goes beyond academic.

"Students have told me that they wouldn't be where they are if it weren't for the school," Reaume said. "It gives them the opportunity and hope to be something... they're accepted here no matter what."

The school does not reject any student, no matter what. Every day is a new start, and if somebody is having a bad day, then it is dealt with - or not: it's up to the student, Webber said.

The school comes equipped with several classrooms and an independent room. The colours and furnishings are carefully designed for kids with special needs.

It also has a communal kitchen where everyone participates in cooking meals.

"We try to eat together at least once a week," Webber said. "So we can keep a family grouping."

Little things like this is what builds the bond between everyone involved in the two programs.

Betty Bustin, 17, has been in the school for three years. She doesn't know what would have happened if she hadn't discovered the school.

"I had no drive, no motivation, and no goals before I came here," Bustin said. "I wanted to be something, but I didn't want to work for it. The encouragement and support I got from here made me think I could be something."

Anjali Pillay, 18, has been there for two years. She tried alternate schools but says nobody cared as much as the students and staff do at YF and WC.

"If there is a problem, they want to talk about it. They try to accommodate how you feel, and they bring you up instead of down," Pillay said.

Pillay told the Langley Advance that last year was a tumultuous year for her.

"Without [the staff and students] I would have fell on my face, guaranteed," she said.

Offering stability is key to the students and once that is achieved, then learning can take place.

Students come from across the Fraser Valley to attend the school. All age groups work together on a daily basis.

"It's a collective school, we're unique in that way," Webber said.

The students that have been there longer mentor the new students.

"They show that it is okay to accept support and to be open to the process," Reaume said.

The programs are run through the Focus Foundation of B.C., a non-profit charitable society.

The programs are funded partly through the Ministry of Education, but the school receives only 80 per cent of what an equivalent public school gets.

Therefore, the school is always looking for private donations to keep the programs up to par.

"We realize we have to gain the support in the community and business community," Webber said. "We have received some donations, but not a lot."

The students have done some fundraising in the past and are always looking for ways to help their school.

"The kids value the school, so they want to be part of what's going on," Reaume said.

Students and their families also contribute to the programs by paying a tuition. It is based on family income.

"Families do what they can," Webber said. "There is no set rate."

Some will pay \$10 a month, while others will send in a cheque at the end of the year.

As much as the students are thankful for a chance to attend the school, the staff is equally appreciative of what they get from the students.

The staff is always surprised by how resilient some of the kids are.

"They kick drug habits; they're strong kids," Reaume said. "I don't know if I could overcome what they do."

Bustin, who will graduate from the WC program in 2008, hopes she can return to the school as a youth worker, so she can give back as much as the school has given to her.

"This is home, the people are my family and I feel safe," Bustin said.

For more on the two programs visit [www.focusbc.org](http://www.focusbc.org) or email at [focus@focusbc.org](mailto:focus@focusbc.org) or if interested in making a donation call 604-532-1268.

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