

Keep kids out of trouble: advocates

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With 9,000 children in government care in B.C., keeping them in school is one of the best ways of keeping them out of trouble with the law.

That's the conclusion of a study that followed thousands of children born in 1986 as they made their way through adolescence.

Results for children in state care a chronic problem that was confirmed by the study's findings. A third of young people in government care had appeared in youth court, compared to five per cent in the general population. And when youths have appeared in court, their likelihood of graduating from high school drops to 13 per cent.

The study, *Kids, Crime and Care: Youth Justice Experience and Outcomes*, was a joint project of Provincial Health Officer Dr. Perry Kendall and the Representative for Children and Youth, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. Both agreed that early intervention to help young people stay in school can pay big dividends for them and for society.

"We need to begin to look at early intervention as a crime prevention strategy," Kendall said.

Turpel-Lafond said providing guidance for young people who don't have family support is a responsibility divided between the Ministry of Children and Families and the Ministry of Education. She said there should be a responsible individual at the school, by next fall.

"Youth involvement with the criminal justice system can only be reduced in British Columbia if the education system is strengthened to meet the needs of the children, it's quite clear," Turpel-Lafond said. "If a child living outside the parental home is more likely to spend time in jail than to graduate from high school, the issue is probably not your youth criminal justice system, because we have declining low crime rates, the issue is the education supports."

Children and Family Development Minister Tom Christensen said that problem is being worked on. And he insisted that the ministry's budget plan to cut more than 100 positions over the next three years won't get in the way.

Christensen said the ministry has about 160 vacancies today, with numerous retirements expected in the next few years.

"We're going to focus our efforts on filling front line positions," he said. "We are actively recruiting today, and we're going to be actively recruiting over the next number of months and years to ensure that our front-line positions, the ones who actually interact with children and families on a daily basis, are the ones that our resources are focused on."

NDP children and families critic Nicholas Simons said the case worker shortages and their caseloads are at the heart of the problem.

"I'd like to see emphasis put on the fact that these children all have guardianship workers and social workers who need to see their children as much as they'd like to," Simons said. "They're being prevented from doing that due to a lack of resources."

The full report is available at www.rcybc.ca