

Children's advocate: B.C. must do more to keep vulnerable kids in school

BY LINDSAY KINES, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 23, 2009

The B.C. government still isn't doing enough to keep vulnerable children in school and out of jail, a new report says.

Children and youth in government care are more likely to end up behind bars than graduate from high school, says the report by Children's Representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond and Provincial Health Officer Perry Kendall.

Yet, government has been slow to act on a two-year-old report that recommended ways to improve graduation rates for foster children. "British Columbia must work with greater urgency on the education outcomes for the vulnerable children at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system," the report says.

"A year in the life of a child is a very long time. Each year that passes without essential yet basic improvements to our child-serving system mean more B.C. youth veer off onto paths of unmet potential and troubled futures."

Turpel-Lafond and Kendall recommend that, by next fall, every school in B.C. assign a staff member to track the progress of foster children attending their school.

"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," Turpel-Lafond told reporters. But schools have to be paying attention if they are to make a difference, she said.

Education Minister Shirley Bond said her deputy has spoken to school boards about assigning a person in every school to track and assist children in care.

"That's a fairly major undertaking," she said. "Having said that, we recognize the value of having that personal support or champion for those children."

Bond balked, however, at whether that can be put in place by September.

"We're going to do our best," she said. "You know, there's a lot on the plates of boards of education across the province. Every single day people have more expectations of them."

But Kendall warned that the price of doing nothing far outweighs that of intervention. Each youth in custody costs taxpayers about \$215,000 a year, he said.

"The cost to society over the lifetime of an individual involved in crime is staggering," the report said.

The study, which examined the involvement of children in care and the youth justice system, analyzed 10 years of data on all 50,551 children born in 1986 and attending a B.C. School in 1997-1998.

Despite the rise in gang violence on the Lower Mainland, the report stressed that youth crime rates are actually falling in B.C. "The issue is not a rising tide of youth violence," Turpel-Lafond said. "As we see it, most of the gang activity that is the subject of concern is activity on the part of older males."