

# Building Bridges:

## Developing an Alternative Learning Environment to Help Build Success for At Risk Youth

Catherine Hamblin and Helen Horsman

---

As a resource room teacher in a Moose Jaw high school, Catherine Hamblin became concerned about a group of students with whom she worked:

They are youth who live in poverty, have substance abuse problems, are pregnant, experience chronic anger, are in trouble with the law, have mental health issues, are learning disabled, or have conflicts with teachers. I worked with many of these youth and, at one time, I thought that I had been successful. Later, I found that I was losing many of them because they were not succeeding at school. They were always sleeping in and either late for class or playing truant. They would not study for tests or hand in assignments, broke every rule in the school, and created conflicts with teachers. After a while, they started to get kicked out of school or they would decide to leave and try another high school. Many of them felt that a change in schools would help them stay on track, and a fresh start would get them into the mood for learning. This did not happen. They did not succeed because their problems transferred with them.

A survey that Hamblin conducted within her high school revealed that most teachers “felt that they were not able to work with at risk students because they did not have the training or the time to put into adapting programs to meet their needs. They felt that an alternative placement in either a resource room or in another setting was the best option for these students”. Hamblin conducted further research into at risk youth

and identified four factors determining the success of these students that were related to the school, personal well-being, the family, and the community at large. She also found that a non-traditional learning environment, in which the students took ownership for their own programming needs, seemed to be very successful. This kind of environment involved a different school structure, careful development of a nurturing school culture, a flexible and individualized approach to curriculum and instruction, and linkages with the community and school system.

Working with Dr. Helen Horsman, Director of Education for the Moose Jaw Roman Catholic School Division, Hamblin made presentations to agencies and businesses inviting them to become involved in a collaborative approach to working with at risk youth. The first of many monthly meetings of the Interagency Alternative Learning Program was held in October, 1998, and the alternative program was gradually established using Saskatchewan Education’s collaborative

### Vision Statement

The Interagency Alternative Learning Program will provide a program for “at risk” youth that is truly alternative to a traditional school setting and will be staffed with personnel from education, social services, health, and city police. From this perspective we believe that it takes a whole community to educate a child.

process for integrating school-linked services for children and youth. Per student funding and special education funding were provided by Saskatchewan Education, with the Moose Jaw Roman Catholic School Division providing administrative services and a location within its Education Centre.

With interagency cooperation, over 100 students were identified who were either not in school or were not succeeding in their present school situation. Where it could be done with respect for confidentiality of information, Hamblin contacted these youth to determine whether they were interested in a non-traditional learning program and what that program should look like. It was understood that no more than 20 students aged 14-22 would be accepted into the program in order to offer a small school environment where youth could feel safe and work one-on-one with teachers.

The program began operation in 1999 and has been carefully designed to meet the needs of at risk youth. Although the academic component meets Saskatchewan educational standards, it also reflects students' interests and enables them to work at their own pace. Moreover, the program

is offered during alternative hours (10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.) and incorporates opportunities for students to use technology (Plato or Pathfinder), obtain a hot lunch, engage in recreational activities, benefit from work education, participate in programs on stress reduction and anger management, learn about healthy lifestyles, and work with an in-house community service worker. Following its first year of operation, an external evaluation concluded that the development of the program was on track as both a collaborative effort and an alternative to traditional schooling.

*God made us all  
as unique  
individuals who  
have a purpose in  
this world.  
As for students  
who are at risk,  
I do not believe  
that God wanted  
them  
to fail in school  
and in life.*

Hamblin documents the process by which the Alternative Learning Program was established, reflecting at every stage on the data she has collected from the agencies and individuals involved. The result is an engaging personal history of one teacher's work with many others to ensure that all students succeed at school and in life.



Catherine Hamblin takes in a session at the 2000 Learning from Practice Seminar.