



# Andrew Hanon

## Schools program proves a godsend for kids with behavioural and emotional problems

You'd never guess that 10-year-old Austin Levesque is among the 1,100 kids in Edmonton's public school system deemed too violent or disruptive to be in a regular classroom.

Austin is polite, attentive and studious. But he readily admits he hasn't always been that way.

"I had big problems," he says in his classroom at Kensington elementary school. "I got picked on a lot and I'd get mad. I was in the office every day."

Things were no better at home.

"Austin was so angry inside," says his mom, Corin. "It was very hard. He got frustrated so much. We had to walk on eggshells all the time because he could be set off at any moment."

He was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and put on medication, but it left Austin so groggy that Corin stopped giving it to him.

Then a psychologist warned her, "If you don't get your son some help now while he's young, he's going to end up in jail."

Two years ago she found the Behaviour and Learning Assistance Program, which Corin says "has been a godsend. Now, of all my three kids, he's the easiest."

The program is operated in 27 elementary and 18 junior high schools, involving about 900 boys and 200 girls.

Senior administrator Deborah Brandell, who oversees it, says the kids in the program have behavioural and emotional disorders like ADHD. Some have fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, mental illnesses like schizophrenia or severe emotional problems because of abuse.

"The ultimate outcome of the program," she says, "is to



DAVID BLOOM/SUN MEDIA

Austin Levesque high-fives teaching assistant Gail Michaels as his teacher Gerrit Noppers looks on at Kensington school.

have the kids reintegrated into regular classrooms."

The key, says Austin's teacher Gerrit Noppers, is structure, stability and routine – the fewer surprises, changes or other curveballs thrown at his 10 pupils, the better.

At the back of Austin's class is a small, empty room.

"It's the timeout room," explains Noppers. "It's where the kids go to push their reset buttons."

At the beginning of each school year, the timeout room is busy, a steady stream of kids calming down after tantrums and other bad behaviour. But by the middle of the year it's hardly used at all, he says.

"It takes a little while for everyone to get the relationship hierarchy," Noppers

explains. "Starting the school year is a big, stressful change for these guys."

Over at Woodside school near NAIT, "karma," says Jimmy, "is biting me in the butt."

School is pretty much the only place the 16-year-old is allowed to be – other than home. Jimmy (whose real name can't be used) faces a robbery charge and must live under a strict curfew until his trial.

Woodside, part of the the behavioural program, is the last stop for kids in the Edmonton public system before being kicked out altogether.

He spent years butting his head against the system – cutting class, getting into fights,

staying out all night – but Jimmy has a perfect attendance record at Woodside.

"I don't get away with much anymore," Jimmy says. "But that's OK. This is this first school I've ever looked forward to going to."

He's even accepted his harsh bail conditions. After all, Jimmy reasons, he must deal with his past before he can take on the future.

After he graduates, Jimmy wants to learn a trade – auto-body repair.

His classmate Debbie (not her real name) had worked her way through several alternate programs until she showed up drunk and tried to pick a fight with her teacher. Now she's an honours student and plans to go to college.

Woodside assistant principal Shaun Hains said the school provides kids, many of whom are completely alienated, a sense of community and belonging.

"We start with the skills they have and work from there," she says.

"And we try to demonstrate the importance of caring for each other and the value of relationships."

Not all kids respond, Hains says, but those who do develop the confidence to turn their lives around.

"The students aren't here because they're bad people. They're here because they need to work on their behaviour."

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