

Cold Lake music program hopes to reach at risk students

Local News

By Andrew Serba

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A new program in Cold Lake is helping at risk students get the support they need, and learn to play music along the way.

"Music is pretty powerful," said Don Cassidy, the assistant principle at Cold Lake High School. "The whole idea is to give these kids something to do that's positive."

Cassidy was part of a group that applied for funding through the province's Safe Community's Innovation Fund to bring the program, known as the Gift of Music, to Cold Lake.

He was armed with letters of support from Sgt. Keith Bott of the Cold Lake RCMP, the support of Northern Lights School Division and research that shows music can help kids learn. The program is already being offered in schools in Calgary and the Morley First Nations Reserve.

"The research that they've been doing over the past 10 to 15 years indicates that music is one of the best ways to develop your intellectual abilities and has a really positive influence on learning," Cassidy noted.

To the tune of \$150,000 over three years, the grant came in. The money allowed Cassidy to hire three music instructors who work with students in Cold Lake and area who are at risk of dropping out and whose parents are not in the financial position to buy them musical instruments and lessons.

Alberta Health Services and educators refer students to the program and Cassidy works with the kids and their parents to match them up with an instructor.

Twenty positions were available when the program started in early September, and Cassidy figures he could maybe stretch the program to 25 spaces.

The demand is there.

Cold Lake's Gift of Music already has 19 students enrolled, drawing its participants from Cold Lake High School, Assumption, the Le Goff School and the Bridges Off Campus School.

If several fundraising events are successful, Cassidy hopes to double the number of positions available in Cold Lake and eventually expand the program to include schools in Bonnyville and Lac La Biche.

Cassidy said Cold Lake has plenty of young musicians capable of passing their talents on to others and so he focused on finding instructors who would fit the bill as strong mentors.

He hired Ken Dietrich and Renee Malo, two recent CLHS grads and band mates. In addition, he hired Daniel McLaughlin of the local band Angels to Ashes.

"Their major role is for mentorship and to show other young kids that these are three kids who graduated from high school, who are productive in their lives with musical talents that they can share with other kids," he said.

The program uses donated guitars and drums that the participants can play. It adds incentives for the kids to stick with it – they can keep their guitar if they finish the program and improve their attendance and performance at school. And while the lessons have only been taking place for a month, the instructors are already seeing progress.

"I've been working with one kid for a month now and his commitment has drastically changed," Malo said. "He used to ditch school and not be back for class in time. And now he's been showing up for school every day and doing his work on time – and I've been checking on it. So it's been awesome."

Dietrich, who is studying audio engineering in Edmonton, said the creative process that students go through in learning music is bound to affect other aspects of their life.

"Creativity is what music is all about," Dietrich said. "And creativity spurs the mind to learn more."

Cassidy said most of the students in the program are in Grades 4 or 5, a "pivotal" time in a student's development,

"All the research shows that kids, although they may not drop out of school until Grade 9 or 10, they've usually made that decision by Grade 5 or 6 that they will exit out of the system," he said.

And while the instructors work to pass their skills on to the students, Cassidy is certain that much more will be learned along the way by everybody involved.

"You never know what conversation or what particular incident changes a kid's life and the things that (these instructors) are doing are going to change lives," he said. "They'll learn that it's not just a job that you do for money. It's about changing young lives and helping build a future just as effective as any teacher could, or more."

Cassidy and the instructors will be holding fundraisers in November to raise money and instruments for the program.