

Music program reducing drop-out rate

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An organization in Calgary will be offering free guitar lessons for youth in Eden Valley come September with the goal of opening their minds to career possibilities and the value of education.

Stoney Nakoda youth in Morley play the guitar with an instructor provided by The Children's Legacy Foundation Gift of Music Program, which is co-funded by Alberta Safe Communities.

The Legacy Children's Foundation Gift of Music Program offered free music lessons to Stoney Nakoda youth on the Morley reserve last year and 80 per cent of the students involved remained committed to the program and finished the school year.

That 80 per cent success rate has proven to be the magic number across North America, where similar programs have been operating for approximately 20 years.

Darryl Wernham, CEO of The Legacy Children's Foundation, said because of the success in Morley over the past year, the Province has awarded the foundation \$150,000 to expand the music lessons to youth in Eden Valley and Big Horn as well as in Morley for another three years.

"Morley was the first test and it's so successful we want to help their whole organization," said Wernham.

Wernham said five youth in Eden Valley will be offered guitar lessons, which cost the foundation approximately \$1,000 per year per student.

"We'll supply the instruments and we have some finances to get them into a recording studio," he said.

The foundation will consult with teachers at Chief Jacob Bearspaw Memorial School in Eden Valley to determine which five students are the best candidates for the program.

The deal is that as long as they attend their school classes and stay out of trouble, they will be given free guitar lessons and the chance to record in a studio. They will also have the opportunity to connect with people who earn their living making music.

"We try to introduce kids to professionals in the music industry, musicians in a studio, sound engineers," said Wernham. "We want them to think, 'Wow, this could be my life.' We really want to get kids excited about it. We could find a budding Eric Clapton."



The grant funding for the program, called the Gift of Music, comes from the Alberta Safe Communities initiative.

“What interests Safe Communities is that we looked at programs like this in San Francisco, Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles – those are all gang centrals,” said Wernham. “They have been super successful in two main things: kids stay in school and out of gangs. In Chicago, 46,000 kids have gone through the ‘Guitars not Guns’ program since 1989 and 90 per cent of the kids have finished high school and/or went on to post secondary.”

Finding a way for aboriginal youth to want to stay in school and out of trouble is a positive move in Alberta.

“Research shows that the school drop-out rate in Alberta for aboriginal kids is higher than the rest of the population,” said Wernham. “I’ve talked to people who are concerned about kids getting in trouble, kids getting into gangs and if we can stop that – well, it’s one kid at a time.”

In Eden Valley it’ll be five youth at a time.

To access the program funding the foundation is required to match the \$150,000 grant, so fundraising is underway. Foundation members are reaching out to corporations and individuals in surrounding communities for donations.

They are accepting instruments, as well as cash donations.

“It’s awesome, I’m excited about this program because of the results,” said Wernham. “We’re seeing what we’re doing for kids.

“Kids who get involved with music, their grades improve, they score better on entrance exams for universities, they do better in math and literacy – it’s been researched for a long time and it’s really, really neat stuff. They also learn what it’s like to be in a team, because a band is a team. They learn about leadership and they learn about the skills you need to be successful in the workplace, like be focused and on time.”

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