

**SCHOOL DISTRICT #71
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
MENTAL HEALTH**



Glacier View Secondary Centre student, Rowan Goodwin, observes forest mushrooms.

**REPORT PREPARED ON JULY 15, 2022 BY
YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Initiated on July 1, 2004, Youth and Ecological Restoration (YER) (www.youthecology.ca) has been mainly funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). YER has had four hundred and nineteen Comox Valley youth participants over the past eighteen years, with most referred from School District #71 (SD #71). In the 2021/2022 school year, YER was granted \$8,000.00 from SD #71, which came from Ministry of Education, Mental Health (MOE).

The MOE funding source was initially implemented in May 2021 to address and increase mental health programs for school students and staff, with a focus on pandemic related mental health. A September 1, 2021 press release states the funds will assist in building “resilience and emotional, physical and mental well-being”. It also supports community programs and outdoor education.

Being a community program with a focus on outdoor education, YER is an excellent investment of these finances. This twenty hour work experience and training program engages vulnerable youth with community members to restore local watersheds. It combines ecological restoration methods, ecotherapy practises and mentoring support. An individual relationship is developed with each youth. On completion, youth give an oral presentation to a community group about their experiences. This unique combination improves their sense of worth and place.

RESULTS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The emphasis of the MOE funding was Glacier View Secondary Centre (GV) as that is where some of our community's most vulnerable youth obtain their education. The strategy was to engage these students in YER, Phase I (YER I) and YER, Phase II (YER II). GV principal, Karma Taiji, sent YER a referral list of students and later assigned academic credits for their involvement. Five GV students completed YER I, and one completed YER I and YER II.

Included in this report are three referrals from Nala'atsi Alternate School (NA), which is for students of indigenous ancestry who need specialized support. Lead teacher, Rory McClure, gave these students credits for YER I. Two NA students completed YER I and one finished YER I and YER II.

This section gives the YER participant numbers and their assigned grades from their respective schools. The benefits of YER for GV and NA students is illustrated through quotes as evidence of their experiences. A summary of the seven YER support letters in Appendix A is included.

Glacier View Secondary Centre Students

YER Participant #397: Leadership 10 – 2 credits at a mark of 87%

“I learned better people skills, well I had to talk to more people, so I had to talk in a nice way. I don't usually work with other people. Just how to ask for help and see what people need done, before I was a little too proud to ask for help.”

YER Participant #398: Leadership 11 – 2 credits at a mark of 95%

“Bittersweet, because I really enjoyed the experiences and would really like to do more along that sort of line, but it's nice feeling accomplished in finishing something. As someone who struggles quite a bit with a lot of things in life, getting something completed or accomplished feels really good.”

YER Participant #399: Leadership 11 – 4 credits (combined with courses) at a mark of 95%

“We were helping Millard Piercy Watershed Stewards today. They are people that protect the salmon and the watershed. It makes me feel safe knowing they are here given that I am an indigenous person and salmon is a natural resource for indigenous peoples. It makes me feel safe because it is protected, and we are ensuring its survival. They seem like nice people who are trying to benefit their community.”

YER Participant #402: Leadership 10 – 2 credits at a mark of 90%

“This program was very fun and I got to learn all about the salmon, the trees and the rivers. My favorite part of all was seeing all of the different birds and animals, especially today when I saw the river otter in Morrison Creek. I would do this program again. Thank you for listening to my presentation.”

YER Participant #403: Leadership 10: 2 credits at a mark of 87%

“I think the biggest lesson was probably learning to be less anxious around people because they are not all always going to judge me. That was a big thing in my life and holding me back from doing what I want to do. Just like being able to go to events and being part of social events and I can do that now. Just working with other people made me more comfortable.”

YER Participant #416: Leadership 10: 4 credits (includes YER II) at a mark of 88%

“This was an amazing, fun, inspiring and fascinating experience, I had an amazing time and learned a crazy amount about mother nature. I worked with the kindest and open-minded people who are interested in a positive change and a higher purpose. Our principle recommended this program to me. I love mother nature and I wanted to have a positive impact on our earth. I did this while receiving school credits, a lunch, fifty dollars and knowledge. I am super inspired by everyone I met and grateful for the connections I made in the community.”

Nala’atsi Alternate School Students

YER Participant #408: Science 10 with a final grade of 82%.

“The program is called youth and Ecological Restoration where we do plenty of stuff to help the environment, such as working with birds, fish and even just cleaning up. It also introduces you to new groups in the community like at the fish hatchery.”

YER Participant #411: Science 10 with a final grade of 78% and 92% in biomes/ecosystems unit

“The first day we planted sword ferns, cedar, lady fern, ninebark, red-elder berry up Arden Creek that flows into Morrison Creek. We planted the plants there because they had to add more gravel in the creek for the female salmon, so they can lay their eggs. They also made some of the creek more narrow because it makes a current so it’s more clean at the bottom. We planted the cedar trees more close to the creek because their roots like it more moist.”

YER Participant #414: Science 10 biomes/ecosystems unit with a final grade of 89%

“Throughout the program, I learned more than I could list in this presentation and everyday was an adventure. Every person I met taught me something, every experience had something new. Because of this program I can see myself having a career in the ecology field.”

Youth and Ecological Restoration Support Letters

Seven YER support letters were received from: David Somers, Outpatient Adolescent Services; Carrie Dumont, Cumberland Community School; Lydia Lewis, Highland Secondary School; JoAnne Restoule, Indigenous Education; Vanessa Thornhill, Lake Trail Community Middle School; Rory McClure, Nala’atsi Alternate School; and Karma Taiji, Glacier View Secondary Centre (Appendix A). The first three letters are from 2021 and four from 2022. They provide insights and feedback about YER youth experiences from youth services and SD #71 staff.

These letters outline YER youth benefits including: improving self confidence, environmental awareness and work skills; increasing responsibility and stewardship through land connections; challenging themselves and experiencing success; hands on experiential learning opportunities; forming new community associations; connecting physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually; providing a mental health and technology break; expressing themselves assertively by public speaking; and transforming awareness of self through ecological and community relationships.

CONCLUSION

Essential YER teachings for SD # 71 students are personal and social skill enhancements. These come through the YER model of developing ecological and community relationships guided by individual mentoring support. Described as ecotherapy, the practice of being in nature offers healing from depression, anxiety and social isolation. Since the onset of Covid in 2020, more young people are struggling with personal and social connections. Advances in technology have also contributed to these issues. Testimonies from participants and referral agencies clearly document the YER advantages to transform youth's sense of well being and place. In addition, Glacier View and Nala'atsi students received academic credits for their YER experience. MOE funds for the 2021/2022 school year supported the expansion of YER for more youth to pursue knowledge through the ecological services and gifts of the natural world.

APPENDIX A: YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION SUPPORT LETTERS

Adolescent Outpatient Service

**Wellness Centre,
North Island Hospital**

101 Lerwick Rd.

Courtenay, BC,

V9N 0B9

Fax 250-331-5903

Phone: 250-331-5900 Ext:65321

April 28th, 2021.

To Whom it may concern,

Re: Youth and Ecological Restoration

The Adolescent Outpatient Service is a hospital clinic providing continuous service to youth with serious and persistent psychiatric disorders. I have worked with teenagers who have attended Youth and Ecological Restoration over the years since it was founded in 2004.

I have heard many testimonials from the youth completing the program. I have also had the pleasure of attending presentations from youth who I referred to the program. It is impressive to see them present to a group of adults about what they have learned and accomplished.

In contrast to therapy programs where the focus is on teaching skills as an end in itself, these youth learn and practice social skills and communication skills, while contributing to improving the environment. With today's youth being more environmentally concerned than ever, YER gives them an opportunity to be active and effective. The learning, mastery and accomplishment builds confidence.

I am deeply appreciative of the opportunities available to youth through YER. I hope that the program funding continues so that this valuable resource remains available to youth in the future.

Regards,

David Somers RPN,
Charge Nurse,
Adolescent Outpatient Service,
Phone: 250-331-5900 **Ext:65321**

Wendy Kotilla, Coordinator
Youth and Ecological Restoration Program (YER)
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November 12, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Carrie Dumont and I am the Youth & Family Support Worker at Cumberland Community School. I am writing this letter to support this amazing program that supports our vulnerable youth. I was introduced to YER approximately three ago. Since that time, I believe we have had at least a dozen or more students from our school participate in this program with success. I have had the opportunity to speak to the parents of these youth and their thoughts on the program. The response was very much the same in that they wished they had had such a program for themselves when they were growing up, (Me too). The parents were thrilled with their child's enthusiasm for nature and its beauty. Not to mention the animals that some of these youth got to work with.

I have sat in on a few of the presentations in classrooms and have observed positive changes in my students. One student told me that working with nature has given him a future to look forward to as he was never quite sure of his goals in life. He wants to work with animals especially those who are at risk. Another student spoke highly of the Oyster River experience working with the fish. Hearing the students expressing positive outlook for their own future as well as something to work towards not only about staying in school but having some form of job-oriented goal for the future, warms my soul.

I have seen responsibility and pride in these students, not to mention compassion for animals and for those people who share and live these traits daily. Some students demonstrate an openness to try new things where before they would not even consider trying. One student who had been labelled as a behaviour student came to me and shared that he now understood why I love my job! He too wanted to help the vulnerable and at risk people for no other reason than just to support and to know that helping those in need does not require fan faire or recognition. He said that the feeling of knowing that he had helped another in need gave him an empowerment never felt before. He said it was like a "high". This program is a one of a kind and should be in every community.

Kw uk w scemxw (Thank You)
Carrie Dumont BSW
Youth & Family Program Worker
Cumberland Community School
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It's an honour and privilege to live and work on the traditional territory for the K'omoks First Nations

Lydia Lewis
Youth and Family Program Worker
Highland Secondary School
June 25, 2021
Youth Ecological Restoration Program:

I am the Youth and Family Program Worker at Highland Secondary School. My role is to provide social, emotional mental health supports to our Youth and their families.

I am constantly looking for creative ways to connect our Youth with services that will benefit their mental health needs. The Youth Ecological Restoration program provides an opportunity for students to have a mental break from school and connect with a mentor in nature.

I have referred multiple students throughout my 2 years here at Highland. The youth who have completed the program have all enjoyed the experience. We have Youth from our behaviour program who rarely engage in the classroom actively participating in this program. They have a chance to disconnect from the mainstream chaos and benefit from one on one time with an adult. It's a chance for kids to be kids for a moment in time.

I value the work Wendy and Graham do and am very grateful to have it as a resource to refer family and youth to. For students who struggle to attend school full time it provides the perfect break to be grounded in nature and make new community connections.

Yours sincerely,

Lydia Lewis
Youth and Family Program Worker
Highland Secondary School
June 25, 2021

Thursday June 23, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter as one of support to the Youth Ecological Restoration Program (YER), that has been developed by Wendy Kotilla, and has been in our community since 2004. In that time as a community member and working within School District 71, I have seen the impact of this program on our youth.

The YER program works with exceptional youth to develop healthy relationships with themselves, the community and the natural world. I have witnessed how this program has developed personal/social skills, and the ability of our youth to effectively communicate their experiences and the knowledge they have acquired. With the experiential learning and the connection to the natural living world, this program also works as an eco- therapy approach to help our youth connect physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Throughout the years that I have spent working with youth who have been referred to the program, I have seen incredible transformations, growth and deep connections that could only happen with this type of experiential learning and doing. I am so grateful to have the Youth Ecological Restoration Program here in our community.

These are the approaches that will better serve our youth, our community and the future generations to come.

JoAnn Restoule

Ni 'Noxsola

Indigenous Education School District 71

June 24, 2022

Dear Wendy:

As per your email sent on June 23rd, here are my thoughts regarding the Youth and Ecological Restoration Program (YER).

In my two years at Lake Trail as the Youth and Family Support worker, I have sent many referrals your way to utilize this program for our students. I have seen youth who often display shyness and have anxieties bloom with their experience at YER and are able to conduct presentations in their classrooms and share the highlights of the many unique and positive activities they were able to participate in.

Through ecotherapy and mentorship provided by YER, this program has given students a hands-on work experience approach that often creates a connection to their environment. I have heard stories of plastic in the ocean and how the marine life is affected by it as the students participated in the cleanup of a local beach or another student who helped nurse an injured owl back to health that was hit by a car.

From my perspective, this program helps build confidence, reduces stressors, anxieties, and aids in gaining work experience and an appreciation for the world they are growing up in, especially one filled with technology, increased anxiety and uncertainty created by the COVID pandemic.

In short, as a Registered Social Worker and Youth and Family Support Worker I have found that the YER program is an extremely worthwhile and positive program in developing self-confidence, environment awareness and work skills for all students who attended the program. More importantly the YER has helped these students to develop an ability to express themselves confidently while gaining a positive long lasting work experience.

I wholehearted support your request to seek additional funding so this program continues to be available for our vulnerable students.

Thank you,
Vanessa

Vanessa Thornhill BSW, RSW
Youth and Family Support
Lake Trail Community Middle School Vanessa.thornhill@sd71.bc.ca
250-334-3168



Nala'atsi School

Comox Valley Schools (SD71)
665 - 16th Street, Courtenay, BC
Tel: 250 331 4040

June 27, 2022

To whom it may concern,

Please accept this as a letter in support of the continued funding of the Youth and Ecological Restoration Program. My name is Rory McClure and I'm the lead teacher at Nala'atsi School in Courtenay, BC. We are a small school with an emphasis on cultural and hands-on learning for Indigenous students in grades 10 to 12.

Over the past 6 years I have had multiple students participate in the YER program each year. Without exception our students have greatly enjoyed the program while also taking away invaluable learning experiences. Many of our students have talked openly about how their experiences in YER have been transformative. I have heard several students express how spending time in nature while completing the program gave them a sense of connection to the land, as well as a sense of responsibility and stewardship. I have also heard many students talk about how the program helped create a shift in their perspective - stepping away from the chaos of technology and everyday life and having time to appreciate nature and recognize their role in it. My observation is that YER has immediate, wide-ranging mental health benefits for our young people. My students often come away from the experience with a renewed sense of wonder and curiosity as well as an appreciation for the natural world. The physical benefits of the program are also quite clear, and they have spillover effects that translate into improved mental health and overall wellness.

In light on the Covid era, where young people have faced a greater degree of isolation than ever before, programs like YER are essential. Anecdotally, I have noticed an increase in anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges since the pandemic began. YER allows young people to challenge themselves in a safe and healthy manner - trying something new and potentially intimidating - after which they experience an increase in confidence that can make all the difference. YER has been extremely helpful for many of my students who experience mental health challenges as it allows them to connect with nature, to experience success outside of the school, and to provide them with a different perspective that can help guide them in a positive direction. I strongly support the continued funding of this program. Thank you for your time.

Rory McClure
Lead teacher, Nala'atsi School



June 28, 2022

Re: Youth and Ecological Restoration support

I am pleased to write this letter of support for the Youth and Ecological Restoration program involvement with Comox Valley Schools. Glacier View Secondary Centre had six of our students participate in the program this year and all of them benefited academically and personally.

One of our school goals was to develop more hands-on learning opportunities for our students and this was an excellent way for them to get engaged. Our students appreciated getting involved in outdoor projects, such as with Millard Creek, Oyster River Hatchery and MARS Wildlife Rescue. They also liked connecting to organizations and projects in their own community. Not only did the students get work experience hours, with further support from the teachers at Glacier View, we were also able to award all the students two to four credits towards a Leadership course.

Our students' mental health also benefited from their involvement with YER. They told me that they enjoyed being outdoors, that they liked switching up the day, that Graham was super nice, that they were surprised they could do a presentation, and that it helped with their social anxiety. Some of the comments from the students were:

"It felt nice. I got to know more about my community and my whereabouts."

"I think the biggest lesson was probably learning to be less anxious around people because they are not all always going to judge me."

"As someone who struggles quite a bit with a lot of things in life, getting something completed or accomplished feels really good."

I fully support the continuation of the Youth and Ecological Restoration program in our district. It helped our students have hands-on, outdoor learning experiences, and it also helped with their confidence, mental health, and connections to the community.

Sincerely,



Karma Taiji (she/her)
Principal
Glacier View Secondary Centre
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