ABC NEWS

Saving Troubled Teens Through 'Safe Schools'

Arizona Gives Juvenile Offenders a Last Chance to Learn and to Change

Aug. 4, 2005 --

At Arizona's Department of Juvenile Corrections, there are pat downs, cell doors and razor wire.

The arrivals come in handcuffs, are photographed and go through a 21-day evaluation to determine their issues -- like anger, sex crimes, mental health or substance abuse.

But the 300 boys at the Adobe Mountain School, and the 80 girls across the yard at the Black Canyon School, aren't exactly in prison.

Arizona's juvenile corrections system calls these facilities "safe schools" -- they are part prison, part school. Juveniles are sent there by a juvenile judge in a civil court. And in the "safe schools," there is opportunity -- even hope.

"If we can train them to do different to live differently then they'll be productive citizens and that's our goal. We want to obviously protect the public but we want to rehabilitate," Suzanne LaRue, Black Canyon's superintendent, told "Primetime" co-anchor Chris Cuomo.

The safe schools represent the last chance for many of the kids in these facilities. If the kids commit another offense, they will likely have to enter the prison system.

"Primetime" recently spent nearly six months following several kids as they wound their way in and out of this system. Because they are juveniles, their last names have been withheld.

Talking on Teens' Terms

One of the eternal questions for staff at the "safe schools" is: "Can a kid be fixed?" One of the unique ways they try to answer in the affirmative is through teaching methods.

For example, they use cars to teach math to teenage boys. "They're street smart. So we don't want to come in and bring them Jane/Sally/Dick type curriculum," said one teacher. "We have to trigger their interest."

They also pay special attention to their students' self-esteem. Many of the kids have grown up being embarrassed by learning disabilities and poor performance at school.

Conrad, a boy who has been banned from Arizona's mainstream public schools, succinctly summarized his positive feelings about his teachers: "They don't treat me like I'm crap," he said.

Dealing With Violence

However, education is not the only challenge for the "safe schools." No matter what the course of reform, when a bunch of hormone-charged kids, many of whom suffer from emotional problems, are kept together in large numbers, violence is bound to occur.

When it does, the result is "separation." It's the closest thing to solitary confinement. "It's the last resort when these volatile youth are out of control. A danger to others or even themselves," said Nurite Friedlander, who runs the unit where problem children are housed.

To prevent suicide, the rooms contain just a bed and a toilet and youth are often stripped of their clothes. They are also constantly monitored by video camera. "A kid to kill themselves takes two to five minutes," Friedlander said.

But separation isn't about isolation or punishment. Boys and girls are sent there for psychological evaluation and to learn conflict resolution and how to avoid violence.

"We're trying to teach them instead of going and punching Frankie in the face, what could you have done differently," Friedlander said. "Because if you don't teach them the skill, they're not gonna have it when they get out on the outside."

'Gay for the Stay'

In addition to controlling violence among the kids, staff struggle with teaching kids how to control their emotions.

It's estimated that at least 20 percent of the youths in the juvenile justice system has a serious mental health disorder. Sometimes these conditions can be treated with medicine, sometimes therapy. Some girls have found other ways to help each other.

In the girls' facility, there are 80 teenage girls. Counselor James Ambercrombie says about half of them have romantic relationships with other girls in the facility.

"That's the thing here," said a Black Canyon student named Casey, who says she is not gay. She said there is a catchphrase for many of the girls: "I'm gay for the stay."

Officially, such behavior is forbidden. But counselor Ambercrombie says the behavior is a common manifestation of emotional trouble here. "What I see that as is people that have a distorted view of what a relationship is," he said.

For some of the girls, finding a girlfriend is creating a kind of substitute family. "The physical [relationship] -- sometimes it makes them feel loved," Ambercrombie said.

For others, it is a chance to be in control. Casey said some girls turn it into a game -- betting their snacks to see if they can turn a girl gay.

Casey said she was even considered a target when she was pregnant. "It doesn't matter ... They're going to try and get to you. They will try and try and try until the day you leave."

Such behavior is part of life in adult prison. But unlike in adult prison, staff at the boys' facility say it is not an issue, and no boys said otherwise.

Reforming the Reformers

When kids leave Arizona's Department of Juvenile Corrections, they still face invisible obstacles on the outside: troubled families, old friends and often, profoundly painful memories.

According to the ADJC, 43 percent eventually wind up back in the "safe schools" or in adult prison.

But the ADJC is considered leagues better than it had been, and there are hopes that recidivism will drop.

Just two years ago, three kids in the system committed suicide in the space of several months. Federal investigators found wide-spread sexual and physical abuse by staff members throughout both the boys and girls schools.

Last year, Arizona's governor cleaned house and appointed veteran law enforcement official Mike Branham to oversee a massive overhaul of the system. He has imposed a new mandate: "Treat these kids like kids who need reform, not hardened criminals."

At this point, Branham said he didn't believe the system is as good as he thinks it should be. However, he said, "we're on the right track."

He was proud of the changes that had occurred. "We make sure that the kids can't hurt themselves and can't hurt other people while we figure out how to reach inside and help that child deal with whatever it is that, that's his or her issues," he said.

"We can and do make a difference in the kids who can and will change."

To purchase a DVD of this program, click here.