



*For some...*

BETTER IS THE

# Alternative



BY SHERRY KANIUGA

**D**uring a meeting in his office, principal Tom Tarrant's smart-phone beeps. He glances at it and sees that he's received a text message from a student.

A text from a student? To the principal of the school?

It may be out of the ordinary elsewhere, but not here at Jameswood Alternative School in Winnipeg.

All 90-plus students at Jameswood Alternative School have Tarrant's work cell

number and they're encouraged to call or text him if they're going to miss school, or if they have a concern they need to discuss.

It's just one of the many factors that sets this school apart from most others in the province.

One of two official "alternative schools" in Manitoba, Jameswood opened five years ago with only 20 students, evolving out of a program for Sturgeon Heights Collegiate students called Second Start. The school now provides a landing spot for students in Winnipeg's St. James School Division who

can't make attending a regular high school work, whether for social, emotional, behavioural or academic reasons.

"We're the last place for these kids, who just haven't had success at their home school. Some come here because of anxiety and depression issues, or because they have an addiction and can't deal with the freedom the other schools give them. Some come because they have become parents themselves, and need a way to balance their new life," says Tarrant, noting that there are



three daycare centres operating inside the school building, offering a possible solution for young parents who want to graduate high school.

Jameswood occupies a portion of a two-storey former elementary school (where a young Tarrant was actually a student). Its four teachers run classes using a student-directed module format, allowing the students to work at their own pace as long as they complete at least one credit per quarter. A number of courses can be running at the same time in one classroom, such as web design, desktop publishing, arts, home ec, electronics and drafting.

When each new student starts at Jameswood, Tarrant asks them to identify their goal.

"They all say it's to graduate, and that's my agenda for them too. I tell them, we can do something to help you with that," says Tarrant. "We sit down and we figure out together how they're going to get there."

Across the city, in its own building at the foot of the Distraeli bridge in downtown Winnipeg, sits the city's more well-known alternative high school: Argyle Alternative School. Argyle got its start as an "alternative" school with a re-entry program around the early 1970s, settling in its current location and format—providing a more flexible and personalized learning atmosphere to help students successfully transition into the workplace, college or university—in 2000.

Like Jameswood, Argyle is a "school of choice"—just not typically a student's first

choice, or even their second or third choice, says principal Pat Graham.

"We're often their last choice, or their only choice," she says. "We're a small atmosphere, which creates a different set of opportunities and challenges for the kids. If high school is somewhere you want to go and hide, this isn't a good place—with only 160 kids in the building and just two hallways, it's impossible. For some kids, that's exactly what they need to be successful—not to be invisible."

Also like Jameswood, Argyle attracts students who need a more personalized learning environment than their home school could offer them. Often the students have made some bad choices and connections and they need a different place to start over again, says Graham.

"You hear about at-risk kids all the time, but what makes them at-risk? We've looked at kids who have had involvement with social workers, psychiatrists, all of those support people; kids who have been labelled special education (either Level I or II); kids who have mental health concerns," says Graham. "Close to half of our students are or have been in the care of Child and Family Services, and we have a large number who are on social assistance themselves. We also have a large gay and lesbian population who struggle with gender identification issues, and kids who struggle with all kinds of things, where no specific reason is what brought them here but it's a combination of all the challenges they have," says Graham.

With nearly double the student body and number of teachers as Jameswood, Argyle's larger space and budget allows it to offer more options beyond the basic academics, such as art, physical education and video production, for which the school has become a bit famous: students have produced award-winning films here over the last few years. The short film *Blood Memory*, which was written, produced and acted by Argyle students, won Best Student Film, Best Short Film and rave reviews at the Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival last year.

The film program is exciting for Argyle students, but it also teaches a number of important skills, says video production teacher John Barrett.

"There's a certain amount of accountability on a film set. The students realize quickly that the group depends on them being there, that they have a part to play, that they need to work together and respect other people's positions. These are skills that can transfer anywhere."

Argyle also has a sophisticated science lab connected to a rooftop windmill that generates energy used to run a hydroponic system in which herbs are grown using solar energy, and then used in the cafeteria. The school's environmental studies program incorporates an "outdoor classroom"



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PICTURED IN PHOTO: Argyle teacher Mark Semenek (far right) with Photography Club students





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— TOM TARRANT

that includes a solar-powered building on a flourishing green space.

Teacher John Danko runs the science and environmental studies courses. In the nine years he's been teaching at Argyle, he has helped the school secure a number of grants to make the programs possible.

"This is a great school. It allows students to have another chance," says Danko with pride. "They come from a different environment where they weren't fitting in, but they really fit in here. You can really see them grow."

The reputation alternative schools earn is not always accurate, staff insist; some people who have heard of Argyle, for example, think of it as the school for "bad kids" and dropouts. The student body is indeed colourful, but alongside students with crazy hairstyles, black clothing and piercings sit others wearing sweat pants and pony tails.

"We get the opportunity to see kids who are not always seen in society. These are the kids that if you're walking down the street you cross the street, or you sit far away on the bus, because you're not sure about them. But the reality is that these are kids who will open the door for you, carry your bags because they're too heavy, or if you look sad that day they'll ask if you're OK. You get

to see the human parts of kids that people don't always see," says Graham.

### **Roll call**

Attendance is a big issue in alternative schools, as that was often part of the problem at the student's previous school. Following up when students don't show up is crucial, Graham explains.

"Our policy does not give a specific number of days they need to attend; our programs are based on continuous progress. Students are in a course for as long as they need to complete that course. Some need a longer time to focus on one course."

One thing on which teachers and principals at both schools absolutely agree is that in an alternative school, building relationships with the students based on mutual respect is crucial. At Argyle, each student meets with an advisor group led by a single teacher, every single day for 30 minutes. This gives the student a built-in place to belong within the school, but also helps teachers keep tabs on which students are in school that day. Another factor that makes Argyle unique, which goes back to its early days, is the tradition of students and staff being on first-name basis with each other.

Argyle also offers a leg up for young parents. The school has a built-in infant lab with room for eight babies, from two months to two years old. The student brings their baby to school in the morning, gets him or her settled into the infant lab, then returns throughout the day between classes to visit, change diapers, feed and have lunch, and put their baby down for a nap.

At both Argyle and Jameswood, each student follows a timetable that's personalized to match their specific needs. In addition to classes, many students meet with a guidance counsellor. At Jameswood, this position was only added about a year ago, but the counsellor, Sherry Ansloos, is plenty busy.

At a smaller alternative school, it's easier for counsellors to reach out to students, Ansloos says.

"With some of the higher profile students in a 'regular' school, you would know about them but it would be difficult to build connections and provide service to them. Here, because we're small, the students see me all the time and there's a level of comfort. They may not want to open up at first but because I'm always there, they begin to feel comfortable," Ansloos says. "The difference is what I'm counselling here is hard-core, heavy, real-life, raise-your-eyebrows kinds of stuff: pregnancy, violent incidents, domestic violence, mental illness, depression, anxiety, legal matters, housing, jobs, university, everything imaginable. I think that it's possible to reach those kids in other schools, but not to the same extent."

The staff at Jameswood consists of just Tarrant, Ansloos and the four classroom teachers. At Argyle there are nine and a half classroom teachers, two guidance counsellors, a full-time work experience co-ordinator, a full-time substance abuse counsellor, a half-time community support worker and four educational assistants who work in the infant lab, run the cafeteria and assist with video production.

In some situations, parents are involved in the decision to send their kids—who range in age from 16 up to 21—to an alternative school, but in many cases it's their home schools, a caregiver or the student themselves who suggest the option.

"Every year we get about 100 new kids, and this year the majority are here because they have heard from people who have attended that if it's not working out for you,

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this is a good place to be," says Graham. "I often say to parents, we don't really have a problem with cliques in the building, because you need at least two kids in the building who are enough alike to form a clique—and there aren't."

Another big difference is that in an alternative school, where students are often older and more independent, many of them work not just part time for spending money, but full-time jobs to support themselves and pay rent.

"About half of our kids have jobs, and because of the age of the students, we don't get a lot of parental support," says Tarrant. "It's part of the gig I do, too—I know way too much about my students, because I have to."

Ansloos agrees, adding that the school needs to know what's going on in the students' lives in order to help them, even if it's not pretty.

"One of the things I'll say to students is we're not about trouble, we're about help. So kids will disclose a lot of stuff to us that's a lot to hold, but it's about supporting them to get help. I think sometimes in other schools, kids are a bit apprehensive to talk to anyone represented as admin about those hard things because they'll think they won't be allowed in, or the issue is just too big."

Part of Ansloos' role at Jameswood is also as resource teacher for Learning to Age 18, a program that works with high school dropouts to try to connect them back into attending school and graduating.

"They just need a connection, a place they can come that's safe, where they can get counseling and support towards getting their basic needs in line so they can move onto the next step, which is education," Ansloos says.

Outside of school hours, Argyle runs occasional Family Nights, where students can bring whoever is significant in their life for a meal and an evening of activities.

"For many of the kids, there isn't a lot they've been able to show their parents as being successful," says Graham. "As much as a high school kid says, 'I rage against this or that', even if you want to be independent, voice your own opinion, be your own person, you still want to be part of a community that listens to your thoughts and wishes. Everyone wants to belong."

Alternative schools can sometimes have a reputation of being loose with rules. True, students at Jameswood are allowed to wear hats and listen to iPods in class, as long as they are respectful towards teachers and



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— PAT GRAHAM

each other. But there's a structure to the day, Tarrant explains.

For a typical student, the day starts at 9:30, they attend two morning and two afternoon classes with breaks and a lunch hour in between, all ending at 3:15 p.m. During morning break, a food and nutrition grant allows the school to provide a snack, such as yogurt and some fruit, to students.

However it's only about two out of every five students that follow a full-day schedule, says Tarrant. "Some students work in the afternoons, so they only come in the mornings, or maybe they work at night so it's only afternoons that work for them. Some of them, we're happy if they can make it in once a week."

The guidance counsellor helps determine what type of specialized schedule might be needed, says Ansloos.

"Kids on my caseload have been set up specifically for success. Some of them have been out of school for a while—one girl I'm working with has been out for two years. To start, she's putting in one hour, two days a week, for the last class of the day. That's what I feel is something she can do; if she has success with that we'll add more time," Ansloos says.

With such a range of types of students at both schools, one might wonder if bullying would be a problem. But Tarrant claims the opposite.

"This is the safest school I've ever been in. We have almost no issues, because we are open," he says. "The students share a lot so if things are bubbling, we hear about it, and we get there before it bubbles over."

Bullying is a no-go at Argyle too, says Barrett, who has taught at the school for 26 years.

"We're working with students that don't necessarily have a lot of good work, study and attendance habits. It's the kind of place that will allow them to succeed and learn those habits in a supportive environment, where it's very inclusive—there's zero tolerance for any sort of bullying or marginalizing," he says.

At both alternative schools, the principals, teachers and counsellors all have stories to tell about students who have made amazing transformations between the time they enrolled and the day they graduated.

"Overall, they are much more confident," Graham proudly says. "They have the ability and are much more articulate in the sense that they can now understand and say what it is that they need, and they know how to work through their frustrations. It's great to see their confidence in their own ability to be out in the world, make good choices and be good people."

One challenge Tarrant says he could do without is the perception that alternative schools like Jameswood are not "real schools".

"We take being a school very seriously. We have baselines we want the students to achieve—some of them have never achieved these goals before, but they do here. They're here to work, and sometimes, to grow up," he says, gesturing to a hallway wall plastered with photos of former Jameswood students on their graduation day.

"What we do here shows that with some imagination, student needs can be accommodated. We all have policies we need to follow, but it can be done—just take a look at all these grads! My staff and I are not afraid to take a risk if it means a student is going to be here, if it means the student is going to get the credit. Nobody can tell me we do too much for a kid."