

ONE SOLUTION

As a former educator and inner city mentor I have seen the needs of at-risk youth and the role that performing arts can play in meeting those needs.

What are the problems associated with at-risk youth? Broken families. Gangs. Violence. Drugs. Poor communication skills. Self-mutilation. Low test scores. Pregnancy. Boredom. While some of these issues may appear more severe than the others, they are all interrelated a dangerous web of rejection, frustration, self-loathing and demise. Today's youth are depressed, strung out, addicted, unfocused, disrespectful, some are undereducated, and even apathetic. In short, inner city teens are often told and shown that they are worthless, so that is how they live. While there are a handful who are able to beat the odds, who are supported and encouraged, who are focused and goal-oriented, the majority are not. Without a group to belong to, a purpose to drive them, a goal to strive for and a love to live for, they are lost.

Consider an alternative.

Being a part of a performing arts program automatically makes you a part of a team. Tall, skinny, short, fat, athletic, clumsy, popular or not, there is something every kid can do to be a part of the team. In addition to singing, dancing, creating and acting, kids can learn to manage the stage crew, sew costumes, apply makeup, work lights and sound the shy ones can fold programs and the bubbly ones can work the front of the house! Theatre helps children hone skills: memorization, interpretation, creativity, public speaking, teamwork, conflict resolution, body movement, listening and following instructions.

For a few brief hours a day, the slow kids can keep up, the fat kids can glide, the dumb kids can leave the grades behind, the geek can get the girl and the ugly duckling can be the star of the show. For a few brief hours a day, students can focus on something they love, something they are good at, something different. They can receive positive reinforcement of their strengths and constructive criticism to improve their weaknesses. They can earn the respect of their peers and learn to respect themselves. They can objectively evaluate their performance, learn from others and set new goals. They can be good and they can strive to get better. They can achieve and see the results of their education and personal growth. They can take on the responsibility of a task and follow it through to completion. They can own their stake in the success of the performance. And, when it is all over, they can look back on their experience and say, "I was a part of something good."

The theory is simple really. Give kids a place to go where they can feel safe, comfortable and loved, and they will show up in droves. Set the standard high and they will strive to reach it. Model desired behavior and they will copy it. Give them a better alternative, and they will take it. In short, by giving at-risk and inner city youth the chance to be a part of a performing arts program, we can give them the opportunity to succeed, to belong to something bigger than themselves, to participate in a common goal and to see a bigger world. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?