

Taking time around critical issues for youth

Where have all the good face to face conversations gone? Sitting down with a cup of coffee and having a rich conversation with someone about meaningful issues of the day is nearly a lost art. The trend in today's fast-paced society is to remove the human equation with examples including YouTube and Facebook, online chat rooms, podcasts, and massive lecture halls. Even with some very interactive technology these types of communication lack personal relationships and by their nature are preset in passive mode.



But the community now has a place to come together for important, engaging conversation on critical issues facing youth/public education: *Kafé12*. At its core, *Kafé12* will stimulate actual and virtual conversation. Bigger than just the premiere forum scheduled in Calgary for April 2008, *Kafé12* will be a place for the Calgary community to talk and to take action on important issues facing Calgary students, especially vulnerable youth. And it will be a place to find solutions.

A group of Calgary funders want to make a difference for vulnerable youth. In 2006, EducationMatters, the United Way of Calgary and Area, the City of Calgary Family & Community Support Services (FCSS) program, and Burns Memorial Fund established the Vulnerable Youth Funders Table. Now called *Funders for Youth*, others funders have signed on since, including Calgary Stampede Foundation, The Calgary Foundation, Norlien Foundation, Calgary and Area Child and Family Services, and other anonymous supporters. This group decided they wanted to do something that would engage the community in solutions, maximize the impact of their financial investments, and result in real change in systems and practices. They wanted to do something that would allow them to work together and to combine their influence and resources. To make a difference, they decided to focus initially on one issue they all cared deeply about.

The group agreed that high school completion rates needs to be improved. They also agreed that improving high school completion rates is a community responsibility – the business sector, citizens, nonprofits, and government working together towards solutions. *Kafé12* is the means by which Funders for Youth will truly engage the Calgary community in caring about high school completion.



Twenty-five percent of Alberta students do not complete high school within five years of entering Grade 10. This issue is a top priority for school boards and the provincial government. Too many youth in Calgary and across Alberta are still not completing high school. This is especially true for those youth who face additional obstacles to success, often referred to as vulnerable or multiple risk youth. Multi-risk youth have critical challenges to overcome including poverty, abuse, social and behavioral issues, cultural or ESL challenges.

Funders for Youth commissioned a discussion paper called *The Best Start is Finishing*, which provides useful background information on: the value of education to the individual, the economy, and society as a whole; the reasons behind high school drop-out; and promising ways to help vulnerable youth complete high school and further their education. In November 2005, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) called on school boards to lead the change which led to the 2006 publication of “How to Improve Alberta’s High School Completion Rates: Insights From Alberta School Trustees.” Both these documents serve as a valuable guide for *Kafé12* education.

In 2006, a conversation café was held for Hull School where educators and community stakeholders joined round table discussions on Hull's role and long term vision. After 20 minutes of facilitated discussion, guests moved to another table and another discussion. Conversation cafés like this one bring interested individuals together around a common theme to powerfully engage in idea sharing. One of the Funders for Youth attended, and it inspired them to build a forum around the World Café format. "We already have a good idea of what the issues are. Bringing people together to share their ideas, expertise, hopes, and aspirations on a topic they are passionate about, goes a long way to identifying possibilities and building the capacity for real change," explains Blair McNaughton, *Kafé12* Facilitator. "And a world café format is going to serve as a dynamic catalyst for moving forward."

Thus *Kafé12* was born. The objectives of the first *Kafé12* are to



- better understand the issues and risk groups
- generate innovative, community-owned solutions, and
- increase awareness and action on the issue.

Who will be involved? The funders, their networks, educators, students, parents, business and community leaders and service agencies. In addition, strategic partners such as the Calgary Board of Education, Calgary Catholic School District, Calgary Chamber of Commerce, and other business and public service sector partners will be invited to participate.

The half day event, held 9:00 am- 1:00 pm on **April 10 at the Red & White Club**, opens with Dave Chalk, a Canadian entrepreneur, technology guru, television personality, and syndicated columnist. His commitment to education is rooted in his life experience. Told as a child he would never learn, Chalk overcame a severe learning disability to become a success.

Beyond April 10, the plan is for *Kafé12* to live as an online community, keeping the conversation alive, keeping participants updated on actions, timelines and outcomes, and sharing initiatives from government, school boards, funders and emerging programs. What happens from there is anyone's guess, but the hope is that *Kafé12* will embolden citizens to come together to create innovative solutions and to make a difference in high school completion and in our community.

"There are many benefits in being the catalyst for change and hosting a conversation café," says Barbara Burggraf, executive director of EducationMatters and spokesperson for Funders for Youth, "including increased awareness and action regarding the importance of all Calgary youth completing school, both for their future success and for the vitality of the community." But one of the biggest benefits is engaging the public, bringing back the human equation, establishing relationships with the community, sitting down with a cup of coffee to discuss meaningful issues....and uncovering solutions....together.



For more information about *Kafé12* visit www.kafe12.org