Kennedy

Continued from A1

Have you considered suicide in the last 30 days?

Statewide: 18.2 percent
Kennedy: 22.7 percent.

Have you eaten less than you felt you should have because there wasn't enough money to buy food?

Statewide: 17.8. percent.
Kennedy: 26.1.

Drank at least one alcoholic drink in the last 30 days?

Statewide: 27 percent.
Kennedy: 31.8

Marijuana use within the last 30 days?

Statewide: 20.9
Kennedy: 38.1

Have you ever had sexual intercourse?

Statewide: 40.9
Kennedy: 45.5

The percentages read like the stereotypical statistics from an alternative high school. They do drugs, they drink, they have sex. But in comparing the statistics from Kennedy to traditional high schools across the state it's clear that "good kids" do too. In some cases, near the same rate as the kids at Kennedy suggesting that the "alternative" students and "traditional" students are neck-and-neck in their developmental markers.

Except for one.

The statement "I can do most things if I try," is pretty much true.
Statewide: 45 percent.
Kennedy: 52.4 percent.

Statistics are tricky with the state-wide average showing that 45.4 percent of kids thought the statement was "very true" and only 23.8 percent at Kennedy agreeing but Clarke attributes the difference between "pretty much" and "very" true to a broad teenage trait that maybe more potent at Kennedy: skepticism.

Kennedy kids may not be fully on board with the idea that if they try, they can do it, they believe it to be a mostly true premise and overheard conversations in-between lessons offer an insight. Kennedy students are curious and they don't accept an answer without a coherent reason.

In Danny Henson's language arts and social studies class, discussions about peak oil, its effect on the environment, its history as a power-source and possible replacements in the near future are littered with interruptions and interjections questioning the plausibility of an argument and foundations of the facts being presented. They want to know more before signing off on a concept and buying into a premise.

"Yeah, I don't know why," Kennedy Principal Halie Ketcher said in addressing the leap of Kennedy students over the state average. She noted that a positive thought process known as "growth mindset" is encouraged throughout the district, not just at Kennedy. "We have guesses but we don't know what it is."

Current Cottage Grove principal and former Kennedy principal Mike Ingman also has a guess as to why it works.

"If you're asking why kids end up believing in themselves, it's because the adults around them start believing in them," he said. "You know, you got (teacher) Vickie Costello telling you, 'No you can do this.' No, I can't. 'No you can, and I'm not going to give up on you until its done.'"

If holding group and individual therapy sessions allows Guhu and Clarke an insight into the lives of the students at Kennedy and reinforces the idea that they don't confront mental health issues abnormal to the teenage experience, it also provides an understanding of their apparent optimism.

"The students here have an opportunity to prove to themselves that they can do something they never thought they could," Clarke said.

"Many of them have been tossed out of the regular school system and said you know, you're bad, you're a problem or perceive that's what has been said about them. There's all ways to end up in an alternative school. And some it's by choice. Some kids do come here because they see that they have more efficacy. Once they get here, there's an expectation that they're going to achieve because they need to they can see the outcome of their work. When we're in traditional school, it's not quite so obvious," she said.

That evidence is provided at Kennedy through hands-on learning during field trips to wetlands restoration site Quamish, the on-campus garden, spark classes and an autonomy in program choice. It's about ownership here. Even in group. Though, every child who walks through the door of room eight does not have an explicit mental health issue and not every child with a mental health issue visits room eight. It's a process.

According to Guhu, a student can come to him through a myriad of ways. A visit to Ketcher with a request for services could have them sitting with Clarke to best decide a course of action or administrators and teachers may suggest SLMH services to students.

"They get here in every way you can imagine," Clarke said. "Other students, their relationship with Girin already, their knowing about it before they get to school because somebody used to go to school here went to group, to the principal, to the teacher, to Jolie in the office. They get to services both group and individual like every way there is."

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Blaize Shawbuck had no interest and no desire to meet with a counselor. To the 14-year-old, it felt unnecessary. This service was not going to do anything for him. Or so he thought.

But with SLMH, Blaize began attending therapy sessions during the school days. He participated in both one-on-one meetings and in group sessions and started creating relationships and bonds with counselors and peers.

"When I knew about the South Lane Mental Health with the school I took advantage of it. I totally did as I needed it. But like I said, I didn't really want to at first. I didn't really realize what I needed at first until we started talking," he said.

What Blaize had been seeking without explicitly knowing it was to be a part of a community. And by attending these therapy sessions with peers who were willing to talk in an honest and candid manner about both their lives, connections were made.

"If we didn't have that experience together we probably wouldn't even communicate with each other. We're same school but like it takes activities and things to bring us together, you know what I mean?" said Blaize who went on to recommend the services to other students.

"I have several friends that don't like opening up really that came here, enrolled in the program of South Lane Mental Health and they start getting a connection with the counselors here and they actually start coming to school more. It's actually really, really great to see that," he said.

Fast-forward to present-day and Blaize who will be graduating in the spring is wearing a hat with his name stitched across it as he sits in the Kennedy gymnasium.

The 18-year-old was named a star student at an all-school assembly. As his commitment and dedication was praised by teacher Brandi Baker-Rudicell, he was described as being a positive embodiment of what the school stands for. He has found his community.

"I know everyone here, literally everyone here. And I've had some sort of connection with and I've done something with them as in an activity or something outside of the classroom that brought us together," he said.

"It's a great environment, it's very positive. Open," he said with a pause. "Open arms. Like, I don't know, we're just accepting of everything. Everyone. Who you are. And always leave room for growth."

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Kennedy has a reputation. It's for the "bad kids." But statewide data is questioning that stereotype and providing an additonal statistical leg to stand on for administrators and teachers who have been saying this all along: Kennedy kids aren't bad. They've just chosen a different educational environment.

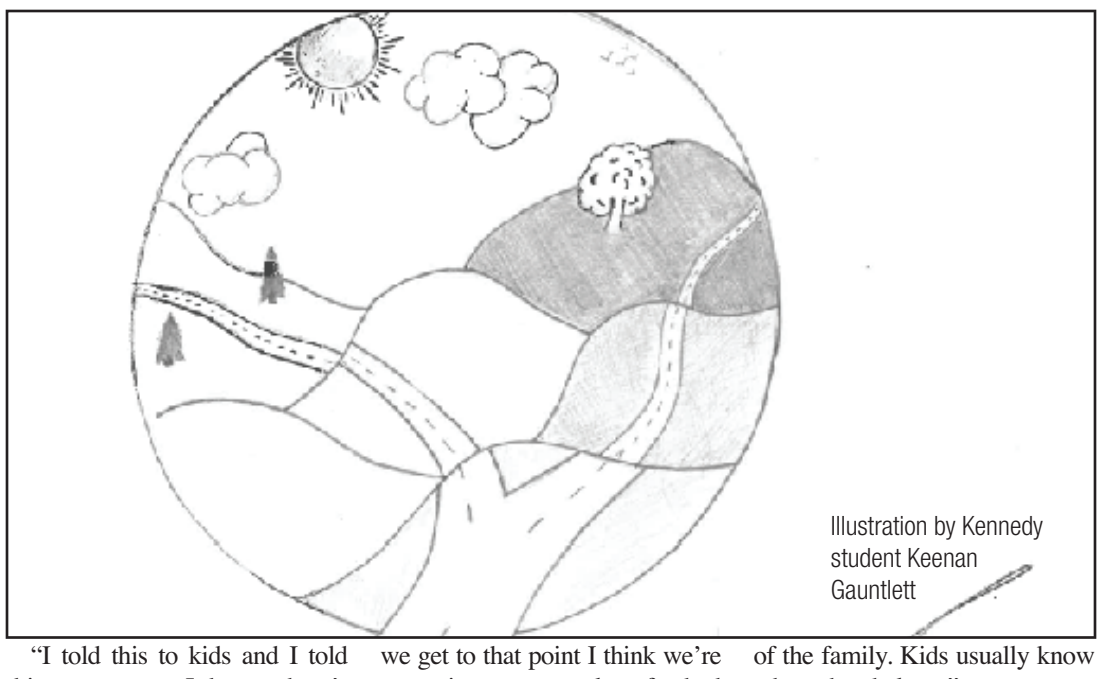


Illustration by Kennedy student Keenan Gauntlett

"I told this to kids and I told this to parents, I know there's a stigma," Ingman said of the community's perception of Kennedy. "I can spend my energy going around Cottage Grove selling why Kennedy is so great or I could put my energy with the kids that are in my building at the time. And I made the decision that I was going to work with kids and not work to change adult's perceptions of what Kennedy is."

In the 30 years Kennedy has been an option for students, its classrooms have seen children who got in trouble at Cottage Grove High School. It's seen teen mothers and flunking seniors and GED students. But it's also seen students who want one-on-one attention from teachers, smaller classes and a cohort model because they just do better academically when their classroom has a fewer students and more understanding.

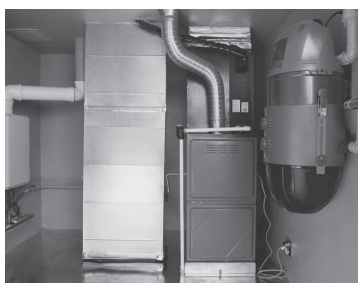
Clarke draws a singular thread in the web of possible circumstances that may lead a student to Kennedy, citing a child diagnosed with ADD who may need more freedom in the classroom. They come to a school like Kennedy and find the environment forgiving, more understanding of their needs.

"There are a group of humans that are like that and we're not -- we don't really have, we don't naturally go oh you're this kind of human, that's the kind of school you need. And you're this kind of human, that's the kind of school you need," she said. "And when we get to that point I think we're not going to see a place for bad kids. You're not ever going to get to be a bad kid. You're going to be a kid that thinks and learns this way. But until we get there… we're going to have the kids who don't fit. Even if they're not called bad kids anymore they're the kids who don't fit.

"And some kids are noticing that. I've done intakes with some kids who are like, there's been the conversation in their family of should I go to Al Kennedy or should I go to Cottage Grove High because I'm kind of a different thinker and it seems like Al Kennedy would be a good place but that's where the bad kids go-right, that comes in the conscious of the family. Kids usually know where they belong."

And whether its conscious or not, the kids at Kennedy seem to know something students around the state are, statistically, still coming to. But where their "can-do" attitude comes from, still has the adults around them unable to pinpoint an exact origin. Clarke though, takes a guess.

"Their social environment—family, friends—have been probably more challenging than the typical person throughout their lifespan. So, they've had more barrier to overcome and, when you have more barriers to overcome and you succeed, you create resilience. And these kids are incredibly resilient."



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