Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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In It For the Money?

by Lon Woodbury



No matter how ethical a good or service of quality may be, there will always be some people whose agenda is something less than righteous; enter the human condition.

This is also true of the network of private parent choice residential schools and programs for struggling teens. Sometimes these are downright scams, but usually the reduced quality comes from owners who have different priorities than are usually accepted by professionals working in the field. The commonality of these "less effective" programs frequently sets money making as too high of a priority.

Mike Watson has worked with adolescent treatment programs for 39 years and has learned a lot about what it takes to run a good quality program, as well as seeing what causes a program to be less effective, ineffective or even dangerous. He recently presented several suggestions for parents interested in checking out residential programs for possible enrollment for their child.

On each of these suggestions, a weak answer should be a red flag that the program might not live up to its potential.

The first suggestion he had was to study the staff for their credentials and longevity. While specific academic credentials are important, it is the experience they have that is the most important. He correctly asserted that all staff that has anything to do with the children (whether directly or indirectly) are important. A good staff person is able to make a good connection with the children, and many people with very little education do great at that. He has also seen psychiatrists, with all the academic credentials in the world, unable to make a decent connection with a child.

Watson wasn't disparaging of therapists, but recognized that effective staff is based on more than just credentials. You have to look at the experience behind the credentials.

To run a successful program there needs to be a good balance between financial staff and program staff. When people who are strongest in financial and administrative matters try to control the day-to-day activities of a school or program, all too often the program is damaged. At the same time, when program people are the ones that are making basic financial decisions, they might obligate the school or program far beyond what the program is able to afford, which is also very damaging.

One thing that is often overlooked by parents is to ask who financially owns the business. When the program owner is primarily an investor, he or she might overstep their knowledge resulting in a negative impact on the school or program. If possible, parents should find out if the person speaking for the school is actually the person who owns the business. Knowing who the real owner is could avoid some unpleasant surprises in the future.

We discussed the importance of good marketing, however with that comes the reliance on a school's website. Web pages are usually primarily used as sales tools. The most telling part of the site, however, is the staff page, indicating the names, credentials and experience of the key staff. If a school or program's web site does not indicate who the key staff are and their backgrounds, it is what I call an anonymous site, and a parent should be very wary of working with them.

All too often, schools or programs assert they can work with all kinds of problem kids. This network of schools and programs is very much niche oriented and effective programs have a very clear and

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