How To Start a Writing Program for At-Risk/ Incarcerated Youth

Before You Start:

Most places that deal with at-risk or incarcerated youth invite the prospect of additional volunteers. Normally the places that do the most good, have the least amount of money. County offices have volunteer programs for kids in juvenile hall or detention camps and private organizations (rehabilitation centers, group homes, after school programs) usually have a process for would-be volunteers. Before you make a commitment to this population, please be very sure that you can indeed be a consistent presence in the life of these kids. These are kids who are used to inconsistency: adults leaving, homes changing, rules constantly shifting. Their lives are severely lacking stability and if you want to be a positive role model for these children, you must be ready to make at least a 1 year commitment. It may take most of or all of this time for some of these kids to even begin to trust you. Patience is key with this population. Do not force anything and always keep your word.

The Children You Will Be Teaching:

This is a very delicate population. Having worked with at-risk and incarcerated youth for five years as a creative writing instructor, mentor, tutor, and English teacher, I can safely say that while no two kids are alike, there are a lot of dark personal traits that they have in common. A lot of these kids have been victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Many come from broken homes or homes riddled with drug and gang issues. Many have had parents leave, either by choice, suicide, homicide, or incarceration. Most have some sort of addiction issue, which is often accompanied by drug or alcohol abuse. These are very wounded kids and you must take this into consideration when constructing prompts and interacting with the kids. Never ask the kids to discuss their pasts with you. You are a writing coach, not a therapist. If the kids want to share with you, they will of their own accord.

Prep:

At-risk and incarcerated youth often have a very long history of truancy. As a result, they are often several grade levels in reading and writing behind their peers. You will need to review such concepts as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, idiom, and rhyme scheme (a lot of kids think that all poetry has to rhyme). I find that having the word, its definition, and an example on the wall at all times so the kids can have something to reference if they forget. Their spelling and grammar may also be poor. The occasional correction along these lines is fine, but I choose to focus on the content and the catharsis of the writing process. You will probably need to supply whatever you require for your workshops (pencils, paper/ journals, poems, etc). Check with the facility you are teaching at beforehand and make sure that they don't have any supply restrictions (many jails only use rubber pencils and may ask you to do the same). You should also make it clear to your students that if their writing indicates that they are going to harm themselves or someone else, you are legally required to tell someone.
Writing Ideas:

I prefer to mix poetry, creative writing, memoir writing, and current event response/discussion in the writing workshops. Teens have a notoriously short attention span so keeping the class varied will help guarantee engagement. The format I follow is as follows:

1) Start with a non-fiction/current event writing prompt. Stories in the news, interesting studies, or quote analysis all work well. Just because the students may not be academically where they should be, does not mean that their interest level is also sub-par. These kids care about big, global issues like poverty, injustice, violence, war, famine, interpersonal relationships, and stories of courage and resilience. I read the article ahead of time and come up with 2-5 questions regarding it. Each question is an opinion-based question. Starting off with questions that have a right or wrong answer can make some students anxious to participate or share. Reminding them that everything they write is opinion-based and that there is not right or wrong will help them to feel at ease. After the students have answered the questions in writing, open up the floor for sharing and discussion. It helps if you do the writing assignment too, and share yours to break the ice. You can find ideas of great, summarized news articles and studies on newser.com and quotes can be found on any quote website.

2) After everyone has shared, we read the poem of the day. I usually pass out two different colored highlighters or markers to each student. As we read through the poem, they are to highlight in one color what they like and with the other color, highlight what they do not understand. After we have read the poem, we discuss and examine what we did not understand. Once all the questions have been answered, we read the poem again, and then discuss what we liked, what we thought the poem was saying, whether or not we agree with the message, etc (feel free to throw in any questions you like). Try to keep the poems to a page or less in length. You can work up to longer poems, but in the beginning, try not to overwhelm the kids. Students often like poems that they can relate to on some level.

3) Lastly, I introduce the poem or creative writing prompt. There are literally limitless ideas. And every group of kids likes something else. Try a few different style prompts (group poems, acrostic, poetry with visuals, etc) and see what the kids enjoy most.

Above all, be patient and consistent. Teenagers are usually pretty good judges of character; they know who is really there for them and they will appreciate it deeply.

If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me at hannahwehr@yahoo.com.