

## Staying the course

Our city has a wealth of Culture, Knowledge, history, dropouts. For Montreal to recognize its potential, it has to find a way for students to recognize theirs

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, THE GAZETTE FEBRUARY 14, 2009



Atami Sagna tutors Monica Bouchard (right) and Mia Ménard-Marien at Verdun Community Church January 29, 2009. They were part of the Toujours Ensemble community group's program "Passeport pour ma réussite" aimed at reducing high school dropout rates.

**Photograph by:** John Mahoney, Montreal Gazette

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Amanda Avila Rojas and Maria Rojas know the drill at 5:30 p.m. on Thursdays.

With knapsacks strapped on their backs, the Grade 8 girls trudge into a church basement in Verdun where a woman with a box of folders hands them their Duo-Tangs.

Maria works on her French homework. Amanda focuses on mathematics - "unfortunately," she adds, a grin spreading across her face.

In the hushed, dimly lit study hall, volunteer tutors sit with students or hover nearby to help them with their school work.

This isn't a typical after-school homework program in a low-income neighbourhood but the first dropout prevention program of its kind in Quebec. For every year of high school they complete, the 125 Verdun students in the program will be eligible for a \$500 bursary for post-secondary education, up to a total of \$2,500.

In a province where the dropout rate is stubbornly stuck at about 25 per cent for public and private schools, the Pathways to Education program in Verdun is drawing high-level interest in education circles. Most of the students in the program attend École secondaire Monseigneur Richard where the dropout rate in 2006-07 was an alarming 49 per cent.

In Regent Park, one of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods, the dropout rate plunged from 56 per cent to 10 per cent after the Pathways program was launched there in 2001. The community-based program focuses on four areas to help students finish high school and continue their studies: tutoring several nights a week, mentoring, financial support and advocacy.

The program in Verdun is run by Toujours ensemble, a local non-profit organization that helps youth, in partnership with the Commission scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys.

Toujours ensemble draws on an army of about 50 volunteers for the tutoring and group mentoring activities it holds four evenings a week.

It's also community based. Pathways to Education Canada, a charitable organization funded by public and private sector donations, contends that school-based attempts to reduce the dropout rate in low-income communities have mostly failed.

After the Regent Park program was put in place, an evaluation showed high-school absenteeism dropped 50 per cent and the percentage of neighbourhood high-school graduates enrolled in college and university jumped from 20 per cent to 80 per cent. Perhaps most importantly, the bloated dropout rate plummeted to 10 per cent.

When he first saw the results from Regent Park, Pierre Côté, chief executive of Toujours ensemble said: "I almost fell out of my chair."

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Pathways is one of the dropout-prevention programs that has caught the eye of a working group that next month will release its 10-year strategic plan for reducing Quebec's dropout rate.

The committee of about 20 people was organized by high-profile Montreal businessman Jacques Ménard and includes dropout-prevention groups, school board officials, a pediatrician and Côté from Toujours ensemble, as well as senior Quebec government bureaucrats, one of whom is an assistant deputy minister of education.

Last fall, Ménard, president of BMO Financial Group for Quebec, lamented that governments deal with the dropout problem in a disjointed, patchwork way.

"I think it's a national tragedy," said Ménard, president of BMO Financial Group for Quebec. "And I think it doesn't have to go on."

The committee has been looking at best practices in Quebec and other jurisdictions - or as Ménard put it - why some communities are making headway on the dropout rate and others aren't getting anywhere.

Montreal clearly falls into the latter category, and pays a steep economic and social price for students who don't get a high-school diploma.

In 2006-07, the dropout rate for Montreal Island public schools was 32 per cent, compared with a provincial average of 29 per cent for public schools. And the combined graduation rate for the five school boards on Montreal Island after seven years of study was 65.9 per cent - a figure that has barely budged in years.

The Commission scolaire de Montréal graduated 55.9 per cent of students in that time frame. Graduation rates for the two English boards on the island have consistently been higher than those at the three French ones, but are still shy of the government's target for 2010: to have 85 per cent of students obtain a high-school diploma by the age of 20.

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One bright spot among all the gloomy figures is that finding ways to curb Montreal - and Quebec's - dropout rate is on a lot of minds, with different groups brainstorming about how to fix the problem. The fall-out for Montreal students not making it through high school is huge - for them, and, also for the rest of us.

The Regent Park program shows it is possible to make dramatic changes, if the will exists. Activists, educators and researchers offer several suggestions including: promoting the value of education, easing the transition from elementary to high school, getting parents more involved in their children's education and better identifying and monitoring at-risk kids.

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One of the problems with dropout-prevention efforts is the lack of continuity, said Michèle Glémaud, executive director of Montreal Hooked on School, a regional organization

focused on reducing the dropout rate that is also working on the strategic plan.

There are plenty of programs at every level of education in Quebec but little comes of them, Glémaud contends. "We have to stop doing all sorts of little projects left and right that don't add to others."

Prevention programs focus their efforts on what goes on in school rather than working with the community and families, she said. "It's working with just one (aspect) of a youth. And that's what we have to avoid now."

Laurier Fortin, a Université de Sherbrooke researcher who has studied the dropout problem for more than 30 years, estimates that over the past 10 years more than \$250 million has been spent on programs to keep Quebec kids in school "and the dropout rate hasn't gone down one per cent."

Most Quebecers get their high school diplomas - eventually. In 2006-07, 16 per cent of adults age 20 and older got diplomas, bumping the total graduation rate up to 85 per cent.

But as Glémaud points out, if you get your diploma in your mid-twenties: "You've lost a lot of years."

A regional group led by the five school boards on Montreal Island is also working on ways to reduce the dropout rate, including plans for a public awareness campaign to drive home the message that education matters to all of us.

"I think everybody has put it on the front-burner," said Antonio Lacroce, the director-general of the English Montreal School Board and chair of the Table des partenaires pour la persévérance scolaire à Montréal. "I think everyone recognizes the need to do something about it."

Glémaud said the committee working on the strategic plan isn't looking at launching another prevention program. They want to look at existing initiatives, and also find ways to create links between them so programs don't happen in isolation. Interventions have to span from childhood through the end of high school, Glémaud said.

"What we say is that we must work on a cultural change. We really have to change the way we approach the education of children."

The students also need a "significant adult" working closely with them and their families, Glémaud said. She pointed to how the Pathways model has workers making the link

between the student, school and family. "That's very helpful because some of the families don't feel at ease to come to the school to talk to the (principal) or the teacher."

Students also need greater guidance about what they're good at and what they might want to do in the future, Glémaud said. In Britain, for instance, high-school kids are linked with universities, she said. "It helps the kids envision where they want to go and it also makes the university more accessible to them."

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Getting kids more engaged in school is critical. That was one of the verdicts in a dropout prevention practice guide for educators published last fall by the Institute of Education Sciences, part of the U.S. Department of Education.

The review panel that came up with evidence-based recommendations called for the use of data systems to help identify students at high risk of dropping out. Schools should continually monitor the academic and social performance of students, the panel said. It suggested intensively intervening in the academic, social and personal lives of students most at risk of quitting school. The panel also recommended assigning an adult advocate to work one-on-one with these students, acting as "a case manager" who interacts with them every day.

Fortin and Glémaud agree schools need to better identify at-risk students. Fortin and his research team have been evaluating students at four francophone high schools in Sherbrooke through a software he helped develop to assess at risk students. This school year, 90 per cent of students in the schools answered six questionnaires on a website. "We're able to know who is at risk and who isn't at risk," Fortin said.

"And then we can start putting in place prevention programs."

One program Fortin is implementing in the four Sherbrooke high schools is adapted from an American dropout prevention program that has been shown to have positive effects on students staying in school.

The Check & Connect program is used in high schools in the Minneapolis school district and has also come to the attention of the committee Ménard set up.

"When kids are showing these early signs of disengagement this is an intervention that can work to assess those students," said Sandra Christenson, a professor in the department of educational psychology at the University of Minnesota who helped develop

the program.

The "check" involves systematic monitoring in three categories: attendance, academic performance and behaviour. A mentor checks on a student and also "connects" with them at least once a week. "If a student is doing less well than we're hoping for, we will implement more intensive interventions," Christenson said.

The program also involves partnerships with families.

When kids get to high school they're often lost, Fortin says. If they have problems, they don't know who to go see. With Check & Connect if students have problems, "the staff will intervene before a youth drops out or before the youth is too lost," he said.

The approach provides students with guidance, supervision and, adds Fortin, a follow-up relationship that he contends is hard to find now in a Quebec high school.

"That's what we find in the programs that have succeeded," Fortin said. "There's always a direct intervention with students at risk."

Helping an at-risk youth in a more intensive way over several years requires an investment of staff but also a reorganization of services, he said. "It requires doing things differently than what we usually do in schools."

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Fortin says work should be done to ease the transition from elementary to high school for students. By Grade 8, some students who have not adapted begin a path to dropping out that will last several years with most quitting school at 16 and 17, he said.

Grades 7 and 8 should resemble elementary school more with fewer teachers and more supervision, Fortin said, adding that studies in the U.S. have shown good results in this area.

Several studies show student motivation declines throughout high school, says Université de Montréal researcher Roch Chouinard.

In a study of more than 2,000 students in the Greater Montreal area, Chouinard looked at what happens to student motivation between Grade 6 and the end of Grade 7. He found, on average, quite a pronounced decline in motivation, as well as a drop in the quality of the students' relationship with their teachers, Chouinard said.

The study recommended more supervision of students age 12 to 14, as well as efforts to boost the number and quality of interactions with teachers.

Often, what is done in schools to tackle the dropout problem doesn't stem from research, Fortin noted. "We're not drawing inspiration from promising research. And often when we do programs, it's short term."

Fortin said prevention programs should be long-term, stem from research and include training for teachers. "If we applied the results of research now in schools, we could do a lot better," he said.

Glémaud said at present there is research and action on the dropout rate - "but between them there is absolutely no connection. And that's the challenge."

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