

Pathways program a classroom success

At-risk youth in two of city's toughest areas reach educational benchmarks, cut absenteeism

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An innovative program that helps at-risk youth complete high school has proved astoundingly successful in two of Toronto's toughest neighbourhoods, according to figures to be released today.

In September, 2007, Pathways to Education – an organization that made its name turning around the lives of struggling students in Regent Park - expanded its offerings to the Toronto communities of Lawrence Heights and Rexdale, as well as to neighbourhoods in Kitchener, Ottawa and Montreal.

In Lawrence Heights, a North York area sometimes known as the "Jungle," the program reduced by 52 per cent the number of Grade 9 students earning six credits or less per school year, a major indicator of whether students will graduate.

In the north Etobicoke neighbourhood of Rexdale, that figure decreased by 41 per cent.

Pathways also helped significantly reduce absenteeism rates among its Grade 9 participants.

Rexdale has seen a 36-per-cent drop in Grade 9 students who skip 15 per cent or more of their classes. Lawrence Heights has seen this number reduced by 43 per cent.

Pathways is unique in that it offers tutoring sessions four nights a week, and provides free bus tickets and food vouchers to students in need. It offers a \$1,000 bursary to every student for each year of school he or she completes, money that is to be used for postsecondary education. The

program also employs support workers who monitor and coach students and their families.

Soufian Khaled, a Grade 9 student from Lawrence Heights, said Pathways has helped him improve his performance at school.

"Before I went to Pathways, sometimes I'd get failing marks," the 14-year-old said. "Now, my tests are certain to be in the 60s. There's no more failing."

Soufian also said the program's bursary would help him achieve his goal of going to university one day.

"They give you a thousand dollars," he said. "That can go a long way."

Marjeta Mustafaraj, a 37-year-old tutor in the Lawrence Heights program, said she thinks the Pathways program is successful because of the dedication of the volunteers and staff.

"They look after students from the time they get there to the time they leave," she said.

"The students get all the support from staff and volunteers ... and there's a lot of materials, books and supplies to facilitate the work."

In Regent Park, the Pathways to Education Program has helped reduce the high school drop out rate from 56 per cent, or twice the Toronto average, to less than 10 per cent in just seven years.

The program has also been successful in increasing enrolment numbers. In Regent Park, 92 per cent of eligible youth have joined the program. In Lawrence Heights and Rexdale, enrolment numbers are 91 per cent and 81 per cent respectively. Catherine Bryant, marketing and communications manager at Pathways, credits the program's comprehensive scope for its success.

"We've addressed the community-based issues and worked with the schools," Ms. Bryant said. "[The program] includes academic tutoring four nights a week in five core subjects, social support, mentoring programs that include social skills; and in later years, career-planning-type skills."

But she said it's important to realize the program is a "hand-up" and not a "handout," meaning students are given resources and it's up to them to make the most of the opportunity.

And while the Lawrence Heights and Rexdale programs are still in their infancy, Ms. Bryant sees reason to be optimistic.

"The results we've achieved in this first year at the new sites, are comparable to the results we saw in the first year at Regent Park," she said, adding the new programs need time to grow.

"To us, those are leading indicators to say that the program is heading down the path to having the same results as Regent Park in terms of lowering drop- out rates."

In fact, Pathways is already working toward introducing the program to other parts of Canada.

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