



Feb. 4, 2004. 01:00AM

Over the hump and on their way

[CAROL GOAR](#)

Toronto has a high school dropout rate of 29 per cent. Regent Park, the city's oldest and largest public housing project, has a dropout rate of 56 per cent.

But it won't for long.

Thanks to a plan conceived by a visionary public health nurse, the kids of Regent Park are starting to see themselves as future doctors, lawyers, teachers, police officers and community organizers. And they're staying in school to make it happen.

Pathways to Education is one of the city's most remarkable success stories.

It all began eight years ago, when Carolyn Acker, executive director of Regent Park Community Health Centre, attended a conference in Montreal.

One of the speakers was Dr. Jack Geiger of City University of New York. As a medical graduate, he had set up a community health centre in rural Mississippi. Within a single generation, he was able to hand the reins to young black professionals, whom he had found as children, picking cotton in the fields.

Acker returned to Toronto, determined to give the same boost to the kids of Regent Park.

She knew there was no one-size-fits-all formula, so she sat down with parents of various ethnic backgrounds to find out where the barriers were. She looked at anti-poverty programs across Canada and the United States. She spoke to educators, community leaders, health-care workers and young people themselves.

In September of 2001, Pathways to Education was born.

It offers high school students four kinds of support:

- ★ They get free tutoring, four nights a week. Volunteers from a wide range of professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds are available to help them with core subjects. This is particularly important for kids whose first language is not English.
- ★ As a condition of staying in the program, students must show up for tutoring if their grade in any course falls below 60 per cent.

- ★ They are assigned mentors, who monitor their progress and offer guidance. Each adult works with 10 students. Every two weeks, there is a group mentoring session at the health centre, where kids can socialize and talk about issues such as drugs, bullying, guns and gangs.

- ★ For teens who spend their nights alone, while a lone parent juggles low-paying jobs, it is important to have a sounding board and a role model.

- ★ They are provided with subway/bus tickets to get to school. If they are absent from class, they lose their eligibility for free transportation.

Because there is no high school in Regent Park, most kids can't walk to class. But their families can't afford \$83 a month for a transit pass. That is one of the reasons so many students drop out.

They earn \$1,000 a year toward a bursary that can be used to enrol in university, college or an apprenticeship program. This encourages them to finish high school and allows them to dream of going on.

Although post-secondary education remains dauntingly expensive for these kids, knowing they can afford to get started makes a huge difference.

"We set an amount we knew we could raise," explained Marni Schecter-Taylor, director of development. "The psychological incentive is more important than the money."

From the very beginning, the program exceeded expectations. The organizers hoped to sign up 75 per cent of the kids starting Grade 9 in 2001. They got a 97 per cent participation rate.

They hoped to reduce the rate of absenteeism among Regent Park's Grade 9 cohort. They cut it in half.

They hoped to lower the number of kids at risk of dropping out. The proportion of Grade 9s who failed three or more courses fell to 18.7 per cent from 38.6 per cent the previous year.

The program is now in its third year, with 430 participants scattered across 32 different high schools. The grades of the Pathways kids are as good as, or better than, those of their classmates. Their younger brothers and sisters can't wait to get into the program.

"I've watched some of these kids transformed right before my eyes," Schecter-Taylor said. "Most started with no clear plan to go to university. Now they want to be doctors and teachers and veterinarians."

One of the reasons Pathways is so effective, Acker said, is that it builds on Regent Park's innovative early learning program and its strong elementary schools. But kids need help over one last hurdle: the bar that will determine whether they soar or fall back into a life of limited opportunity.

The program is not cheap. It will cost \$1.87 million this year. Forty-five per cent of its

Toronto Star – Feb 4, 2004 “Over the hump and on their way” -Carol Goar.-

funding comes from charitable foundations, 40 per cent from corporate sponsors and the rest from individual donors. Volunteers give 13,000 hours of their time, tutoring and mentoring the kids.

Gratifying as it is to tap into the goodwill of hundreds of Torontonians, Acker and her colleagues would appreciate government support. They believe they have a program that could be replicated in low-income communities across the country. It improves kids' grades, increases their motivation, bolsters their confidence and keeps them off the streets at night.

It is too soon to tell whether Pathways will transform Regent Park within a generation. But it's off to a pretty amazing start.

Carol Goar 's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.