

## **A hand up - not a hand out**

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Four years ago, I met a bright young kid named Mohammed Shafique, who lived in Regent Park, a low-income enclave in downtown Toronto. Historically, most kids from Regent Park dropped out of high school. But Mohammed was heading off to university. He belonged to the first class that had been nurtured through high school by a remarkable program called Pathways to Education. Without Pathways, he joked, "I'd probably be doing drugs."

Today, the dropout rate in Regent Park is under 10 per cent. Eighty per cent of Pathways kids go on to postsecondary education. Nearly all are the first generation in their families to do so. This spring, Mohammed will graduate with a B.Comm from Queen's. "I got a lot of opportunities with Pathways," he says. "I met a lot of great leaders who boosted my confidence."

Mohammed's family came to Canada from Bangladesh when he was 9. They knew nothing about the Canadian education system. "When your parents are struggling so much, it's difficult for them to take the extra time and effort."

Pathways is a comprehensive program that offers academic, social and financial support, as well as advocacy. It tutors and mentors students so they'll stay on track, and it makes sure they have bus tickets. Essentially, it gives them the kind of opportunities that middle-class Canadian kids have. It lines them up with internship programs, helps them apply to college and exposes them to a broader world. And it raises their expectations.

Pathways began as a grassroots public-private partnership. The Boston Consulting Group's David Pecaut called it "one of the most successful programs we have found anywhere in North America." But can it be replicated?

The early signs are excellent. Five other low-income communities have now launched Pathways programs, with funding help from the province. "They had terrifically high dropout rates and were ready to embrace change," says Carolyn Acker, the programs' founder. In the first year, all dramatically cut

the number of "at-risk" kids, as measured by school attendance and credit accumulation. They also achieved high participation rates - as much as 91 per cent of eligible students. There are 1,720 students in the programs now, and there'll be 5,000 by the time the current Grade 9s graduate.

The Pathways program starts in Grade 9. To change the peer culture, it aims to enroll everyone. If all your friends are going to after-school tutoring, chances are you will, too. If your friends start acting success-oriented, you probably will, too. By Grade 11 or 12, Pathways kids are talking about becoming plumbers, carpenters, scientists, even MBAs. David Hughes, the president, says, "What's so exciting is their ambition to show what they're capable of."

Everyone at Pathways says that what they offer is a hand up, not a hand out. "A lot of this is about responsibility," says the chairman, Sam Duboc. "We're helping these kids to help themselves flourish."

How much does it cost? It's not cheap. The current budget is \$9.5-million, which works out to just over \$4,000 per kid per year. Ontario has kicked in about a third of that, with the rest coming from foundations and the private sector. But the payoffs are spectacular.

The mentoring doesn't stop after Grade 12. Pathways mentors keep in touch to offer advice and support. "I had some tough times in first-year university," Mohammed says. He struggled with the cultural and academic expectations of a top university. But now, with an internship lined up with Xerox, he's optimistic about his future. He keeps in close touch with other Pathways graduates. One is doing an internship in cancer research at Notre Dame. Another is heading off to law school in Britain.

Pathways won't work in every community. It must have the skills and depth to deliver the program. It also has to have something else. "It's the passion," Mohammed says, "that makes it work."