

Education program for Toronto's underprivileged to expand

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A unique program with humble beginnings in Toronto's rugged Regent Park neighbourhood will be expanded to help youth across the country stay in school, said Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty.

In 2007, the Pathways to Education program – a plan which has successfully reduced drop-out rates in Regent Park since 2001 – grew to serve the Toronto neighbourhoods of Lawrence Heights and Rexdale and communities in Ottawa, Kitchener and Montreal in 2007.

At a press conference Tuesday, Mr. McGuinty called the expansion of the Pathways to Education program a “test” to see if it could be exported to communities around the country.

After reducing the number of kids who failed six or more courses by 52 per cent in Lawrence Heights and 41 per cent in Rexdale, Mr. McGuinty said the program has proven that it can meet the needs of underprivileged communities across Canada.

“We are...looking now to take this even further, make it national in scope and to see if we might improve the lives and opportunities for young people far beyond Regent Park,” Mr. McGuinty said at Sir Sanford Fleming Academy, a high school in the Bathurst Street and Wilson Avenue area.

The extension of the program, which stands on the four key pillars of tutoring, mentoring, coaching and financial assistance, is an attempt to step up the fight against poverty in Canada, said Samuel Duboc, co-founder of Pathways, the organization that created the program.

“You can never do enough,” Mr. Duboc said. “We're in discussion right with Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver for additional sites and locations out there. We expect to be out west...in 2010.”

Kathleen Wynne, Ontario's minister of education, fully supports the idea.

"I think it's terrific," Ms. Wynne said. "There are communities and kids who need the support of this kind of initiative in every province in the country."

David Hughes, president of Pathways, said he would be surprised if the program isn't out west in the next year or so.

"I've been brought on specifically to help find a pattern and a path to help us get across the country," said Mr. Hughes, former chief executive officer of Habitat for Humanity Canada.

"We're fairly regionally centric...we're in Ontario and we have one program in Quebec," said Mr. Hughes.

"In a very short period of time we will be a national program. By national I would say we're in four or five provinces and moving toward being in all provinces and communities where support is needed."