

EDUCATION: Toronto program finds success in lowering dropout rates

Pathways to Education looks to expand nationwide

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March 10, 2009 3:16 PM

After successfully lowering the dropout rates in Regent Park, the Pathways to Education program is now experiencing similar success in Lawrence Heights.

Begun in Regent Park in 2001, the Pathways program expanded to Lawrence Heights and Rexdale in late 2007 with the help of a \$19-million grant from the provincial government.

In its first year the Lawrence Heights program saw a 52 per cent reduction in the number of at-risk Grade 9 students, defined as students who earn 6 credits or less, as well as a 43 per cent drop in rates of high absenteeism and a total enrolment of 91 per cent of eligible students.

On Tuesday, March 10 Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty was on hand to announce the program's first-year results.

"The big question was could this program and its success be replicated," McGuinty said. "I think these results prove that it can be expanded to offer students in other communities the opportunity to not just improve their future, but improve the future of others."

In Rexdale, the program saw a 41 per cent drop in at-risk students and a 36 per cent reduction in high absenteeism with 81 per cent of students enrolled. Results were also announced for Pathways programs in Kitchener, Ottawa and Verdun, Montreal, which also began in 2007.

"Dropout rates have long been a problem in Toronto and the surrounding area," said Samuel Duboc, chairman of Pathways to Education, citing statistics that show high school dropouts have higher rates of unemployment, make lower wages, pay less taxes and cause more crime.

"These young people are proving that if we just invest in opportunities for them they're going to take those opportunities and run."

The program uses four pillars to improve student achievement, which include academic support provided by volunteer tutors, social support through a mentoring program, counselling, and financial assistance, which ranges from bus tickets and lunch vouchers to bursaries for post-secondary studies.

"There's been a shortage of good news lately and this is a good news story and an economic story," McGuinty said. "The strongest economies in the world will be built on education and innovation and that's what we're trying to do. When we give students a better education they go on to get better jobs. At its best I think public education does more than just build strong economies, it builds strong societies."

Sabri Habibu, a Grade 10 student at Sir Sanford Fleming Academy and resident of Lawrence Heights, said his average has gone up by 30 per cent since he joined the program.

"It shows kids that people care," said Sabri, who wants to be an airplane mechanic when he finishes school.

His classmate Shamis Ismail, also a Grade 10 student, has seen a 20 per cent increase in her average and hopes to become a lawyer.

"I wasn't really trying before," she said. "But now that I know I have someone to help me it's easier. You know someone's going to be there."

The program aims to improve the lives of students rather than just their academics.

"I'm not really interested in creating an after-school academic program," said Owen Christopher Hinds, program director of Lawrence Heights. "That's certainly part of it, but I think we are preparing them for life. We prepare them to help the community and become better citizens. We really want them to learn how to contribute to society and make a better society."

Duboc said the next step for the program will be expanding nationwide, something graduate Mohammed Shafique finds encouraging.

"I think I speak for all pathways students when I say the program changed my life," said Shafique, who was one of the first graduates from the Regent

Park program. "With the plans to go national I have an even greater sense of hope for students across the country."