

## **Q&A: Regent Park program making the grades**

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by Barry Hertz

**Pathways to Education reduced the high school dropout rate in Regent Park from 56% to less than 10%, before expanding in September, 2007, to five new areas — including Lawrence Heights and Rexdale. Yesterday, officials announced the group has had similar success in those communities too. The Post's Dave Bowden asked founding program director Norman Rowen to explain how they did it:**

*Q You helped develop the original program in Regent Park, an area where more than half of high school students were dropping out. Tell me about that process.*

*A I interviewed a ton of kids, kids who had been successful [in school], kids who hadn't been successful, parents in the community, agency workers, as well as workers in the different schools. They all said the same thing: the kids needed support to move from Grade 8 to Grade 9 and be successful. There's no local high school in Regent Park, [so] they needed to move beyond the community and they needed that support. So the hypothesis behind the program was that based on best practices, the supports we develop would allow the kids to be as successful as anybody else in the city of Toronto. These are the lowest income census tracts in Toronto. So that's how the program developed.*

*Q Once you identified the need, how did you go about addressing it?*

*A Well, the program is predicated on there being four supports ... developed in relation to what had been best practices in other successful programs, but also — more importantly — what the kids needed in the community and what the parents thought were necessary. Clearly they needed academic help. They also needed some kind of social support because they had the stigma of the [low-income] community. They needed the advocacy support of staff who knew the school system but also knew the community and could relate to them as young people, as individuals. And finally the financial*

support and support for unity. We couldn't change the fact of poverty there, but we could help them believe that ... we could help them get through high school and if they graduated high school, there would be some support for them."

*Q Can you explain how the supports work?*

A The first [is] academic support, which takes the form of tutoring four nights a week as well as academic support that they get for special education and the like. [The second is] social support that they get in Grades 9 and 10 and specialty and career mentoring in Grades 11 and up. There's a financial support to it: Either TTC tickets for those who live a fair distance from their high school, [or] lunch vouchers in other communities. There's also financial support totaling \$4,000, a bursary applied to post-secondary education. The fourth support is a staff [member] of the program who serves as an informal mentor of the kids.

*Q Every student gets \$4,000 for university or college?*

A Every student. They're also eligible for provincial grants that are available to low income families, so that helps them spread the \$4,000 Pathways further. Eighty per cent of kids from Pathways pursue post-secondary education and [of those] there's a 95% retention rate, meaning they stay in school. Between the provincial money and our money, most of the kids are OK.

*Q Pathways includes a legion of volunteers. What kind of work do they do?*

A All the tutoring and mentoring are delivered through volunteers. There's staff support ... but the actual delivery of the program works through volunteers. We do really good screening of the volunteers, they pass police checks, all of that management stuff. But then as well, they're people who are interested and committed to working with the kids on a regular basis. As the kids get older and need more academically specific work, [volunteers] may be specialists in one field or another. The same with mentors. We try to hook them up with different places where they get exposure to the kinds of careers that they want to pursue.