

Educating Adna

What happens when poor kids are given the kind of school support that most Canadians enjoy? A minor miracle, MICHAEL VALPY reports

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By MICHAEL VALPY

Adna is 16 years old, with hopes and expectations for the future as sparkling as her smile and as ambitious as those of any Canadian her age. She wants to be a doctor, a pediatrician. That is what she talks about with her friends, her teachers and her single-parent father.

What makes Adna's dream special is that, until two years ago, an Everest-sized barrier stood between the Somali-born Grade 11 student and her medical-school aspirations. Teenagers in her neighbourhood just didn't grow up to become doctors; it was enough merely to graduate from high school.

Adna's home is Regent Park, the vast public-housing project on the eastern flank of downtown Toronto that has become synonymous in the city with an urban underclass, with a ghetto of brown, black and yellow faces stigmatized for its perceived human failure, its crime, its drugs and violence, its relentless poverty and its high-school dropout rate: 58 per cent.

At least some, if not most, of Regent Park's bleak statistics can be found in urban communities across Canada -- Vancouver's Downtown East Side, Spryfield in Halifax, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve in Montreal, Calgary's Beverly Heights, Winnipeg's Edgewood and, returning to Toronto, St. James Town, Alexandra Park and the Jane-Finch neighbourhood.

There are "a lot of Regent Parks around," says Prof. Lynn McIntyre, dean of the Faculty of Health Professions at Nova Scotia's Mount St. Vincent University and a member of the Canadian School Board Association's advisory committee for 10 education-intervention pilot projects in poor communities.

In all, University of Alberta education scholars William Maynes and Rosemary Foster have identified 145 inner-city "educational poverty programs," 29 of them aimed at students like Adna.

But the results have been generally tepid, Prof. Maynes says. "With adolescents, we're just starting to understand the kinds of things that might work. And the programs

suffer from what most Canadian programs [for poor students] suffer from, which is poor evaluation."

What is happening in Regent Park may well be cause for excitement.

Across the nation, 70 per cent of children from immigrant families graduate from high school; in Regent Park, the figure used to be 30 per cent. Only 23 per cent of its children with single parents were graduating from high school, compared with the Toronto average of 42 per cent.

But then, in the fall of 2001, a year in which the housing project recorded nine homicides, the Regent Park Community Health Centre unveiled Pathways to Education, a program that has stunningly altered the statistics foreshadowing Adna's future.

Pathways, known as P2E, was the product of three years of North America-wide research and discussions with the community's parents. It was founded on the maxim that what's good enough for a kid in wealthy North Toronto is good enough for a kid in Regent Park. It focuses on the critical point in a teenager's life: The often scary transition into high school. Its aim is to provide teens with the support they need to succeed as students

In two years, P2E has slashed the academic-at-risk rate by more than half, sharply reduced absenteeism and resulted in Regent Park students outperforming or performing as well as non-Regent Park students in the high schools they attend.

"In a year of nine murders," says Norman Rowen, the program's executive director, "we created something that led to a sense of hope, an image of positive expectations."

Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, who owns a house in Cabbagetown, just north of Regent Park, is the program's honorary patron. "I think that public education is the only way we can give everyone an equal start in this country," she says. ". . . With a bit of financial encouragement, wonders can be wrought."

Ontario Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman has had students to his vice-regal suite for tea. Canada's major banks, some of the country's largest charitable foundations and the Canadian Auto Workers union have contributed to its \$2-million annual budget.

Toronto's universities have provided intellectual resources and hundreds of student volunteer tutors and mentors, and the Toronto District School Board rhapsodizes about the program.

"Pathways came to us as a gift," says Pauline McKenzie, principal of Jarvis Collegiate Institute, which about one-third of Regent Park's high-school students attend.

All students who agree to take part in P2E -- 95 per cent of those who are eligible -- must attend tutoring sessions if their marks fall below a certain percentage. They must agree to group mentoring sessions in which P2E staff counsel them on navigating the shoals of being teenagers in high school and on making plans for their future.

In each of the 34 high schools across Toronto where Regent Park students are enrolled, a P2E support worker monitors their attendance, behaviour and academic performance, and acts as an intermediary if they get into difficulty.

Each student receives free public-transit tickets to get to and from school. For each academic year they complete, they receive a \$1,000 bursary for their postsecondary education.

Pathways had its genesis in the decision five years ago by the Regent Park Community Health Centre, the core agency in the housing project, to rethink itself and its services. The program is, if anything, the neighbourhood's brainchild -- parents wanted a way to address their children's failure in school and the hopelessness they faced in getting good jobs.

Mr. Rowen, an education consultant and former researcher at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, was hired in 2000 to identify and analyze education programs in low-income communities across Canada and the United States. From his work, Pathways was born, and he became its executive director.

P2E may sound like little more than an income-support and surrogate parent scheme, but that, Mr. Rowen says, would be a gross over-simplification.

"Income support? We pay out \$60 a month for TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] tickets and supplies and a bursary at the end of the year. That's hardly a major income supplement and it doesn't begin to make up for the cuts in social services over the past few years.

"Surrogate parents? Maybe a little bit. But all kids need adults in their lives who aren't their parents. I can't think of anybody I've met who hasn't needed a mentor, some other adult. That's what we're being, we're being the 'others.' "

It is the scope of the program, its embrace of the whole child and the child's family, school and social environment, that is its genius.

In September, 2001, P2E started with 120 Grade 9 students who included Adna. Each school year since then, it has added a new group of Grade 9s. Mr. Rowen and his staff won't know until a year and a half from now, when Adna's group completes Grade 12, what impact P2E has had on Regent Park's high-school dropout statistics. "But the intervening variables," he says, "are splendid."

Adna's assessment is blunt. Without Pathways, she says, she wouldn't have made it this far. She has a dream. She has a 65-per-cent average, which she knows has to rise to meet that dream.

On one of the three or four nights a week Pathways orchestrates her life, Adna can be found at a local elementary school attending a first-year university sociology course. The course and instructor Horace Henriques are provided free by the University of Toronto.

She also must see tutors if her average falls below 70. So two nights a week, she is tutored by volunteers, most of them university students, and once every two weeks, she attends a group mentoring session designed to make her feel comfortable in school and to cement relationships with her peers.

Dinny Biggs, on secondment from the Toronto school board as P2E's co-ordinator of tutoring and mentoring services, says research shows clear links between mentoring and academic achievement.

Adna has gone off on retreats to talk about how to turn her dreams into reality: "I now know how to go university." Once every two weeks, her mentor calls her at home to chat about her life.

She attends Eastern Commerce Collegiate Institute, where a Pathways student-parent support worker (SPSW) is available to help her with any problems or deal with the school if her father has any concerns. In the past, says Ms. Biggs, high schools have been too quick to shunt Regent Park's kids into non-academic programs or encourage them to move to other schools.

Adna recently asked her SPSW to help resolve a personality clash with a teacher. Others have dealt with attempted suicides, police arrests and trials, school suspensions and other discipline problems. They connect their students to lunch-subsidy programs, negotiate student fees, gym-uniform costs and textbook deposits, ensure none of the students for whom they are responsible miss out on school field trips because they can't afford them, and hand out TTC tickets.

The transit tickets are handed out every two weeks. If students are missing classes, support worker Khadra Mohamed at Jarvis Collegiate makes the pickup a weekly chore "just to torture them. There's nothing more horrendous for a teenager than having to talk to an adult." If absenteeism persists, the tickets are cut off.

Is there a stigma to being in a program just for poor kids? Adna wrinkles her nose. "All my friends at school want to join."

A far cry, one teacher says, from the days when Regent Park kids would stay on the streetcar as it passed their stop so classmates wouldn't know where they lived.

Perched on a chair at Jarvis, almost too shy to speak, Somali-born Warda, 14 and in Grade 9, says quietly that Pathways is "all you need."

That night, brow furrowed and pencil in her hand, she hunches over a notebook at the English tutoring table in the church basement, as a university student helps with her essay on Anne Frank. She attends sessions twice a week in English, French, geography, math and science. "You go there," she says, "and you concentrate."

The following night, a transformed Warda -- chattering, giggling, bursting with laughter -- is at her group mentoring session, too busy socializing to pay much attention to mentor Jameela Krishnan, preparing Sri Lankan finger food.

To Warda, these sessions are about playing basketball and getting to know her peers. To Pathways' staff, that means a chance for her to feel socially connected.

Does she intend to stay in school? "Of course," she says. She wants to be a doctor or a social worker.

Bengali-born Ebadhur, 16, in Grade 10 at Jarvis, has ventured out of Regent Park on Pathways-arranged summer canoeing expeditions and a wilderness-survival course. He dreams of becoming an aeronautical engineer.

He goes to his support worker, Ms. Mohamed, for help in dealing with a teen affliction: being disorganized. "She gives you advice on how to schedule your time."

He is trying to get his average above the 65 Pathways requires for Grade 10 (60 for Grade 9). "The tutoring is the most valuable part," he says. "They know how to talk to kids. They're not snobby. Every time you have a problem with something in class, you go there. All my friends go there."

Mr. Rowen says only 16 students have ever withdrawn from the program, some coming back, such as two girls who had babies.

What he calls P2E's "splendid interim variables" look like this:

Before Pathways, 75 per cent of the Grade 9 students passed English. Now, the figure hovers near 90 for Grade 9 and Grade 10.

Before Pathways, 72 per cent of the Grade 9s earned a science credit. Again the figure is near 90 for Grade 9s and 10s. Before Pathways, only 61.9 per cent passed math. Now, it's above 70 per cent in Grade 9 and 80 in Grade 10.

In the three schools attended by most Regent Park students, those in Grade 10 are academically well ahead of other classmates (Central Technical School and Eastern Commerce) or slightly behind (at strictly academic Jarvis).

At the same time, the number of students with high absentee rates (15 per cent or more days missed) has fallen from 25 per cent to 13.

What is clear from Mr. Rowen's "interim variables" is not only that P2E is a benefit to Regent Park but that other students need the same supports. The problem is money.

Pathways' budget this year is \$1.87-million. Next year, with students for the first time in all four grades of high school, it will be \$2.4-million. Except for a bit of help from the school board, it is all privately funded -- the transit tickets cost \$300,000.

"It is a struggle every day to raise the money," Mr. Rowen says. "We're out beating the bushes. We can't continue to run this on individual largesse." And if Pathways is having trouble, how much hope is there for other communities? "It can't be done," Mr. Rowen says.

A senior official with the school board, speaking on condition of anonymity, says the board can't fully fund Pathways without offering the same program city-wide, which it just can't afford.

Mr. Rowen disagrees. The public money is available, he says, but sits in the wrong program envelopes. He says the federal government, for example, supports programs for young people who drop out but not programs that keep them in school.

The Ontario government, he says, offers \$5,275 per student annually for school-based programs offering remedial help from Grades 7 to 10, but nothing for community-based programs that offer the same sort of remedial help at \$4,200 per student -- in fact, much less if TTC tickets and bursaries are subtracted.

"The project sounds absolutely fantastic [but] perverse funding models are the nature of some of these issues," says Prof. McIntyre, who has extensively studied health-service interventions in poor communities.

What angers Mr. Rowen, the professional researcher, is what he sees as governments' false economy.

He cites research by the Rand Corp., a major U.S. think tank, to argue that, if he could cut the dropout rate in half, government social services would be reduced by \$5-million over the students' adult lifetimes: fewer welfare and health costs, prison and police costs, unemployment costs. At the same time, \$5-million would be added to the economy in disposable income and tax revenues.

Adna, flopping in a chair at the end of her university sociology lecture, puts it another way. She gestures at the city around Regent Park and says: "A lot of people think we're dumb."

She pauses. "A lot of people here are very smart and doing something with their lives."

Regent Park by the numbers

Population: 15,000, about 70 per cent of whom live below Statistics Canada's poverty line.

Background: 85 per cent are members of visible minorities, mainly immigrants from Bangladesh, Somalia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and the Caribbean.

Annual income: \$14,000. The project sits on Toronto's two poorest census tracts.

Employment: Only half of the community's adults are engaged in the labour force, and few work at anything better than menial jobs (many have more than one).

Education: Fewer than half the adults made it through high school, an education blight that, until 2001, was being passed on unabridged to their children.

Dropouts: Until 2001, the rate was double the Toronto average. Routinely, 40 per cent of each year's Grade 9 students were considered to be at risk of failing and 25 per cent had serious absenteeism, both statistics much higher than the city's norms and key early indicators that someone will drop out.

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