

Pathways to Education Program: Tutoring

Essential Elements of Pathways to Education

Pathways to Education is an integrated, community-based program that provides comprehensive supports to students in low income communities with high dropout rates. The Pathways to Education Program was first delivered in 2001 by Toronto's Regent Park community. Recognizing that schools alone cannot address the complex challenges and barriers faced by young people in economically disadvantaged communities, Pathways provides targeted academic, social, financial and advocacy supports for the educational attainment of youth, which is fundamental to health, well-being and prosperity.

The Program reaches out and encourages all youth in the Pathways catchment area, including those least likely to participate in the Program. Support is provided to students throughout their full term in secondary school and beyond and young people are challenged to be responsible and accountable. Students and their parents sign a contract in which they agree to comply with the Program requirements related to school attendance and Program participation in exchange for Pathways supports for the duration of student's secondary school enrolment.

Academic and social supports are delivered in large part by volunteers, who are recruited, trained and supervised in delivering after-school tutoring and extra-curricular mentoring activities. Students receive assistance to address financial barriers to school participation, such as for transportation to school or lunch while at school. Students also have financial incentives in the form of a bursary for each year of Program participation to offset the costs of post-secondary education or training.

Pathways to Education works with the school system and rigorously monitors Program implementation and results for continuous improvement. To date, every Pathways Program has improved credit accumulation and reduced absenteeism by participating students. Eighty percent of Pathways graduates from Regent Park have gone on to post-secondary education, compared to 20% of the pre-Pathways cohort, and over 90% of these students are the first in their families to go on to university or college.

Pathways to Education is cost-effective and results in a significant long-term financial pay-back to society. The incremental benefit to society over the lifetime of a Pathways graduate is an estimated \$400,000 due to reduced costs to government and increased tax revenues collected. The Pathways to Education Program is demonstrating that young people from economically disadvantaged communities can do as well as or better than their more privileged peers.

OVERVIEW

Academic preparedness is the subject of considerable effort by school boards and provincial education ministries across the country. For the overwhelming majority of youth living in low-income communities, however, these efforts have had extremely limited success. The complexity of factors affecting academic success requires a comprehensive approach and recognition of the appropriate and necessary roles of schools and communities.¹² The Pathways to Education Program's success to date underscores the efficacy of community-based approaches. This Program continues to challenge deeply held and internalized assumptions that young people from poor communities are not capable of success.

Pathways students are offered free tutoring support in core academic subject areas, such as math, science, history, geography, English and French. Tutoring is typically offered four days per week. Each Pathways Program determines where to locate tutoring sites and in what time slots, based on student needs, volunteer availability and community resources. Pathways sites try to provide one tutor for every four students, but there are not always enough available volunteers to keep the tutor-to-student ratio this low. One-on-one tutoring can be arranged as needed.

Students are expected to attend tutoring twice a week if their marks fall below certain percentages/levels set for each grade in the core subject areas. For example, in Ontario Grade 9 students are expected to obtain at least a 60% average and the minimum level expected increases to 65% for Grade 10 students and 70% for Grade 11 and Grade 12 students. Many Pathways students choose to attend tutoring even if their grades exceed these percentages.

Mid-term marks are evaluated and meetings are held with students and their parents to discuss school and Pathways Program participation, and changes to the Program, as well as to stress the importance of tutoring for academic achievement.

TUTORING STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

The Program Facilitators for Tutoring report to the Coordinator of Mentoring and Tutoring. Program Facilitators become well acquainted with the students who come to tutoring often seeing them twice a week throughout the school year. The Facilitators match up students with tutors, model proper tutoring techniques, organize resources, and record attendance at the tutoring sites. Program Facilitators for Tutoring also gather and respond to information from logs that the volunteers and students fill out daily after every session, and serve as liaisons with Student-Parent Support Workers (SPSWs) and schools.

Program Facilitators for Tutoring work in pairs, for combined expertise in the core subject areas in high school. As well as subject knowledge, the Facilitators have a strong

1. Rowen and Gosine, p. 2 citing HRDC 2000 and HRDC 1997

repertoire of tutoring techniques to share with the volunteer tutors, including those for supporting students with special needs. The work that goes on during tutoring sessions can be divided into two categories: subject work (homework, study assignments, or prepared exercises); and other learning activities that will help students develop as competent learners.

At Regent Park, for example, five part-time Program Facilitators for Tutoring work at the two main tutoring sites four evenings a week, in addition to a part-time Program Facilitator for Literacy Tutoring and another part-time Facilitator for Technology. One full-time Program Facilitator focuses on special education and staff support, helping students with special needs, regardless of whether they have been formally designated as a special education student by the school system.

Private tutoring for a student can be very costly for a family. Having committed volunteers working as tutors with Pathways students makes it feasible to provide this support. Finding interested individuals, interviewing and vetting them, orienting and training them is only the beginning and on-site staff support the tutors at every tutoring session.

Tutoring is provided by volunteers from a range of ages and professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds. Local universities and colleges are major sources for tutor recruitment in all Pathways communities. The Program strives to reflect the cultural diversity and the gender balance of the communities within both staff and volunteer groups. Delivering and sustaining a community-wide response and the Program's reliance on volunteers requires a great deal of resources.

Training in strategies for working with struggling or disengaged students is offered to the volunteers, and most take advantage of the training in order to provide the best support they can to help students do well. Different tutoring strategies recognize the different learning styles of individual students. As much as possible, worksheets, activities and assignments appropriate to the learning needs and levels are developed, as well as to the curriculum of the school that individual student attends. Tutors assist students in developing study skills while working to increase their overall levels of literacy and general knowledge.

Often, convincing struggling students that they can be successful in school is one of the greatest challenges faced by the tutors. Some students have become frustrated or have internalized pessimistic attitudes about their capabilities. Working with disengaged students requires persistence, perseverance, and support from staff.

A number of Pathways students have grown up in war-torn countries or spent most of their childhoods in refugee camps, with little or no schooling. A fundamental lack of literacy skills poses learning challenges and requires special tutoring supports, so Pathways communities often try to recruit some volunteers who have English as-a-second language (ESL) skills.

Tutoring is not offered in isolation but is linked with the Program supports through the timely and thorough communication among the members of the staff. That is what makes Pathways so uniquely effective.

TUTORING SITES

The goal is to create a safe, social learning environment located in places that are easily accessible to the students. Secondary schools, local libraries, faith-based organizations and community centre partners provide space for Pathways tutoring sites and Pathways offices are also used.

“The Pathways Program has helped me so much in school. I am confident that I will be able to complete high school with good grades and many friends.”
—2009/10 Student Survey, Regent Park Pathways Program

Some tutoring sites put a lot of emphasis on student safety due to security issues in the community. For example, the Rexdale Pathways issues photo identity cards to their students which assist those who are stopped en route to tutoring and/or mentoring sites by police looking for suspects. Students are also given maps that show the safest routes for walking to sites.

Tutoring Partnerships

A number of important partnerships are essential to the Pathways Program, and the tutoring component depends heavily on partnerships with individual teachers, schools, school boards and volunteers. Post-secondary institutions typically are major sources for the recruitment of volunteer tutors and mentors and the Toronto-area Pathways, for example, have developed partnerships with several post-secondary institutions, including Humber College, York University, Ryerson University, and University of Toronto.

Partnerships with public and private sector agencies such as JUMP Math also assist with both recruitment and training for the tutors. JUMP Math, a Toronto-based charitable organization dedicated to creating a numerate society, provides tutoring resources and the training for volunteers to help Pathways students who have remedial math skills.

A number of corporate partnerships have been developed by Pathways to Education Canada at the national level. Corporations help recruit, orient and refer their employees as volunteers. Some communities have engaged professional associations, such as the Professional Engineers of Ontario and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, which assist in recruiting tutors from the association rosters. Volunteer recruitment agencies also refer volunteers and help with training and recruitment expertise.

TUTOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Information and orientation sessions are offered to Pathways volunteers and cover topics such as student learning styles, special needs, diversity, and pre-exam preparation. Volunteers must be over 19 years of age, with no criminal record and have an interest in working with youth. Most students express appreciation for the fact that the volunteers are caring adults who are providing support “on their own free time.” Students often develop relationships with individual tutors, and regularly seek them out for ongoing assistance during the tutoring sessions.

Every Pathways community employs a Coordinator of Tutoring and a number of part-time Tutoring Program Facilitators. The Coordinator is responsible for developing the tutoring program, recruiting and supervising volunteer tutors and securing tutoring sites and other resources through partnerships with community agencies and corporations. Program Facilitators provide on-site training, supervision and support and feedback to the tutors. Tutors debrief with the Tutoring Program Facilitator at the end of every tutoring session.

“I found the students have experienced their share of successes and challenges. As a tutor, I can sense they fully appreciate the help that is offered and they are eager and willing to do what it takes to overcome these challenges.”
—Scarborough Village Pathways volunteer tutor

Tutoring Program Facilitators work closely with the Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) and use mechanisms developed to share information about upcoming tests and assignments, identify areas where individual students are struggling, and to develop strategies for specific youth. The Program Facilitators also keep the SPSWs informed of students’ progress and attendance at the site and identify areas that may require SPSWs follow up.

Some sites use confidential student specific communication tools in order to keep an ongoing record of the needs of specific struggling students, feedback from the student’s teachers, tutoring strategies and resources needed. This facilitates a consistent and integrated approach to supporting these students.

Staff also use formal and informal in-person communications between SPSWs and Program Facilitators on a regular basis. This allows for rich, detailed information sharing about students’ strengths and challenges and helps ensure staff and volunteers communicate consistently with individual students.

Pathways staff meet with each other in a number of subgroups as well as a whole team on a regular basis. The meetings feature such items as regular updates on the tutoring sites, cross-team committees, policy changes and problem-solving around emerging program or community-wide issues. Ongoing feedback and evaluation of the various program components are often discussed at these meetings, and data on attendance trends are reviewed.

“I have a quiet working environment away from distractions such as TV and Facebook.”

—2009/10 Student Survey, Ottawa Pathways Program

Most of the sites use case conferences to bring staff together to share information about students’ successes and challenges. Through this process, staff have learned that while a student may be struggling with tutoring, their mentoring participation has been very positive, for example. The case conferences give tutoring staff information about students’ overall strengths and challenges at home, in school and within the community.

“I like seeing how the students think, how a new skill learned makes a huge difference in their understanding, how proud they are of themselves when they understand something they thought was too difficult, and discovering that even the most unmotivated and ‘challenging’ students have HUGE dreams and aspirations.”

—Ottawa Pathways volunteer tutor

VOLUNTEER RETENTION AND OTHER CHALLENGES

Volunteers often return to tutor year after year. A number have been with their Program from the very first year, which is a tribute to their commitment and skills. However, as the Programs expand in the various communities, volunteer recruitment and attrition are ongoing challenges.

Some Pathways sites are developing a more systematic approach to recruiting, orienting, training and supporting tutors who can work effectively with students with special learning needs. The lack of resources to assist ESL students with foundational language and literacy skills has been identified as a challenge in providing academic supports. Connecting with busy teachers in order to obtain resources, learning plans and curricula-specific materials is essential, as is understanding and staying up-to-date with policies and procedures across various schools and school boards.

Managing tutoring sites can be challenging, especially when large numbers arrive at a particular site at one time and/or if volunteer tutors don’t show up as scheduled. Some Pathways Programs have had to limit the number of students at sites at any one time and adopt a stricter approach to punctuality and onsite discipline. Deciding on the placement and number of students per table, keeping noise levels down and keeping students engaged are other challenges. Some Programs are trying to find ways to provide snacks for students and/or make tutoring fun with rewards and games.

“I like that she has somewhere to go three nights a week, especially in this neighbourhood. She’s always been a good student so I want her to succeed and go on. I have a disability and can’t help her, so any extra help she can get I really appreciate.”

—Parent of Ottawa Pathways student

CONCLUSION

Bolstering a student's secondary school achievement helps increase confidence and self-esteem and enhances a young person's motivation and feelings of engagement with both their school and their community. Pathways uses volunteer support to help students enhance their study habits and overall levels of literacy and general knowledge, with a focus on core academics. Credit accumulation over the course of the student's secondary school participation is systematically monitored and the academic supports needed are tailored to individual needs.

Pathways to Education has a proven track record in enhancing the credit accumulation achievements by its students, thanks to the commitment of the community and the rigorous application of the essential elements of support. Pathways to Education is demonstrating that all Canadians, regardless of where they live or their social and economic standing, can succeed in school.