

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Goss Gilroy Inc., Evaluation of the Pathways to Education Program, 2017*

## OVERVIEW

An evaluation of the Pathways to Education Program™ (Pathways Program) was conducted between June 2016 and January 2017 by Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI), an independent evaluation firm located in Ottawa, Ontario.

The objective of the evaluation was to provide Pathways to Education Canada (Pathways Canada) and its funders with evidence-based findings, conclusions, and recommendations upon which to base future Pathways Program decisions.

The evaluation assessed the following areas:

- Progress made toward outcomes in the Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) funding agreement for the 2014 – 2018 period.
- The Pathways Program's ability to prepare students for life after high school (employability skills).
- The effectiveness of The Pathways Program's design and delivery, and its impact on youth in the Program, including best practices and lessons learned.

## METHODOLOGY

The evaluation included seven methodologies:

1. Literature review
2. Conduct of 30 key informant interviews
3. Conduct of 10 focus groups at five Pathways Program locations, including five groups with Pathways alumni and five groups with Pathways volunteers
4. Analysis of two years of data from a survey of Pathways alumni, conducted by Pathways Canada
5. Analysis of administrative data (including an analysis of comparison data, where possible)
6. Online survey of Pathways alumni from cohorts not previously surveyed by Pathways Canada
7. Online survey of Pathways Program staff

The evaluation included data on almost 4,700 Pathways students who were enrolled in eight Pathways Program locations across Ontario between 2010 and 2014.

## FINDINGS

### Improving Graduation Rates

The on-time high school graduation rates<sup>1</sup> for Pathways students in Ontario are significantly higher than the comparison group of non-Pathways students by approximately 10 to 19 percentage points. Despite large differences in educational systems, Pathways students from Program locations outside of Ontario with comparison groups also have higher graduation rates than non-Pathways students.

### Preparing Youth for Post-Secondary

The Pathways Program is helping to prepare youth for life after high school, with almost three-quarters of surveyed alumni agreeing with this assertion, supported by qualitative evidence from alumni focus groups.

- Administrative data found that a majority of Pathways students apply to post-secondary education after high school, primarily university or college.
- Similarly, the survey of Pathways alumni found that almost all respondents went on to pursue post-secondary education and/or some kind of training after high school.
- A variety of career development and employability activities are available to Pathways students and can take many forms, such as visits to employer sites, employer speaking engagements, job placement opportunities, job fairs, and mentoring events. These supports help Pathways students increase their employability and determine their future employment/career trajectories.
- The evaluation showed that the Pathways Program helps students both set and achieve their goals after high school. Over half of the alumni surveyed agreed that the Pathways Program influenced what they were currently doing, compared to what they think they might be doing had they not been a part of the Program. Similarly, 90 per cent of alumni surveyed agreed that the Pathways Program helps students apply for post-secondary education.
- Students develop a wide spectrum of life skills through the Pathways Program that prepare them for life after high school, including transferable skills, such as interacting with professionals/adults, working in a team setting, managing stress, and time management/organizational skills.

### The Pathways Program Model

Through literature review, interviews, surveys, and focus groups, the evaluation found that the overall Pathways Program model, a holistic combination of academic, financial, social, and one-on-one supports, is an effective and appropriate method of support for high school students living in low-income communities.

- Through the Pathways Program, students are empowered to make decisions and are provided with tools to autonomously negotiate various situations and relationships at school and in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> On-time high school graduation rates refers to the standard high school term as set by each province (three years in Nova Scotia; four years in Ontario and Manitoba; five years in Quebec).

- Pathways students develop positive relationships with their Student/Parent Support Workers (SPSWs), mentoring and tutoring staff and volunteers, as well as corporate and community partners. The evaluation confirmed that these relationship-building aspects of the Pathways Program are both effective and appropriate.
- Alumni surveyed in the evaluation indicated that the following areas of support are helpful in building relationships: 99 per cent responded that the relationship with their SPSW is helpful; 92 per cent responded that the Pathways tutoring program is helpful; 96 per cent responded that Pathways group mentoring is helpful; 96 per cent responded that engagement with Pathways' corporate and community partners is helpful.
- The financial supports provided by the Pathways Program facilitate Pathways students' overall success. A large majority of Pathways alumni indicated that the various types of financial support were helpful for them.
- Pathways Canada has an extremely robust performance data collection system. An important strength that sets Pathways Canada's performance measurement apart from similar organizations is its ability to measure results in relation to a comparison group (i.e., high school graduation rates from the year prior to the Pathways Program's introduction into the community).
- The evaluation found that a strength of the Pathways Program is its emphasis on and frequency of sharing innovations and best practices (e.g., sharing between Pathways Program locations nationally and sharing between Pathways Program locations and Pathways Canada).
- The Pathways Program has high rates of retention with 87.9 per cent of students included in the analysis remaining in the Pathways Program throughout their high school years.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Pathways Program is making a difference in the lives of students in the low-income communities served by Pathways. There is strong evidence (via comparison group data analysis) that both credit accumulation and graduation rates are higher among Pathways students than those who do not participate in the Pathways Program. The Program also appears to be influencing students' application to, and acceptance and enrollment in post-secondary institutions.

The evaluation found that the Pathways Program is effective in a wide range of educational systems and supports for students. Participation rates for eligible youth are high and dropout rates are low within the communities Pathways serves. The characteristics of non-Pathways students are not collected for evaluation. Therefore, the extent to which non-Pathways students would benefit from participation in the Pathways Program is not known. The evaluation found that all Pathways Program components play a role in the achievement of outcomes.

Pathways strongly believes in demonstrating success through data collection and reporting, and sees tremendous value in the sharing of best practices. It has many mechanisms in place for sharing best practices, and those consulted for the evaluation generally praised Pathways' willingness and approach to knowledge sharing. The variety of means of sharing is particularly important, given that different stakeholders and Pathways Program Partners have varying preferences for how they receive information.

The importance and role of partnerships was highlighted in many capacities during the evaluation, including its role in broadening services for students and finding efficiencies within existing programming. Partnerships are also seen as a critical mechanism for Pathways expansion of the Program.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation of the Pathways Program, Goss Gilroy Inc. makes the following recommendations:

1. Broaden the concept of what success looks like for some students for whom post-secondary education is not the best path. Ensure that programming components and supports are available to reinforce this alternative pathway.
2. Consider changing comparison data from the year immediately before the Pathways Program is introduced to one where comparison data is derived from other students who are in the same school and/or students who are in other schools in close proximity, within the same cohort year(s).
3. Improve Pathways Program location-based participant data (in terms of consistency, annual figures, and some qualitative data). As well, Pathways Canada should regularly mine this data to identify Pathways Program locations where improvements are required or where best practices could be shared with others.
4. Models for expanding the Pathways Program should take into account available partnerships and existing programs with similar mandates that can be leveraged and/or adopt Pathways principles to increase outcomes.
5. If Pathways wishes to focus on Indigenous youth, situate future Pathways Program locations in communities with high Indigenous populations and ensure that the programming adopts tailored approaches for engaging and working with Indigenous youth.