

MARCH 2015

What Works in Dropout Prevention:
Research Evidence, Pathways to
Education Program Design, and
Practitioner Knowledge.

About Pathways to Education Canada

Pathways to Education Canada is a national charitable organization that helps youth in low-income communities graduate from high school and successfully transition into post-secondary education or meaningful employment. The organization works with partner organizations to deliver a community-based dropout prevention and youth engagement program. It provides funding, program evidence-based practices, and public voice to enable program delivery.

Founded in 2001, Pathways to Education Canada operates nationally with programs in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and British Columbia.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the support provided by the Government of Canada through Employment and Social Development Canada to the work of Pathways to Education Canada.

We would like to acknowledge the support provided by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to the work of Pathways to Education Canada in Ontario.

This report owes its existence to my colleagues in the Program and Research Department at Pathways to Education Canada as well as Program Directors and front-line staff at several Pathways to Education partner sites throughout the country. Your insights and support have been invaluable. Thank you for sharing your wisdom, commitment to youth and community development, and years of practice-based professional knowledge.

Konrad Glogowski, Ph.D.
Director, Research and Knowledge Mobilization
Pathways to Education Canada
March 2015

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Introduction

Pathways to Education Canada is a national charitable organization that strives to provide all youth — regardless of their background or situation — with the support they need to complete school, achieve their full potential, break the cycle of poverty, and contribute back to their communities. More specifically, Pathways provides the leadership, expertise, and resources needed to run effective, evidence-based community programs that help youth from low-income communities graduate from high school and make the often difficult transition into post-secondary education or meaningful employment. First developed in 2001 in Toronto’s Regent Park, Pathways to Education programs now operate in 17 communities in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and British Columbia.

The organization’s approach to youth-centred community programming, partnership development, and knowledge mobilization remains deeply rooted in its genesis in Regent Park. The founders of the Pathways to Education program, Carolyn Acker and Norman Rowen, worked closely with the community and the Regent Park Community Health Centre to develop the program through a comprehensive community consultation process — a bottom-up approach that made visible and prioritized the community’s experiences, insights, and needs:

the program was developed [...] using an “action

research” framework to elicit the community’s experiences and perceptions of barriers faced in education and employment, coupled with a review of best practices from related programs. The process was guided by and built upon the solid foundation of community development [...], an action research methodology, a results-driven focus, and a passion for breaking the cycle of poverty and hopelessness that had engulfed the community for so long (Acker & Rowen, 2013).

This strong focus on community engagement and voice is an integral, foundational part of the Pathways to Education program that continues to define how the program is delivered in 17 communities across Canada. It is one of the key reasons why Pathways to Education Canada partners with respected and well-established community organizations and agencies to deliver the program: community knowledge resides in communities and is instrumental in the delivery of any community-based intervention.

This report, written 15 years after the Pathways to Education program was developed, is an attempt to update the original “review of best practices” by capturing what we currently know about dropout prevention and effective interventions and approaches. It also offers a section on what we know and are continuing to learn from the Pathways to Education

community partners throughout Canada and their front-line staff who, years after the original community consultations in Regent Park, implement the program in a wide variety of diverse communities, serve youth and their families, engage with their communities, and continue the legacy of the community-based dropout prevention program first envisioned by Carolyn Acker and Norman Rowen.

The report continues the Pathways to Education tradition of listening to other voices, considering their views, and asking critical questions. While far from definitive, it surveys the research landscape, brings together what we consider to be some of the most relevant research on dropout prevention, and answers some of our most pressing questions about the educational attainment of youth in low-income communities. Designed to be practical, it offers a way in, allows for a quick perusal of key findings, and serves as a convenient starting point for those interested in deeper, more sustained inquiry.

By sharing this report, we hope to start a conversation on what works, on what's needed, on how to best learn *from* and *with* our youth, community and school programs designed for their success, and professionals across the country who support, engage, and listen to young people on a daily basis. In short, this is not a definitive statement of what we know but a

snapshot of learning, a list of practical resources and key findings. In the coming months, we will continue to add to the knowledge captured in this report. We plan to share our growing understanding of the lived experiences of young Canadians trapped in contexts of marginalization and give greater prominence to the voices and professional knowledge of front-line staff who engage and support youth in low-income communities across the country.

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IS “THE RESULT OF A LONG-TERM PROCESS OF ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL DISENGAGEMENT FROM SCHOOL, WHICH IS INFLUENCED BY THE INTERSECTION OF A VARIETY OF ACADEMIC, PERSONAL, AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES AND RESOURCES.”

(Alexander et al., 2001)



Executive Summary

This report is designed for program management staff and practitioners interested in educational attainment and positive development of youth living in risk situations. It provides an overview of proven and effective strategies and approaches based on a scan of external research and front-line expertise at select Pathways to Education program sites. It outlines risk factors, key aspects and components of effective interventions, research-based recommendations for effective program implementation, and key insights from interviews with front-line and management staff at six Pathways to Education program sites.

External research findings presented here show that early school leavers are not a homogeneous group, that dropping out of high school is a lengthy and complex process, and that risk factors are as diverse as the individual students who may experience them. Predicting high school dropout is connected to a number of complex variables: families, including their socioeconomic status, schools, and community factors can all influence a young person to leave school prematurely.

Programs that have shown to be effective tend to include a range of support strategies. The most promising of those strategies include case management and mentoring approaches, programs that focus on building lasting relationships with a

trusted and engaged adult, programs that monitor student performance and progress, and programs that engage parents and help students develop strong life and interpersonal skills.

KEY EXTERNAL FINDINGS

- Students who: a) receive poor grades in core subjects, b) have low attendance rates, c) fail to be promoted to the next grade, and d) are disengaged in the classroom and exhibit behavioural problems are considered likely to leave school before graduating. These factors are also considered better predictors than fixed factors, such as gender, race, and poverty (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).
- Research shows that early school leaving is a result of “a complex set of relationships between student, family, school, and community factors.” In addition, the decision to withdraw is generally part of a longer process of disengagement from school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- Personalization is an essential component of effective dropout prevention programs and involves “striving to understand the nature of academic, social, and personal problems affecting students and tailoring services to address individualized concerns” (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

- Providing students with a comprehensive mentoring support that includes positive role models who assist with academic challenges, advocate for the student in the school system, and connect them to services outside of the program has been shown to have a positive impact on dropout prevention, attendance, test scores, and grades (Klima, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009).
- Interventions with the strongest effects on reducing dropout rates tend to be “multi-faceted programs employing at least 4 effective strategies” (ICF/National Dropout Prevention Center, 2008).
- Effective intervention “must be appropriate for many ‘types’ of dropouts, and by definition, this requires a multi pronged approach” (ICF/National Dropout Prevention Center, 2008).

KEY INTERNAL FINDINGS

The Pathways to Education program is aligned with a number of effective strategies and programs outlined in this report. These include case management, mentorship, and comprehensive, individualized approaches to student support, as well as social and academic engagement strategies. Research on dropout prevention highlights these approaches as particularly effective.

Pathways to Education program staff report that the following characteristics of the program have a particularly strong impact on student well-being, engagement, and academic attainment:

- The modular character of the Pathways program provides the flexibility to customize it to individual student needs. Pathways to Education is not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Strong, consistent, effective, and long-term relationships with caring adults are a very important aspect of the program.
- Sense of belonging is crucial: being part of a community that students enjoy is fundamental to their success. The community and the sense of belonging it generates have a formative impact on the students.
- The Pathways program works because all of the elements work together. They can be accessed by the students whenever they need them.
- Links and relationships with other community organizations have been developed and fostered over a long period of time. This facilitates referrals to other community services, if and when they are needed.

Part I:

Why Students Leave School Early

- Socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of educational attainment.
- The strongest school-based predictors include attendance, credit accumulation, and behaviour.
- No single factor can be used to reliably predict a student's decision to drop out.
- Dropping out is a process, not an event.
- Families, schools, and communities all affect how likely students are to drop out.

RISK FACTORS

- Attendance, behaviour, and course failure (often referred to as the ABCs of dropout) are the strongest indicators of dropout related to individual student performance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- Students who: a) receive poor grades in core subjects, b) have low attendance rates, c) fail to be promoted to the next grade, and d) are disengaged in the classroom and exhibit behavioural problems are considered likely to leave school prematurely. These factors are also considered better predictors than fixed factors, such as gender, race, and poverty (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).
- However, family background also greatly affects educational outcomes. The family's socioeconomic status (parental education, occupation, and income) is often cited as the strongest predictor of dropout (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- There is "overwhelming evidence that socioeconomic status (SES) has been and continues to be the best single predictor of how much schooling students will obtain, how well they will do at their studies, and what their life prospects beyond school are" (Levin, 1995). "Childhood SES is the strongest single predictor of long-term income and educational achievement" (Levin & Riffel, 2000).
- According to Acker and Rowen (2013), non-school risk factors, such as "immigration and settlement, moves/interruptions, social isolation, assumption of adult roles, and minority status are all present in the most impoverished and challenged communities."
- The following risk situations are well documented in the literature: "low socioeconomic status, minority group status, specific community characteristics, household stress, poor family process/dynamics, limited social support for remaining in school by significant others, conflict between home-school culture, assumption of adult roles, low levels of student involvement with education, risk behaviour, discrimination and identity conflict, youth with learning, behavioural and/or physical disabilities/mental illness" (Tilleczek, Ferguson, Roth Edney, Rummens, Boydell, & Mueller, 2011).
- While there is some disagreement regarding the impact of school-based versus community-based risk factors, research has shown that, after controlling for background, community factors appear to have greater impact on educational attainment. According to Raptis and Fleming (2003), background factors account for 50-60% of the difference in achievement, compared to 5-6% for school-based factors.
- There are two categories of reasons for leaving school: push factors, which lead students to drop out as a result of forces and experiences in the

school environment (school climate or policies, grade retention, frequent disciplinary action), and pull factors, which result in detachment from school. Pull factors include events and circumstances outside of school (personal, family, peer, or community factors) (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, & Cosio, 2004). Research shows that push factors are reported more frequently by early school leavers (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999; Lehr et al., 2004).

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), such as living in a single-parent household, living with anyone with a substance abuse problem, witnessing violence at home, being a victim of violence at home or the community, or experiencing economic hardship, can have a negative impact on adolescent well-being. Research shows that almost half of adolescents who experienced three or more ACEs exhibit low engagement in school. One-third of adolescents who experienced only one ACE are also likely to exhibit low engagement. (Moore, Harbin Sacks, Bandy, & Murphey, 2014).
- A recent survey of US early school leavers reveals that young people who leave school do so as a result of having to navigate very toxic environments that include violence and abuse at home and in the community, personal and family health challenges, and unsupportive school policies (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).
- There is no single risk factor that can serve as an

accurate predictor of dropout. The predictive power of risk factors is relatively low (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

- While some predictors and their combinations offer valuable insights, dropout prediction is generally problematic and there is no clear group of predictors that offer strong reliability (Hammond et al., 2007).

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IS A PROCESS

- School leaving has been defined as a “long-term, multi-dimensional process” influenced by “a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences” (Tilleczek et al., 2011). Research shows that it is a result of “a complex set of relationships between student, family, school, and community factors” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The decision to withdraw is generally part of a longer process of disengagement from school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- A recent qualitative Canadian study of early school leavers demonstrated that “early school leaving is a social and inter-relational process rather than an individual decision” (Tilleczek et al., 2011).
- Based on interviews with participants, the study also concluded that “young people’s accounts of becoming disengaged and leaving high school are often non-linear and fragmented social processes

rather than those described in the literature as simple and linear individual decisions. These complex social processes were evidenced by the past, present, and future concerns that coalesced in the narratives around multifaceted social and emotional resolutions and/or a disconnection with school personnel, families or friends” (Tilleczek et al., 2011).

- While there are no foolproof mechanisms to predict dropout, the accuracy of predictions increases when multiple risk factor combinations are considered (Hammond et al., 2007).
- One study was able to predict 82% of non-graduates using a combination of early childhood indicators, family background, school performance and experiences, and individual characteristics (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Hammond et al., 2007).
- Another study analyzed the following six factors in a group of grade 8 students: single-parent households, parents without a high school diploma, older sibling who dropped out, home alone in the afternoon for over 3 hours, limited English proficiency, and low income. The research showed that risk of dropout increased with each additional risk factor. Almost a third of students with three or more risk factors dropped out (Ingels, Curtin, Kaufman, Alt, & Chen, 2002).
- Early school leavers are not a homogenous group (Hammond et al., 2007). The group consists of different subgroups, each with different risk factors. A seminal Canadian study proposed a typology consisting of four distinct types characterized by different levels of social and academic disengagement (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000).
- Since factors related to dropout risk are interrelated, it is virtually impossible to determine causality (Gaustad, 1991; Jimerson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001).
- One approach to help better understand the impact of different risk factors is offered by longitudinal studies of student cohorts. These studies show that dropping out is a “developmental process with significant markers on a pathway to dropping out” (Jimmerson et al., 2000).
- Another longitudinal study revealed that decisions students make in high school “result from events, decisions, and experiences that predate high school” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). High school dropout is therefore “the result of a long-term process of academic and social disengagement from school, which is influenced by the intersection of a variety of academic, personal, and family experiences and resources” (Alexander et al., 2001).



Part II:

Effective Practices and Approaches

- Effective programs include more than one support strategy.
- Case management and mentoring approaches are fundamental to student success.
- Building trust, strong relationships, and supportive environments is a very effective strategy.
- Development of life skills and parental engagement contributes to program success.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Successful programs share the following common elements: close mentoring and monitoring of students, case management of individual students, family outreach, attention to personal non-academic problems that can affect academic success, behaviour, and attendance, and — in the case of school-based programs — “curricular reforms that focus on either career-oriented or experiential approach or an emphasis on gaining proficiency in English and math, or both” (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- Personalization is an essential component of effective dropout prevention programs. This aspect of programming focuses on “striving to understand the nature of academic, social, and personal problems affecting students and tailoring services to address individualized concerns” (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).
- Providing students with a comprehensive mentoring support that includes positive role models who assist with academic challenges, advocate for the student in the school system, and connect them to services outside of the program has been shown to have a positive impact on dropout prevention, attendance, test scores and grades (Klima, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009).
- “Successful interventions do more than increase student attendance — they help students and families who feel marginalized in their relations with teachers and peers to be connected at school and with learning” (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).
- “Students report that having a person at school who is checking up on them gives the sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school” (Gonzales, Richards, & Seeley, 2002; Smink & Reimer, 2005).
- To be effective, “programs must be comprehensive and directed towards all facets of a student’s life. As youth leave school prematurely for a multitude of reasons, services and supports must be flexible and customized to meet individual student needs” (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005).
- Successful schools and programs use “a broad focus that includes academic, social, and supportive activities” (Ferguson et al., 2005). Such initiatives “are responsive to a wide range of student needs, made possible through the integration of community services” (Ferguson et al., 2005).
- Successful interventions do not rely on one strategy but offer a blend of support mechanisms: “Using a specific program approach ... is fundamentally a one-size-fits-all solution that is in conflict with the many different kinds of students and the many different reasons they have for dropping out.” Instead, programs should try to “understand the particular characteristics of individual students and

[use] this understanding as a basis for developing interventions” (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

- Interventions with the strongest effects on reducing dropout rates were “multi-faceted programs employing at least 4 effective strategies” (ICF/National Dropout Prevention Center, 2008).
- Effective intervention “must be appropriate for many ‘types’ of dropouts, and by definition, this requires a multi pronged approach” (ICF/National Dropout Prevention Center, 2008).
- “Well-designed and effectively implemented after-school programs add to the chances that at-risk students will stay out of trouble, stay in school, and stay engaged with their education” (Peterson & Fox, 2004).
- Research has identified two key program themes: 1) Students in risk situations require “specialized attention” — committed and caring adults who monitor student progress and performance and understand the students’ individual challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and career goals; 2) Successful dropout prevention programs have an impact because of their “many intangibles.” This includes building trust and strong bonds and relationships with students as well as helping them believe that success is within their reach (ICF/National Dropout Prevention Network, 2008).

EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

- Reviews of exemplary programs highlight the importance of the following strategies:
 - Strategies that build social competency skills, such as communication and problem-solving. Programs that include this strategy should also provide opportunities to practice these skills in real-world contexts and to reinforce them frequently (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Gottfredson, 1998).
 - Strategies that offer academic support through academic skills enhancement, homework help, and tutoring. Successful programs often provide both academic support and social skills building (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Lehr et al., 2004).
 - Strategies that help youth understand appropriate behaviour and develop more “prosocial and healthy norms (e.g., by promoting healthy eating habits or the peaceful resolution of conflicts.” These strategies must involve interactive methods, such as role-playing or group discussions (Hammond et al., 2007).
- The most common strategies used by quality dropout prevention programs include: 1) Life skills development (with a focus on a wide range of skills, such as peer resistance, critical thinking, communication skills, conflict resolution, and social skills); 2) Family strengthening (with a focus on building parenting skills, family management and communication skills, and strategies to help parents

to help their children academically); 3) Academic support (with a focus ranging from tutoring to experiential learning, homework help, and providing access to computer labs) (Hammond et al., 2007).

- Interventions that demonstrated impact on at least one variable offered the following supports: 1) personal-affective focus (personal counselling, participation in interpersonal relations activities; 2) academic focus (specialized academic courses or tutoring; 3) focus on addressing alterable variables, such as poor grades, attendance, and attitude toward school. These programs also placed strong emphasis on creating caring environments and relationships (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003).
- Effective programs also focus on:
 - building relationships between the student and teachers, parents, and peers;
 - monitoring student performance;
 - developing students' problem-solving skills;
 - creating a caring and supportive environment;
 - helping students with their personal problems;
 - highlighting the relevance of education to life after high school (McPartland, 1994; Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003).
- Two major national studies in the United States reported positive results from mentoring programs. Tierney, Grossman, and Resch (2000) reported a 37% decrease in truancy among participants in the

Big Brother/Big Sister programs. The commonwealth Fund's Survey found a 52% decrease in skipping school among participants of mentoring programs (McLearn, Colasanto, & Schoen, 1998).

- "After-school and summer enhancement programs [...] eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill the afternoon 'gap time' with constructive and engaging activities" (Smink & Reimer, 2005).

SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS OFFER A BLEND OF SUPPORT MECHANISMS: “USING A SPECIFIC PROGRAM APPROACH ... IS FUNDAMENTALLY A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION THAT IS IN CONFLICT WITH THE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF STUDENTS AND THE MANY DIFFERENT REASONS THEY HAVE FOR DROPPING OUT.”

(Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

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Part III:

The Pathways Program Model

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Pathways program model grew out of a comprehensive process of community consultations. Working in the context of the Regent Park Community Health Centre and in partnership with the community of Regent Park in Toronto, the founders of the Pathways to Education program developed the program based on a scan of evidence-based interventions for youth living in disadvantaged contexts and a series of extensive focus groups with youth and their parents.

Community-focused consultations helped to identify key local barriers to education, as experienced by the community's youth and their parents. One of the program's founders, Norman Rowen, conducted interviews and focus groups with young people from the community, including those in school and those who had dropped out. He engaged parents from all backgrounds and cultures in conversations about barriers to education faced by their children.

Consultations with youth helped to identify the following three barriers to completing high school:

1. Transportation to and from school. Since there was no high school in Regent Park, students needed bus tickets to get to school.
2. Low expectations. The young people in Regent Park did not believe they could go on to post-secondary education. Finishing high school was

therefore not seen as a valuable milestone or a stepping stone to further attainment and success.

3. Affordability of post-secondary education. Even those who valued high school completion and expected to graduate were discouraged by the cost of post-secondary education.

Consultations with parents identified barriers that made it challenging to support their children's educational attainment:

1. Language barriers. Lack of proficiency in English prevented parents from helping their children with their schoolwork.
2. Subject knowledge. Even when language was not a barrier, parents often did not have the level of education that would allow them to support their children's learning.
3. Education systems. Parents educated outside of Canada did not have a good understanding of the school system, methods of instruction, school culture, or expectations.

The insights gained from this community engagement and action research initiative led to the development of the program's key pillars — a set of supports designed to address the barriers to education identified by the community. When the program launched in 2001, the four pillars included academic tutoring, social supports, financial support, and advocacy. These four supports continue to provide the general blueprint for program implementation and delivery in a diverse

array of communities where the Pathways to Education program is now active, delivered through partnerships with local community agencies.

THE PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION PROGRAM MODEL

The model consists of four main pillars or supports, delivered by full-time program staff. Pathways to Education Canada partners with local community agencies and organizations to deliver the program and provides the funding, evidence-based program practices, knowledge-sharing, and community of practice support to enable program delivery. Community partners provide local leadership and staff, adapt the program to local needs, and deliver the program in their communities. While program fidelity may vary depending on the context, the following four program supports provide the blueprint for implementation.

Tutoring

Tutoring in core subjects is provided by volunteers four nights a week in a safe, social learning environment at a Pathways to Education program site. Volunteer tutors are supervised and supported by program staff. Student attendance is mandatory twice a week unless students maintain a specified grade average.

Social Support

The overall goal of this support strategy is to provide

pro-social and positive experiences where youth can further develop age-appropriate social skills, including problem-solving, team building, communication, and conflict-resolution skills. Students can choose from a variety of creative or sport activities, depending on their interests. These social support and mentoring programs are often organized in partnership with other community programs and services.

In grades 11 and 12 the focus shifts to encouraging students to plan and prepare for life after high school. This often involves opportunities to explore a variety of careers and post-secondary programs by attending career fairs or campus tours as well as learning about post-secondary application processes and admission requirements.

Financial Support

Financial support is designed to remove immediate financial barriers that affect school participation (students receive bus tickets, lunch vouchers, or help with school supplies). Students also earn a postsecondary scholarship in the amount of \$2,000. In order to maintain their eligibility for these supports, students must attend classes regularly.

One-on-One Mentoring

Each Pathways to Education student is assigned a Student-Parent Support Worker (SPSW) who:

- Monitors school attendance, academic progress, and participation in the Pathways program;
- Disburses bus tickets, lunch vouchers, or other financial supports;
- Helps the student build stable relationships with parents, teachers, peers;
- Works closely with school administrators and teachers in order to address academic issues;
- Is familiar with the school curricula, culture, and policies;
- Advocates on behalf of the student when the parents are unable to do so themselves, keeps parents connected with the Pathways program, and liaises with tutors and mentors.

ALIGNMENT WITH RESEARCH

Pathways to Education shares a number of key areas of alignment with exemplary school-based dropout prevention programs, research-based program implementation recommendations, and research on effective interventions for students living in risk situations. According to external research, all of the key components in the Pathways program, such as adult advocates, academic support, mentoring, and opportunities for social skills development, have shown meaningful impacts when deployed as dropout prevention strategies to support students living in contexts of marginalization and disadvantage.

Research shows that effective dropout prevention programs must include a number of approaches and

components, that there is no one strategy proven to work effectively in a variety of contexts and with a wide range of student needs. This is because, as Part I of this report demonstrates, students who leave school early are a heterogenous group. In order to be effective, dropout prevention programs must be able to respond to their participants' unique personal backgrounds and challenges, support their diverse needs, and counteract the negative impact of social disadvantage. The multifaceted approach of the Pathways program provides that support.

The success of the program and its longevity attest to the fact that “low-income youth, particularly those who may be struggling with educational, family, peer or personal issues, benefit from a critical mass of supports that provide sustained adult contact, monitoring, encouragement, and incentives to succeed” (Acker & Rowen, 2013). Both Pathways to Education practitioner knowledge (see Part IV, below) and external research demonstrate that it is the combination of effective support mechanisms in the Pathways program that allows it to support a wide range of student needs and respond to their diverse personal backgrounds and challenges.

Since the risk factors are very diverse and dropout is a longer process, effective programming must help students navigate a variety of challenges as well as toxic environments, relationships, and experiences. The case management approach embedded in the Pathways to Education program is well-aligned with

research that describes early school leaving as a developmental process. The program ensures that students have access to a caring and committed adult, a community of supportive adults and peers, and a safe and welcoming environment. This removes potentially disabling “significant markers” that may assail students as they progress through high school and adolescence from transforming into complex insurmountable barriers. Furthermore, individual program components help with social and academic engagement and provide a support mechanism against the push and pull factors of high school dropout. The program’s focus on alterable variables — academic performance, attendance, credit accumulation, and attitude towards school and learning — also ensures its alignment with existing external knowledge on program implementation, composition, and impact.

The Pathways to Education program also aligns with dropout prevention program recommendations in the 2008 practice guide developed by the U.S. Department of Education, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, and the What Works Clearinghouse (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). Three of the six recommendations in the practice guide apply to school-based interventions. The community-based Pathways to Education program is aligned with the remaining three recommendations, which can be applied outside of school settings. They are:

1. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out

The guide argues that “personal and academic needs can be addressed through a meaningful and sustained personal relationship with a trained adult. The adult should be responsible for addressing academic and social needs, communicating with the families, and advocating for the student. The adult and student

should have time to meet regularly.” Moreover, the adult advocate, through an ongoing relationship, can help students overcome a variety of barriers: by “assisting the student in addressing academic, personal, and emotional needs, [the] advocate can model positive and respectful behavior and offer guidance, stability, and assistance in making intelligent choices” (Dynarski et al., 2008).

2. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance

The practice guide recommends that academic support be implemented in conjunction with other suggested approaches, once again strengthening a clear research trend that the most successful interventions do not rely on one strategy. It goes on to say that “low academic performance, absenteeism, and grade retention are related to dropping out. Providing academic supports, such as tutoring or enrichment programs, helps address skill gaps and offset a cycle of frustration, and can enrich the academic experience for students who may be bored or disengaged” (Dynarski et al., 2008).

3. Implement programs to improve students’ classroom behaviour and social skills

Helping students “identify, understand, and self-regulate their emotions and interactions with peers and adults” can help to “mitigate problematic and disruptive behavior both in and out of the classroom by teaching students how to interact and communicate positively” (Dynarski et al., 2008). Students who are offered this type of support also learn to understand long-term consequences of their behaviour. An additional benefit of this type of skill development is to help students consider long-term consequences of their actions and behaviour.

Part IV:

Practitioner Knowledge

While program staff agree that the four supports of the program model continue to provide a blueprint for implementation, the day-to-day delivery of the program is more nuanced and focused on responding to individual student needs. In fact, program staff consistently report that the greatest value of the program resides in its flexibility and the flexibility of staff to respond to student needs. Effective support of individual students requires a high degree of flexibility and staff-student interactions that foreground every student as an individual with unique needs as well as skills, interests, ambitions, and voice. The program works well because it allows staff to build relationships, not merely provide services.

Pathways to Education front-line staff are an invaluable source of knowledge about program design, implementation, local adaptations, and impact on youth. The following section summarizes their insights recorded during recent semi-structured interviews at six Pathways to Education program sites.

The modular character of the program provides the flexibility to customize it to individual student needs. Pathways to Education is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

- All supports are very important, but the ability to combine them into an individualized program, based on individual student's needs, is absolutely crucial.
- Supports can be combined and recombined for

individual students — the flexibility of the program is one of its most valuable characteristics.

- To individual students some components may be more important than others, but all components have value: what's needed and valued by students can change from year to year or month to month.
- The Pathways program works because all of the elements work together; it is not about one single element over another.
- Students have flexibility to choose what they need most; it's a student-focused program. It is customized for them.
- The program offers a holistic, wraparound service.
- Students can access what they need, whatever works for them, and what they need that particular week or month. They tap into that set of resources.
- There is structure but also flexibility within it — students pick what works best for them.

Program staff consistently identify the flexibility of the program as key to student success. However, this flexibility and modular characteristic of the program would not be possible without the flexibility of program staff. The ability to personalize the program based on individual student needs is dependent on effective training and preparation of front-line staff, their skill in assessing when youth require a different approach or support mechanism, and shifting into the appropriate mode to offer support and guidance. Pathways to Education front-line staff are adept at assessing student needs on a daily basis, immediately responding to situations and circumstances, adapting

scheduled program elements, or shifting into alternative conversations and interactions to ensure that students feel supported and that their needs, anxieties, or immediate barriers are addressed in a timely and personalized fashion. This ability to “shift gears” and be present for the student in the right mode, based on the student’s emotional or physical state, is frequently identified by program staff as crucial to building lasting relationships with students.

The caring adult, student voice, and building of trust are critical.

- Strong, consistent, effective, and long-term relationships with a caring adult are a very important aspect of the program.
- Sense of belonging and being part of a community that students enjoy is crucial to their success. The local Pathways community has a formative impact on the students.
- The relationships created between youth and the Student-Parent Support Workers (SPSWs) are crucial.
- Students see that staff are focused on them and they value that. They feel important. They feel that they belong, that their voice matters.
- What really works is the consistency of a caring adult and support.
- They are gaining from interactions with adults who care, a whole range of adults (staff and volunteers) that they interact with at the Program site, not just their SPSWs.

In order to have an impact and provide a consistent, wraparound support, program staff must have a very good grasp of the challenges, barriers, opportunities, and successes in the lives of their students. The Pathways program makes it possible for staff to develop a very balanced and insightful understanding of student lives: they interact with students in a variety of different contexts, including the program sites, tutoring sessions, mentoring and leadership development events, the community, and schools. The opportunity to observe and interact with students in different contexts provides meaningful insights into the students’ social and emotional development, engagement, and general well-being. It increases the number of opportunities for relationship-building and assists front-line staff with developing a more incisive understanding of student lives, in academic and non-academic contexts. In fact, this key aspect of their professional practice is consistently highlighted by program staff as both a crucial component of their own ongoing practice-based professional development and the key advantage of the Pathways to Education program over school-based programs where staff interact with students in one context only.

Being a caring and consistent adult voice and presence in the lives of program participants also requires a strengths-based approach to youth development. To that end, program staff place a strong emphasis on: 1) assisting the students they serve in reflecting on their own experiences and decisions, 2) modelling how to navigate the school system and interactions with peers

and adults, and 3) building on the resilience, strengths, and assets that reside in each student. Program staff do not tell students what to do in the situations they encounter in their lives as high school students. They don't make decisions for the students. Instead, they provide scaffolding and model the skills the students need to develop in order to effectively cope with and rise above their often challenging contexts and circumstances.

Well-established partner host agencies provide great value to the program.

- Each Pathways program is part of a larger community organization or agency that is a fixture in the community and that everyone knows as a place of support.
- Because the local Pathways delivery partner has been in the community for a very long time, parents and students know that it will remain in the community, year after year.
- Having a well-established local partner provides infrastructure and a sense of leadership. It helps with credibility and auxiliary supports for students.
- The host agency is well-anchored, well-respected, and has a great deal of credibility in the community.

Community partnerships are crucial to program success.

- Partnerships with schools in the community is what sets the Pathways program apart from other

programs in the community.

- Links and relationships with other organizations have been developed and fostered over a long period of time. The trust that the community has in the agency helps open doors and ensure success.
- Program sites develop strong partnerships in the community and their outreach efforts ensure that the program has a strong presence.

The Pathways to Education program first emerged as an initiative of the Regent Park Community Health Centre in Toronto in partnership with the community of Regent Park. Led by the program's founders, the initiative emerged through dialogue with the community. That sense of dialogue with the community, of being embedded in it in order to serve it, continues to be the hallmark of the Pathways to Education program, as implemented by a diverse array of partner community organizations throughout Canada. When program staff discuss the program, they frequently focus on being part of an established community agency and serving as a hub for their students and their families. While the Pathways program provides a comprehensive set of supports, it also frequently provides referrals to complementary community-based services, based on student needs. Being part of a respected community organization, often with a very visible physical presence in the community and a wide range of programs, makes that process much easier for Pathways program staff and benefits the youth they serve.

**TO BE EFFECTIVE,
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COMPREHENSIVE AND
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FOR A MULTITUDE OF
REASONS, SERVICES AND
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TO MEET INDIVIDUAL
STUDENT NEEDS.”**

(Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005).



Conclusion

Developed with the community of Regent Park to serve its youth and their families, break the cycle of poverty, and support the educational ambitions and attainment of the Regent Park youth, the Pathways to Education program has since expanded to 17 communities where it is implemented in partnership with local agencies who understand the communities they serve and can adapt the model to ensure its ongoing effectiveness and relevance. While the model continues to provide the foundation for program implementation, its roots in Regent Park and thoughtful community engagement ensure that its focus is, first and foremost, on the youth it serves, and that adaptations can be made in response to local needs.

The original program blueprint has proven to be of value in very diverse communities, thus attesting to both the strength of the model as well as its adaptability. External research on dropout prevention demonstrates that effective programs must include more than one support strategy, case management and mentoring approaches, strategies that build trust, strong relationships, and supportive environments for youth. The Pathways model provides these supports and practitioner knowledge confirms that the program's wraparound approach is effective at supporting all aspects of a student's life, building meaningful relationships with caring adults, and ensuring flexibility in program delivery in order to respond to individual

student needs. In fact, the importance and value of relationships and the ability of program staff to “shift gears” and respond to student needs are consistently highlighted as some of the most valuable aspects of the program. Built through dialogue with the community in Toronto's Regent Park, the program continues to stay true to its origins and ensures that youth and their needs come first.

Despite its rapid growth in the past decade, the Pathways to Education program is still young. Both Pathways to Education Canada and the organization's local program delivery partners are still learning. Every community where the program currently operates continues to generate valuable practitioner insights and program knowledge. In the coming months, we will continue to share what we learn using a wide range of tools and vehicles. Having developed this report on external research and the Pathways model, we are now committed to using it as a building block and sharing additional insights, including those gained by listening to student voices — an important future research priority.

We look forward to working with like-minded partners and colleagues from across the country so that, together, we can continue to build on existing knowledge and contribute to this important field.



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Pathways to Education

439 University Avenue, 16th Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 1Y8

T 416 646 0123

Toll free 877 516 0123

F 416 646 0122

Charitable Registration Number
861908499 RR0001