

Pathways to Education Program: Mentoring

Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever. —Gandhi

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

Identity formation is an essential part of adolescent development and the Pathways to Education Program has a holistic, community-based approach to student support. Pathways includes a mentoring component that focuses on healthy social development and confidence building in a positive and safe environment that encourages youth to dream and plan for a successful future.

The Program includes group mentoring for younger Pathways students and later specialty and career mentoring for older students as they progress through school. All students are expected to participate in some form of mentoring activity on weekly or biweekly basis as part of the Program requirements.

Group Mentoring

Students attend group mentoring during their first two years in the Pathways Program. (Pathways begins providing supports to Grade 9 students except in Quebec, where the Program begins with Grade 7 students). Group mentoring is intended to create a positive sense of belonging to a peer group and to a caring community of Pathways staff and volunteers. Its purpose is to reduce isolation, promote the development of social skills and personal identity, and provide adult role models and encouragement.

Group mentoring meetings are held in accessible community locations so that students can easily participate after school. Students select from a variety of activities and are then assigned to groups and mentors with similar interests. Mentoring groups are typically made up of about 15 students and three volunteer mentors.

The mentoring activities provide students with support and exposure to a variety of learning opportunities. Mentors assist students in developing their social negotiation and communications skills in the context of fun, organized activities.

“You get to learn more about what you’re interested in. It helps you get involved.”

—Student Survey, Ottawa Pathways, 2009-2010

Students must participate in approximately 30 hours of group mentoring over the course of each school year. Participation in some form of group mentoring is mandatory in order to ensure that every student learns to form relationships, meet commitments and engage in a learning process that builds social skills, broadens individual interests and talents, and encourages self-reflection over time.

Group mentoring activities might include attending theatre or sports events, participating in creative arts, cooking, community recycling projects or physical activities such as martial arts.

Speciality Mentoring

In their third year of Pathways participation, students commit to some form of specialty mentoring for at least 45 hours over the school year. The purpose of specialty mentoring group is to help develop students' individual talents and interests. Activities are selected to:

- foster new knowledge, skills, and confidence outside of classroom settings
- encourage critical thinking and self-reflection about learning
- build self-confidence about capabilities and expand aspirations
- build networks of people and experience linked to personal interests and goals
- provide concrete examples of participation in learning opportunities.

In general, older students are expected to take some initiative in finding specialty mentoring activities through their school or community. A Mentoring Program Facilitator works with the student's Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) when needed to help find or develop programming suitable for individual students.

Career Mentoring

Career mentoring activities are available for all students no later than their final year of high school, although the Program tries to connect Pathways students with potential post-secondary opportunities early in their high school years. Pathways arranges for activities that support students' post-secondary goals. Preparing resumés and practising interviewing skills, completing college and university applications, participating in apprenticeship opportunities and visits to potential employers and post-secondary institutions are typical career mentoring activities.

Campus tours give youth an opportunity to make informal connections with student organizations or to talk with professors. Organized sessions with practitioners and guest speakers from different occupations or fields of study help expand students' understanding of their future options, while providing some real-world examples and stories that can help individuals picture themselves in different scenarios and jobs. Career mentoring gives youth a chance to explore some future education and employment options while sharpening the skills needed to land these opportunities. Pathways stays formally connected with graduated students for two years after their high school completion to provide follow-up support and advice as needed.

VOLUNTEER MENTORS

Volunteer mentors are carefully recruited, screened and trained. Pathways strives to reflect the cultural diversity and the gender balance of the communities and mentors serve as role models who are expected to demonstrate positive, non-judgemental social skills and problem-solving abilities in their group interactions. Mentors create a safe space for the students to try out these skills with each other and ongoing support is

provided to the volunteers through debriefing sessions, training seminars and ongoing communication by e-mail and phone.

“We try to be positive role models for the kids. We try to expose them to different opportunities.”

— E.K., Volunteer Mentor, Ottawa Pathways

Pathways to Education actively cultivates partnerships with local universities and colleges, which are major sources for volunteer recruitment, particularly student associations and faculties of education and social work. Volunteer recruitment plans project the numbers needed each year and volunteers have job descriptions, schedules and training opportunities. Special events and the exam schedules of both the students and the volunteers are factored into the schedule of mentoring activities.

MENTORING SUPPORTS

A Program Facilitator for Group Mentoring works with volunteer mentors and generally has a background in recreational leadership or camp counselling and knowledge and skills for dealing with group dynamics and working with first- and second-year high school students. The Program Facilitator serves as a link between the volunteers and the Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW), so that strategies and supports provided effectively help students to progress. The Program Facilitator provides updates that the SPSW can present at the bi-weekly staff meetings, such as student and volunteer feedback, attendance trends, challenges and successes.

Program Facilitators also substitute as needed when volunteers are not available to mentor students. A Site Support Worker, who is often hired from within the community, greets the mentors and students, assists with room set-up and clean-up, and works closely with the Program Facilitators.

“One student who almost refused to register in Pathways in spite of his mother’s encouragement was finally persuaded to join when he saw the list of interest groups for mentoring. Suddenly, he was completely excited to join and wanted to know if he could start in the summer.”

—Ottawa Pathways Annual Program Evaluation Report, 2010

At the beginning of each school year, students and staff develop tailored mentoring plans. Evaluation meetings after the program ends result in recommendations for improvement and throughout the year, SPSWs regularly meet one-on-one with their Pathways students to reflect on the mentoring activities and how they contribute to the development of post-secondary goals.

VOLUNTEER RETENTION AND OTHER CHALLENGES

A community-based program with a large contribution by volunteers requires a great deal of resources for effective recruitment, screening, training and retention. Some volunteers return to mentor year after year, and a number have been with their Program from the very first year. However, as the Programs expand in the various communities, volunteer recruitment and attrition are ongoing challenges. As the school year progresses, there may be gaps in specific types of volunteers, such as those working with special-needs students, or with expertise in certain school subjects.

Ensuring that the Pathways to Education Program remains effective and reflective of each individual Pathways community requires a commitment to evaluation, monitoring and flexibility. As the Pathways to Education Program expands to other communities, each lead agency works with the community to adapt the Program to reflect local resources and the students' and parents' needs and interests and relies heavily on volunteers and a commitment to excellence and student success.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that adolescents require structure as well as choices, fun, challenges and a chance to learn from mistakes. Pathways to Education's mentoring in the first two years of secondary school is designed to foster peer relationships and develop a strong relationship with the Program staff and volunteers, as the focus shifts to career related mentoring in the later years.

Mentoring activities reflect students' need to experience increasing levels of independence while developing healthy social bonds with their peers, parents, teachers and the community as a whole. The mentoring component of the Program is integrated with the whole Program. It recognizes individual strengths and enhances self-esteem through extra-curricular activities.

Bolstering a student's social skills helps increase confidence and self-esteem and the mentoring activities are key to engaging certain students, especially those who are struggling in school. Mentoring is usually a positive, fun experience and can help reveal individual strengths and potential beyond what may be revealed with a more narrow academic focus, complementing the Programs' other supports in order to narrow the achievement gap for secondary school students from Canada's economically disadvantaged communities.