



Pathways to Education Program Introduction and Overview

Teaching is more than imparting knowledge, it is inspiring change.
--William Arthur Ward

The Pathways to Education Program was created by Toronto's Regent Park community in 2001 and is now being delivered in 10 other Canadian communities. This article describes Pathways development in Regent Park and the program model that is closing the academic "achievement gap" in low income communities with high dropout rates and preparing young people for post-secondary education and meaningful employment.

INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental to health, well-being and economic prosperity. Canadians on average are better educated now than a decade ago and Canada has one of the highest rates of post-secondary attendance in the world.¹ But national averages mask the fact that certain populations are consistently under-represented for post-secondary achievement. One in five teens between the ages of 15 to 19 years is no longer pursuing an education.² Young people whose parents did not attend college or university are less likely to pursue post-secondary education themselves, as are those with low family incomes.³

Not completing secondary school increases the likelihood of a lifetime of disadvantage in Canada. Dropouts have higher rates of poverty and unemployment, tend to commit more crime, and experience higher rates of illness, drug-use and teenage pregnancy. Society pays a high price for low educational achievement. An estimated 85% of income assistance goes to the 34% of Canadians who have not completed secondary school. Over one-third of those who do not graduate from secondary school receive income assistance, compared to 6.7% of those with a secondary school diploma. Compared to non-graduates, secondary school graduates have a 23% better knowledge of health behaviours, 13% better general health status and 26% better family functioning.⁴

But this scenario is not inevitable. As the Pathways to Education Program demonstrates, with the right supports, young people from low income communities can achieve as well as or better than their more privileged peers.

¹ Shari Orders and Cheryll Duquette (2010). *Enhancing Access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada: An Exploration of Early Intervention Initiatives in Selected Countries*. Canadian Policy Research Networks), p. 1

² Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, Tuesday September 7, 2010, p. 2, *Education Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective*

³ Orders and Duquette, pp. 1-3

⁴ PHAC website, *The Social Determinants of Health*, citing FPT Advisory Committee on Population Health, 1999

REGENT PARK, RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL

Knowing that education and income are key social determinants of health, Carolyn Acker, executive director of the Regent Park Community Health Centre when the Pathways Program was developed in 2000 and first implemented in 2001, wanted to improve the health of residents by tackling the roots of poverty and supporting academic achievement among the community's youth. At the time, Regent Park was home to Toronto's oldest and largest public housing project and was characterized by low incomes, high unemployment, low educational attainment, and a large proportion of single-parent families.⁵

In 2001, 35% of Regent Park residents collected general welfare, 25% were on the Ontario Disabilities Support Plan and 28% were employed.⁶ The average family income was \$16,954 (compared to \$25,593 for Toronto as a whole⁷) and 56% of Regent Park youth dropped out of secondary school (compared to 29% for Toronto overall). About 80% of residents were visible minorities and Regent Park was home to a considerable number of new Canadians, 58% of whom were born outside of the country and spoke little or no English. Nine murders occurred in Regent Park in 2001 but the bleak statistics masked the resourcefulness and resilience of the community.

In the early 1990s, Acker attended a conference where she heard an American physician, Dr. Jack Geiger, describe the creation of a community health centre in rural Mississippi, where the youth in the community went on to become the centre's doctors, nurses, administrators and community workers. Inspired by this vision of "community succession," Acker and the Regent Park Community Health Centre took steps that would result in the development of Regent Park's Pathways to Education Program. In 2000, Norman Rowen was to research best practices and programs promoting the educational attainment of youth in low-income communities. Rowen, who later became the Program Director of the Regent Park Pathways to Education Program, reviewed the literature and identified the following key characteristics of successful programs:

- **Time:** Effective programs tend to last a considerable period of time.
- **Financial:** In addition to financial incentives, typically in the form of scholarships for post-secondary education, successful programs also address day-to-day financial barriers to school attendance and participation.
- **Links to other community services:** Helping young people or their families access other existing services when needed made programs more effective.
- **High expectations:** Effective programs communicate clear expectations and provide academic support in order to meet these expectations.
- **Quality staff and relationships:** The continuity and intensity of relationships between students and staff are key to success.
- **Participation:** All of a community's youth can benefit from support in reaching their goals, not only the high achievers or those who were struggling in school.

⁵ Rowen and Gosine, p. 3

⁶ Rowen and Gosine, p. 3 citing Metro Toronto Housing Authority data, 2000

⁷ Rowen and Gosine, p. 3 citing 2001 Census

In addition to programs and academic research, Rowen consulted with community service and educational experts and, most importantly, with a wide range of people living in the community. He conducted interviews and focus groups with youth of all ages, including those in school and those who had dropped out. He talked to parents from all backgrounds and cultures (in the parent's first language) about barriers to education faced by their children.

The consultations with youth identified three major barriers to high school completion:

- **Transportation:** with no local high school, Regent Park students needed bus tickets in order to get to school.
- **Low expectations:** students did not believe they could go on to college or university and as a result, felt it didn't matter if they finished high school.
- **Affordability:** Even youth who expected to graduate high school said the cost of post-secondary education was clearly beyond their reach.

Consultations with parents revealed additional barriers to supporting their children's educational achievement:

- **Language:** A lack of English language skills prevented parents from helping their children with their schoolwork.
- **Subject knowledge:** Even when language was not a barrier, parents often did not have a level of education that would allow them to support their children's learning.
- **Education systems:** When parents did have a level of subject knowledge, this usually did not mesh with high school methods of instruction and expectations.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Recognizing that different factors come into play at different times and that young people often have complex lives, the Pathways Program developed intense, multi-faceted and long-term supports. From the beginning, the Program rigorously measured and evaluated both implementation and results in order to incorporate a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

The Regent Park Pathways to Education Program focuses on school attendance, academic achievement and credit accumulation, in combination with social supports like advocacy and mentoring. In partnership with parents, community agencies, volunteers, local school boards and secondary schools, Pathways provided four main types of support: academic, social, advocacy and financial. These have become the major pillars of a successful program model.

Academic Tutoring

Tutoring sessions focus on homework and study assignments, as well as prepared exercises and other learning activities to help students develop as competent learners, while boosting literacy, numeracy and general knowledge. Tutoring in core subjects (e.g., English, French, math, science, history, geography) is provided by volunteers four nights a week in a safe, social learning environment. Tutoring volunteers are supervised and supported by Pathways staff and come from a range of professional, educational and ethnic backgrounds, although most are university

students. Attendance at tutoring is obligatory twice a week if a student's marks fall below certain levels⁸ although many attend tutoring sessions even if their marks are above the minimum level.

Social Supports

Group mentoring is provided for Grade 9 and 10 students, while specialty and career mentoring is provided for Grade 11 and 12 students. Mentoring staff recruit and train volunteer mentors, who are typically university students, professionals or community residents. The overall goal of group mentoring is to provide pro-social and positive experiences where youth can further develop age-appropriate social skills, including problem-solving, team building, communication, and negotiation. Structured group mentoring activities are held on a weekly or biweekly basis. In some cases students can choose from a variety of creative or sporting activities, depending on their interests.

As students progress from Grade 10 to Grade 11, mentoring becomes more specialized in order to encourage students to view themselves as capable—with support—of developing their talents and interests. Speciality mentoring focuses on the development of each individual's talents and interests through group-based activities, such as community groups, clubs and extra-curricular programming provided by schools and mentoring staff and volunteers. Career mentoring is designed to support students in pursuing their post-secondary goals and Pathways maintains formal connections with the graduated students for two years after high school.

Advocacy

Each student is assigned a Student-Parent Support Worker (SPSW), who monitors school attendance, academic progress and Program participation while helping the student build stable relationships with parents, teachers and other students. These Pathways staff members work closely with school administrators and teachers in order to address academic issues and are expected to be familiar with the school curricula, culture and policies. The Support Worker advocates on behalf of the student when the parents are unable to do so themselves and keeps parents connected with the Pathways Program and liaises with tutors and mentors. The Support Worker's goal is to facilitate healthy relationships, which research shows help youth to develop the social capital they need to succeed, while connecting them in a positive way to the larger community.

Financial Support

Pathways' financial supports were designed to remove financial barriers that hinder school participation. Bus tickets were provided to participating students for transportation to and from school and vouchers were provided as needed for school lunches. Students who fail to attend classes lose their eligibility for bus tickets and lunch vouchers.

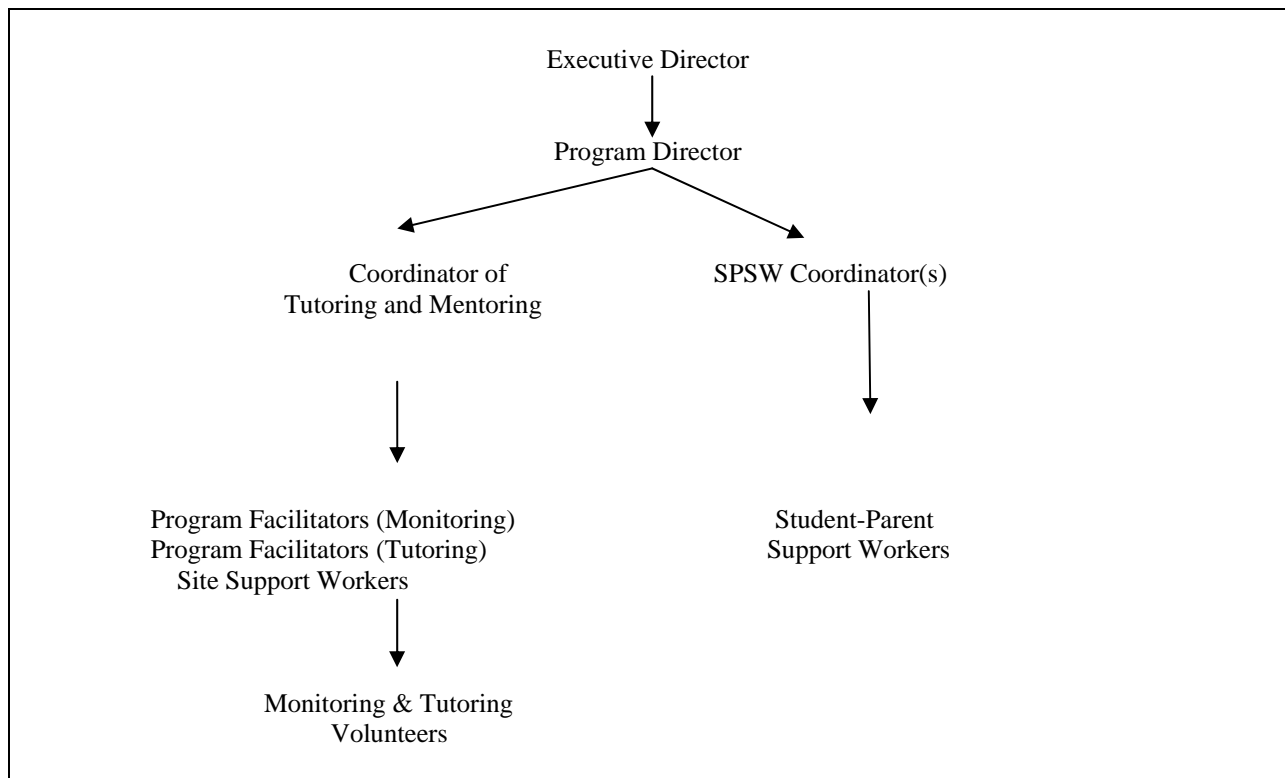
Pathways also provides a financial incentive to participating students in the form of a \$1,000 bursary for each year Pathways Program participation during high school to a maximum of \$4,000 for post-secondary education or training.

⁸ In Ontario, minimum grade levels are 60% in any Grade 9 course, 65% in Grade 10 and 70% in Grades 11 and 12.

PATHWAYS STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Pathways depends upon dedicated staff working as a team as well as the commitment of numerous volunteers for successful program delivery. Volunteer tutors and mentors are the backbone of the Pathways model and there about 300 volunteers who are tutors and mentors for 920 Regent Park Pathways students. Roughly two-thirds of Pathways volunteers are university students, while the others are professionals and community residents.

Key Positions, Pathways to Education Community



TRACKING PROGRESS AND EVALUATING RESULTS

Pathways to Education adopted an action-research and continuous improvement approach to the growth of the Program and its implementation by diverse communities. Established processes gather feedback from students, parents and volunteers in order to evaluate when the Program needs to improve and to better understand how Pathways is making an impact on the lives of participants. Information gathering tracks satisfaction among participants, the development of staff relationships with students, parents, volunteers and schools, as well as how students are feeling about themselves and about their future.

Pathways works closely with the public school system and other agencies to build upon existing systems and provide more comprehensive, integrated supports. Local school boards also help

facilitate Pathways' strong commitment to monitoring results over time. In Toronto, data provided by the Toronto District School Board on dropout rates for the year prior to the start of the Regent Park Pathways Program provided a baseline for comparing the results of Pathways students to other youth from Regent Park who experience the same curriculum, live in the same community, go to the same schools, but lack the supports that Pathways provides.

Regent Park Results: Credit Accumulation and Grade 9 Absenteeism

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has documented a clear relationship between credit accumulation and attendance in the early years of secondary school with future academic achievement. Students who accumulate fewer than seven credits and who are frequently absent in Grade 9 are not likely to graduate from secondary school. Students who miss a half a day per week on average in Grade 9 are moderately at-risk, while students who miss a day per week or more on average are highly unlikely to finish secondary school. TDSB has also found that an average below 60% in compulsory courses (English, geography, mathematics and science) and enrolment in the applied (non-academic) stream are also significant predictors of failure to finish secondary school.⁹

Overall, from 2001, when the first cohort of Regent Park students entered Grade 9, until 2010, Pathways has helped reduce dropout rates from 56% to less than 11.7% (for the first five cohorts in Regent Park). Credit accumulation continues to increase for Grade 9 and 10 students, while absenteeism rates continue to decline. Pathways students are consistently more likely to be represented in the academic stream than non-Pathways students. Students in the Regent Park Pathways Program in Grades 11 and 12 are continuing to perform well, as both graduation rates and participation rates in post-secondary education remain high.¹⁰

According to the most recent available data from 2008-2009, 80% of Pathways Regent Park's approximately 600 graduates have enrolled in post-secondary education, compared to 20% of students who entered Grade 9 in the two years before the Pathways Program began. Ninety percent of these graduates are the first in their families to go on to post-secondary education. The attrition rate for Pathways students in university is 1.7% compared to a national average of 16% and 8.8% for Pathways students in college compared to a national average of 25%.

EXPANSION AND GROWTH

As a result of the remarkable success in Regent Park, a number of other low income communities with high dropout rates across Canada inquired about initiating their own Pathways to Education Program. Although those involved in the Program in Regent Park believed that the results could be replicated elsewhere, they had no time to assist other communities in adopting this work. The Regent Park Community Health Centre Board and the Pathways to Education Trust and Development Committees created a separate organization with a mandate to bring the Program to other communities and raise more funds to make that possible. Pathways to Education Canada was incorporated in 2005 and began its work in 2006 with other communities.

⁹ Rowen, p. 32, citing Robert Brown and Erhan Sinay, April 2008

¹⁰ Rowen, pp. 34 - 43

In 2007, five new communities launched Pathways to Education Programs: two in Toronto (Lawrence Heights and Rexdale) and one each in Ottawa (Pinecrest Queensway), Montreal (Verdun), and Kitchener. Programs began in Scarborough and Hamilton, Ontario in 2009, followed by Halifax, Kingston and Winnipeg in 2010. In each of these locations, the Pathways Program is delivered by a local non-profit agency with credibility and a history of working with the community.

Without community buy-in and support, the Pathways Program will not flourish. Every new Pathways Program begins with a period of research and community engagement by the agency that lead Program delivery. The Program and community “wrap” students with essential supports. These are delivered with the essential participation of volunteers and strong partnerships with school boards, community organizations and local post-secondary institutions to help ground the Program in the current realities.¹¹

The Adoption of Pathways to Education by Communities Across Canada

Toronto’s *Lawrence Heights* community is predominantly made up of newcomers and first-generation immigrants from East and West Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. This public housing community features 1,080 family units with a high proportion of single-parent families and has experienced a recent increase in youth gangs and violent crime involving firearms. The Pathways Program is hosted by Unison Health and Community Services.

Rexdale is located in the northwest of Toronto and has a history of rich cultural diversity and strong community spirit. The community faces challenges related to poverty, unemployment, immigration, housing, education, and family breakdown. The Pathways Program is hosted by Rexdale Community Health Centre.

Ottawa’s Pathways Program is embedded in six public housing neighbourhoods with some 4,000 people, most of whom live in single-parent households; close to 30 percent of residents are newcomers to Canada, primarily from Somalia and Arabic-speaking countries. The Pathways Program is hosted by Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre.

Two diverse *Kitchener* neighbourhoods have embedded the Pathways to Education Program; the communities feature a wealth of languages and cultures, public housing and many new Canadians. The Pathways Program is hosted by Mosaic Counselling and Family Services.

Montreal’s *Verdun* neighbourhood has a large proportion of sole-support parents and families living on social assistance. Two-thirds of the community speak French as their first language and 15% are recent immigrants, mainly from Asia, and poverty and unemployment are major challenges. Toujours ensemble is the lead agency for this Pathways Program.

¹¹ Pathways to Education, Accessibility to Post-Secondary Education, speaking notes to Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, June 9, 2010

The **North Hamilton** community includes a mix of recent and long-term immigrant populations, in addition to Canadian-born residents. Hamilton's Pathways Program was initiated by a local anti-poverty coalition and is delivered by the North Hamilton Community Health Centre.

Scarborough Village is a public housing neighbourhood in Toronto, with a large proportion of immigrants and low-income families. YouthLink, a Toronto-wide youth serving agency, is the lead agency for this Pathways Program.

The Spryfield community on the periphery of **Halifax** proper has a drop-out rate of 61 per cent from grade 11 onwards. Chebucto Connections is the lead agency for this Pathways Program.

The **Kingston** community includes the neighbourhoods of Rideau Heights and Inner North End. The lead agency for this Pathways Program is Kingston Community Health Centers, which provides services for the lowest income neighbourhoods in North Kingston.

Winnipeg is a community with a large Aboriginal population and a high drop-out rate. The lead agency for this Pathways Program is the Community Education Development Association and is recognized as a community leader with a focus on education and expertise in working with Aboriginal communities.

Essential Elements of the Pathways Program

Research and evaluation are integral to the Pathways Program, as is two-way knowledge transfer between Pathways to Education Canada and all Programs through an ongoing process of adaptation, implementation, evaluation and improvement. There are as many ways to replicate the vision of the Pathways Program as there are communities able to sustain it.

Assisting and supporting students so they can succeed in school requires more than the ability to absorb, understand, and remember material that is taught in class. The Pathways Program systematically helps students to develop the skills, characteristics and work ethic needed for life-long learning, including:

- curiosity and knowledge-seeking
- organizational skills
- research skills
- study skills
- critical thinking and listening
- numeracy and literacy
- subject knowledge
- note-taking
- time management strategies

Program participation is voluntary and open to all students within a defined catchment area. Every site aims to recruit at least 75% of eligible youth, beginning in the first year of operation with students entering Grade 9 in Ontario or Grade 7 in Quebec.

Pathways does not wait for parents or students to approach them but actively recruits across the community to ensure that all eligible families know about the Program and its benefits. Relationships are developed with school boards and local schools before the Program is implemented. Cooperation with schools is needed to run the Program effectively, including help in adapting the Program to local needs and to identify and recruit eligible families.

Registration

Registration involves a formal meeting of Pathways staff, the student and parent(s) and all aspects of participation are discussed so that parents and students can ask questions and clearly understand the requirements and benefits of Pathways before committing to the Program. Students and parents agree to comply with Program requirements related to school attendance and participation in exchange for Pathway's support for the duration of secondary school enrolment. A formal participation agreement is signed by both parent and student, and renewed annually as the student progresses through high school.

A Sound Investment

The Pathways Program also strives for efficiency and responsible financial management. The cost per student is approximately \$4,000 per year in the Ontario Pathways Programs and \$3,500 in Quebec in 2009. Financial incentives and assistance (including the bursary) account for \$1,800 of this amount, and \$2,200 was for program delivery costs (primarily staffing). A cost-benefit analysis conducted by the Boston Consulting Group in 2007 concluded that every dollar spent by Pathways has a \$25 return to society. The analysis found that the cumulative lifetime benefit to society was \$400,000 per Pathways graduate.

Each Pathways Program identifies its own level of financial supports and incentives, based on input from parents, school, and community members. Each Program determines the amount of the bursary based on tuition and training costs as well as the amount of funding available. In Ontario Programs, this is generally \$1,000 for each year of Pathways participation to a maximum of \$4,000.

Conclusion

To date, the attendance and credit accumulation trends observed in the Regent Park Pathways Program are evident in the other Pathways communities. With the community's commitment and the rigorous application of the essential elements of support for their young people, Pathways to Education is demonstrating that all Canadians, regardless of where they live or their social and economic standing, can succeed in school. The Program has challenged prevailing community expectations from failure to success and community collaboration and activism are the primary tools to reduce the dropout rate and broaden the opportunities open to youth.