

Reducing Dropout Rate in Secondary School: Feasibility Study for Implementing a New Program

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The current knowledge-based economy context requires enhanced qualifications and diplomas for employment (Robertson & Collette, 2005). As a consequence, students' dropouts are facing serious challenges when looking for jobs: lower salaries, unemployment, welfare, etc. (Fortin, 2009). Students from low income families may have impoverish diet, inappropriate accommodation and limited access to educational resources and often end up dropping out of school before graduation. Schools dealing with these students face considerable challenges when implementing programs to retain students at school until graduation (Gagnon & al., 2006). In the region of Outaouais in the province of Québec (Canada), the dropout rate reaches 34,2% compare to the average rate of 24% for the province (MELS, 2009). Henceforth, promoting and supporting perseverance at school is a priority and, according to research (Robertson & Collette, 2006; Rivard & Deslandes, 2013), it requires collaboration between school, families and communities.

The program Pathways to Education is an example of program aiming at the reduction of dropout rate in secondary school while involving school, families and communities. This program was first implemented in Toronto by the Regent Park Community Health Center in 2001. The success of the program (dropout rate in that community has decreased by over 70 per cent in less than 10 years) led to its implementation in 11 communities in Canada (Acker, 2001). Pathways to Education comprises four types of measures to support students' retention: academic, financial, social and personalized support. With a dropout rate of 34,2%, the Outaouais region would beneficiate from the implementation of such a program.

In order to maximize the adequation of the program with the specificities of the Outaouais region, a feasibility study was conducted in the year 2013-2014 with the aim of implementing the program in one secondary school located in a low-income sector of the region. The objectives of the study were twofold: first, analyze the characteristics of at-risk students within the school and second, identify the support measures available within the school, family and community. It was hoped that this analysis would provide the basis for the development of a program aligned with the specific context of the students at this school. A multimethod approach was used to collect data from students, school personnel, families and members of the nearby community. All students were asked to complete a questionnaire aiming at 1) identifying students at risk of quitting school, 2) defining the dropouts' profiles within the school and 3) identifying the needs of students. The other three groups (school personnel, families and members of the community) participated in interviews focusing on the identification of potential difficulties in areas such as, family income situation, family crisis, school and social environment, and learning problems in school.