



Program Evaluation Findings Report

Promoting Excellence: A Community-Based Approach to Social and Academic Support for Youth in the Jane/Finch Community (Year One)

May 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About *Promoting Excellence*

This a six-week summer program for Grade 8 students in the Jane-Finch community. Specifically, it is targeted at students who have not met the academic requirements for high school and are being "transferred" rather than promoted. The program's objective is to support students in making successful transitions to Grade 9 and in developing the competencies and skills needed to be successful in high school.

Located on the York University campus, *Promoting Excellence* offers an integrated program of upgrading skills and recreation that combines academic instruction in the morning with sports, social activities, and field trips in the afternoon. Senior students from the local high school provide on-site mentoring throughout the day and are a source of ongoing support for the *Promoting Excellence* students during Grade 9. The sixty students, who attend voluntarily, receive a .5 Learning Strategies Credit toward their secondary school diploma. The program provides school supplies, lunch and snacks, and transportation to and from the campus; and it covers the cost of field trips.

Initiated by the Caring Village, a non-profit community group with a long history of involvement in the area, *Promoting Excellence* is the product of a unique collaboration that draws on a number of organizations, including the Toronto City Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department, the Black Creek Community Health Centre, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), York University, and the York University Faculty Association.

Evaluation Design and Data Sources

This report is a formative evaluation of Year One—the "pilot" phase—of *Promoting Excellence* (4 July to 11 August, 2006). The study is based on interviews, document analysis, field observation, and a triangulation of data.

Data sources include interviews with *Promoting Excellence* organizers and staff, program participants, and school administrators and observation of community meetings and forums. Secondary analysis of research reports, demographic profiles, and community-based assessments also inform this report. Finally, the evaluation relies on summary data provided by the principal of the local high school in order to assess student achievement and educational engagement

Major Findings

The evaluation provides compelling evidence that *Promoting Excellence* met its objectives and effectively supported students enrolled in the program in making

positive transitions to high school. Data based on the first two terms of Grade 9 indicate that *Promoting Excellence* students earned higher marks and failed fewer courses compared with incoming cohorts over the previous four years (2001-2005). Their rates of suspension and absenteeism were also lower. Motivation to achieve, self-esteem, and interpersonal competence were consistently higher. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of students stated that the *Promoting Excellence* experience had heightened their interest in post-secondary education. In this connection, the association with York was often identified as a crucial aspect of the program's success.

As for the programs problems, the biggest were (1) a lack of adequate planning time; (2) the challenge of recruiting and training teachers; (3) the difficulties of translating pedagogical ideals into program practices; (4) poor communication processes; and (5) a lack of effective conflict resolution strategies.

All told, however, *Promoting Excellence* presents as an innovative community/school/university collaboration that is charting new territory in the intersection of school reform and community organizing. Its success in attracting and retaining academically-disengaged students in a six week summer school program is especially noteworthy and affirms the utility and quality of the program. The preliminary findings indicating that participation was associated with increased levels of student engagement and achievement in ninth grade further suggest that the program is making progress in achieving its goals. In sum, *Promoting Excellence* has great potential to positively affect transition to high school and enhance student engagement and academic success.