

# Creating Hope, Opportunity, and Results for Disadvantaged Youth Part III

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### Editor's Message

This article completes the three-part series on Creating Hope, Opportunity, and Results for Disadvantaged Youth. If you have not read the previous parts, they are available at the CJCD website in Vol 12(1) pages 63-79 and Vol 12(2) pages 105-140.

In part one, the background, context, development of the Pathways program, and chal-

lenges the program was set to address were discussed in depth. Part II reviewed the successes the Pathway Program has achieved, results on the participants, impact on graduation and dropout rates, and a discussion about what these impacts and results mean. Part III concludes with the lessons learned about the Pathways program, the program design, and future implications for both the students, communities, and research.

It has been an honor to be able to present our readers with this series and we hope that you enjoyed it, and it has brought about thought and discussion. Any questions and comments can be addressed to the authors Carolyn Acker and Norman Rowen. You may also visit the website Pathways to Education at [www.pathwaystoeducation.ca](http://www.pathwaystoeducation.ca)

### Section III. Some Lessons Learned

Over the past decade, much has been learned both about the effectiveness of the Pathways to Education Program itself and about the Program as a social innovation designed to address what had been considered an intractable problem. In what follows, we try to summarize some of these lessons and offer some brief comments about their implications.

#### Comprehensiveness of the Intervention

Pathways is a comprehensive program of supports including academic, social, financial and advocacy to address the his-

torical dropout rate and which built on the many strengths and assets present in the community. While there are many reasons for wanting to be comprehensive, perhaps the most important is that providing multiple supports concurrently seems to be one of the factors which is related to program effectiveness. For example, Partee and Halprin (2006) noted the importance of "a holistic approach... effective programs include a broad set of strategies and services to address varying needs of young people [including]... a strong focus on developing peer support". As well, with respect to increasing post-secondary participation for those from historically under-represented groups, the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Fund

(2009), concluded on the importance of a comprehensive approach in addressing the barriers experienced by young people from disadvantaged communities, by Aboriginal youth, and by those who would be the first in their families to access post-secondary education.

More than solely the need to be comprehensive, the particular program elements which comprise Pathways were designed and are delivered in a manner to address some important needs of disadvantaged youth. In his analysis of resilience among young people, Ungar (e.g. Ungar et al, 2008) identifies seven "tensions" which adolescents need to address and which require support (see below). As with factors identified related to school leav-



ing (Ferguson et al 2005), Pathways developed before these were specifically identified, though it seems more than coincidental that many of the factors and “tensions” have, in fact, been addressed through the supports provided in the Program. And the specific supports developed through Pathways are consistent with the current view of successful program including, for example, those cited by Lerner and Brand (2006) who note that “(t)he four most common supports that have proven effective [are]... caring adult advisors, academic assistance and tutoring, college success classes, and a safe environment and peer support.”

As well, data from single support programs, i.e. those focused primarily on tutoring or mentoring or financial support alone, show far weaker outcomes than Pathways<sup>1</sup>. As one commentator noted

*Low-intensity programs that provide occasional tutoring, counseling, or activities to boost self-esteem do almost nothing to keep students in school. In a rigorous experimental evaluation of ... interventions that provided low-intensity supplemental services—such as tutoring, counselling, or workshops to enhance self-esteem or leadership skills—had no impact on dropout rates. (Jerald 2007)*

The approach that Pathways to Education has taken aims to be comprehensive with respect to the supports many young people need to address barriers to secondary school participation

and success, including transitions to post-secondary education. However, we would be remiss if we did not note that there has been some discussion of the need to be even more comprehensive – and coordinated – in the community’s approach to youth development in a broader sense. For example, the work done by the Project on Effective Interventions at Harvard University (Schorr and Marchand, 2007) concluded on the need to integrate supports for educational success with those required to address challenges of the justice system, physical and mental health systems, housing, employment, and child welfare systems, to create an overall “place-based” approach to the developmental needs of the most vulnerable young people. Pathways does, when necessary, purposefully connect youth and their families to a variety of services while deliberately maintaining a focus on the specific supports which, taken together, are most related to the goal of secondary school success.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to suggest that a broader view of what it means to provide comprehensive support may not be important. Rather, the approach adopted by Pathways reflects an understanding that (a) success in one area cannot be dependent on trying to do too many things, (b) the responsibility for developing many of the other needed supports cannot rest with a single provider, and (c) that the coordination of the range of supports requires an independent initiative, distinct from the individual service providers each of whom is strug-

gling to provide a focused service.

That said, the Harvard project did identify a number of “cross cutting” characteristics that made a broader approach to “comprehensive” possible, including

- Outreach and enrolment procedures that ensure accessibility and which maximize eligibility;
- High quality programs where “the focus, duration, frequency, and intensity of interventions, services, and supports are carefully calibrated to the needs, resources, and risk factors of young people, their families, and the community served” and which embody “mutually respectful relationships”;
- Effective management typified through well trained and well supervised staff
- Results orientation where “effectiveness is gauged by the results and outcomes”
- Connections to and across services and supports, in which “systems are designed to connect young people with basic supports, supportive networks, and specialized services”;
- Community engagement and social networks where youth are engaged and “services promote belonging, social connectedness, and the development of relationships”;
- Sustainability and Fund-



ing whereby “funding is sufficiently flexible ... (and) investments are made on terms and at levels that ensure high-quality implementation... through processes that are simple, streamlined, and focused on achieving results”. (Schorr and Marchand 2007:Appendix 4:1-7)

Although it is difficult to make a straight comparison between Canada and the U.S. because of the different social programs in Canada, these characteristics are shared by Pathways to Education. Indeed, the authors noted that the challenges of applying these “cross cutting” characteristics to initiatives which attempt to address the broader range of systems in the United States are considerable. However, from our perspective, it is difficult to imagine being more comprehensive; that is, having Pathways staff be responsible for providing or coordinating an even broader range of supports. So, while Pathways’ version of comprehensiveness may not meet all possible needs of all young people, there are clearly practical limits on the capacity of any one organization or initiative to provide a full range of more complex supports since it cannot be assumed that all young people involved in the initiative would require the full range of what is being suggested by the Harvard project.

### **Being Inclusive**

Pathways’ development and success reminds us that the community can have great wisdom. Through the development of the program residents were clear and consistent that to have an impact on a community the Program needed to “include all the kids”; not targeting or creaming, but including all the youth. Other programs had tried to deal with a few of the “most at-risk” kids or the ones with the most “promise”. The community knew better. The reason this matters is because the stigma changes when you’re all in it together; achievement rises for everyone. The form of the supports may differ a bit, but no one is stigmatized. It may sound simple, but it’s hard to do.

An important example of this occurred routinely in tutoring sessions where the room would include those students struggling with fractions, as well as those doing calculus; those working on basic literacy alongside those writing university level essays. The young people accepted each other and these differences. It was no surprise. Rather, they understood that the same supports – in this case, tutoring – were being provided to everyone and were designed to include, rather than exclude, them and to respect their capacities, their experiences, their challenges.

And the community also clearly said that the program’s impact was dependent on supporting the young people for the duration of high school, rather than for a year or two as other initiatives had done. This was

crucial and the ability to deliver support over such a period of time had important effects including that it dictated the large size of the program. However, the most important effect was to establish that Pathways would support the youth of the community over the long haul. Making this commitment was an important component of the trust placed in the Program by the community and the young people themselves. And this ability to provide support over a (relatively) long period has been confirmed as a characteristic of effective youth development programs (e.g. Partee and Halprin 2006). This “stability” is a key in providing the opportunity for the continuity of the relationships necessary to be effective; and, at the same time, it serves as an everyday example of the need for perseverance on the part of staff and students alike.

### **“It’s All About Relationships”: The Role of Pathways Staff**

While it should be clear, both from Pathways’ experience and from the conclusions of the broader youth development community, that a comprehensive program is needed, there has also been an acknowledgement that the role of Student/Parent Support Workers (SPSWs) has been an important innovation of the Program. The role grew from the initial judgement that the challenges faced by Regent Park youth required a unique approach to providing support to each and every young person; and an understanding that the role needed



to embody several skills and approaches.

A first lesson in this regard is that the needs of the young people and their families required that the support and advocacy functions of this position needed to be located in a paid staff, rather than volunteer position. As the largest single cost component of the program, this decision had obvious implications. However, it proved to be an important understanding as many have referred to this role as the “glue” which holds the supports together. How these staff provide the necessary support can be understood with reference to the seven “tensions” described by Unger et al (2008):

- access to material resources,
- access to supportive relationships,
- development of a desirable personal identity,
- experiences of power and control,
- experiences of social justice,
- adherence to cultural traditions, and
- experiences of a sense of social cohesion with others.

The development of the staff role over the past decade (SPSWs, but also program facilitators who work with the mentoring and tutoring elements and volunteers) is a testament to how central are the caring relationships within a program structure of high expectations and accountability which provide young people from disadvantaged

communities with the support they need to learn to navigate these tensions.

For example, the SPSWs are the link to the financial supports Pathways provides through the tracking of attendance which holds the participants accountable for the Program’s material supports. Similarly, the advocacy (i.e. how SPSWs both intervene and support students to question their relationship to authorities in the school including teachers, guidance and school administrators) often provides experiences of both individual power and control, as well as experiences of social justice. And the development of a positive identity is often and consciously acknowledged by Pathways participants as a direct result of the support of their SPSW and flows from the trust developed over time through what becomes a primary relationship for many Pathways youth.

Part of the development of a positive identity has come from the support of staff when young people of many different cultures question their own cultural backgrounds and work through the age appropriate challenge of negotiating between their parents’ culture and expectations and those of the broader Canadian urban context.<sup>3</sup>

As well, the Program as a whole, including participation in and support from program staff involved in tutoring and mentoring, provides those experiences of social cohesion, of joining peers without the stigma which has long been attached to youth from such communities. Pathways exists as a positive alternative to the participation of some

young people in the gang culture that is, in many similar communities, a principal form of inclusion. Some have suggested that engagement with Pathways serves as a positive “gang”, by providing Pathways youth with a sense of belonging similar to the “validation” necessary for academic success.

Another important lesson from the success of Pathways’ staff has been the understanding that young people from such communities are not, by definition or circumstance, deficient or unhealthy; that is, success comes, in part, from not “pathologizing” these young people. Indeed, while Pathways was developed as a program of the Regent Park Community Health Centre, unlike other “clients” of the Centre, the young people of the community are not well served by assuming they necessarily have either physical or mental health challenges. Some do; but that number has proven to be a distinct and very small minority. While one might expect serious issues to arise from the circumstances of extreme poverty, from their experiences of war, famine, etc. in their home countries, it is certainly a testimony to the general resilience of these young people that they are as “normal” as other youth in their aspirations, their ability to respond to support, their capacity and willingness to be part of a positive culture of achievement when the supports are provided.<sup>4</sup>

This reality, however, posed many challenges in staffing which was consciously designed to include caring and motivated individuals from a



variety of professional backgrounds: some with social work or child and youth work training, others who are qualified teachers, others who have community and international development education and experience, and still others with little or no formal education, but a wealth of experiences with youth in similar communities. Developing a coherent professional culture was as much a challenge to the program's development as the diversity of staff was a gift.

While the counselling provided by staff is largely informal, the importance and effectiveness of the role has been summarized by Jerald (2007) as follows:

Ongoing, comprehensive, and personalized attention from counselors can reduce dropout rates even for the most at-risk students. Rigorous experimental studies have shown that programs ... that provide intensive, sustained, comprehensive, and coordinated interventions can reduce four-year high school dropout rates among highly at-risk students by one-third, and five-year rates by one-half... Programs that work use counselors as case managers who build sustained relationships with students, closely monitor each student's attendance and performance, intervene rapidly at the first sign of trouble, help students and families overcome obstacles to educational success, and teach students how to solve problems. (Jerald 2007)

Many Pathways staff, not

only SPSWs, play these roles (though SPSWs may be primarily responsible for the "case management" function). Indeed, another learning from the Program's first decade is that it is largely impossible to determine in advance which staff a given student will find that relationship with; that at any given moment, circumstances and events may find a young person relating to different staff. Therefore, one of the principal features of staffing has been to ensure that there are enough different staff available with whom each student may develop the necessary affinity and trust to benefit from the relationship. A simple example of the benefit of this approach has been the reality of some youth who will, at times, want to connect with a staff member of the same cultural background while, at other times, seeking out staff specifically not of their culture. In an effort to be "normal", adolescents need to test their identities with a variety of others.

In addition to not pathologizing the young people, another important principle of Pathways is an understanding that the important role the Program plays also has limitations. The circumstances and challenges of our young people are considerable. Pathways can support the capacities of youth from disadvantaged communities to negotiate many of the tensions Ungar describes; and Pathways can mitigate many of the effects of poverty, of un-supportive others (both adults and other young people), of the stresses of experiences of racism and sexism, etc. However, Pathways cannot change many of

these circumstances in the lives of our young people. Pathways may be able to influence, but cannot by itself, change many of the systems that impinge on students' success. Rather, the Program has been successful by helping students to negotiate their relationships with and to these systems: to schools including teachers, administrators, clerical staff; to police and the justice system; with health care and social service providers (including child welfare agencies); with their families, both immediate and extended. And the sense of efficacy in being successful in these ongoing negotiations is, as Ungar notes, a developmental need in addressing the "normal" tensions of adolescence.

A further and key factor in the success of staff seems to be their ability to be "present" for the young people. By present, we mean the capacity of staff to demonstrate their caring; to be emotionally as well as intellectually, available; to be supportive in a way which demands accountability to high expectations, and which demonstrates a willingness to work with the young person to solve problems and find constructive solutions when challenges arise. Being present is a quality well understood, though difficult to define, for Pathways' young people: they know who is and who isn't. It is the everyday expression of staff's caring and commitment. And it is a quality equally important for program managers to exhibit with staff, staff with volunteers, and agency executive directors with program directors.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Pathways provides



the youth with a structure through which the supports can be effectively provided, staff and volunteers similarly require a structure and process of supervision and support to enable them to be effective in their work. Frequent individual staff supervision meetings are coupled with ongoing informal support. For volunteers, an important learning from the Program's first decade is the benefit of engaging volunteers in regular "debriefing" sessions which provide the space necessary for them to explore both challenges and successes in the programming, as well as providing important feedback to program staff. These sessions, formally structured for mentors, less formal for tutors, also demonstrate the commitment of the program to listen and hear their experiences of the young people, and serve as a concrete expression of the value of these volunteers to the program and participants.

To those from social work or health care backgrounds, the complexity of the SPSW role may be understood to be a version of active case management; that is, with a focus on problem solving (sometimes through solution focused counselling) coupled with a more traditional focus on referrals for more intense supports, with an added advocacy function to support young people in dealing with particular challenges. Indeed, what separates the role in Pathways from other interventions is that all participants have access to this support, and that the structure of the support provides for young people and staff to negotiate the type and

intensity of the support provided at any given time based on the circumstances and specific needs identified by the young person. Such flexibility may be informally available to select students in school contexts, to particular young people in faith-based organizations, but is uniquely present in Pathways for all the youth from a given geographic community. While in other interventions it may be available based on particular staff "going the extra mile" for a special young person, Pathways has structured this relationship into the very fabric of the program. In this way, Pathways might be seen to organize the important characteristic of "empathy" as a central feature – and determinant – of the Program's success. Leadbeater (2011) has noted that this characteristic will be fundamental to successful social innovations in the coming years.<sup>6</sup>

### **Research: Accountability and Program Improvement**

It is doubtful that Pathways to Education could have been sustainable – either financially or programmatically – in the absence of a strong research function. It has proven true, and remains so, that financial sustainability has been dependent on the ability to show demonstrable results. Given the absence of direct government funding from the outset, the program was consciously designed to include a research function that could provide simple and clear measures of success; specifically, the comparisons of attendance and credit accumulation of Pathways

young people with those of pre-Pathways students from the same geographically defined communities. After four years, these data were supplemented with comparative data on graduation rates and post-secondary participation. Those supporting the program (beginning with the Counselling Foundation of Canada and the Ontario Trillium Foundation) have often noted the importance of strong and consistent results on these metrics as a factor in their decisions to grant multi-year funding.

Some have suggested that these metrics are far too simple and that they have come to dominate the program's orientation. It can be stated unapologetically that there are at least three reasons which justified a focus on such metrics. First, without positive and easily conveyed results few of the initial and now long-standing funders and donors would continue to provide financial support. Second, in the absence of positive results, Pathways is frankly too complex and difficult an undertaking; the time and energy, as well as funding, for the Program could be better spent in finding a more effective approach. And, third, if frontline staff have the relationships with the young people that Pathways expects, the results will, in fact, be forthcoming. While the first two of these rationales have been continually affirmed (since the results over the past decade have been consistently strong), the third has been well understood, not only in the initial site in Regent Park, but now in each of the newer Pathways sites as well.



Perhaps more important is that the research capacity of Pathways from the outset has included a broader understanding of the purpose of the research. Specifically, the Program emerged using an action research approach which has been sustained, in large measure, over the past decade. This approach is rooted in an understanding of, and in values which began from, the knowledge and aspirations of the community; and, through a disposition to engage many types of participants, continues to hold existing practices (of both the school system and the program itself) up to scrutiny. While the techniques employed have been varied, the orientation has remained one of seeking to better understand the experience of the range of program participants in an effort to both enhance outcomes and improve the program. The orientation and use of an action research approach, therefore, has been purposeful: the social purpose being the amelioration of the numerous disadvantages that confront these young people and the community (leading to demonstrably greater educational attainments), as well as the more located purpose of first determining and, subsequently, building upon and improving the specific program elements which have come to be Pathways.<sup>7</sup>

Whether termed action research or its “emergent learning” variant, the Program has collected data to meet both accountability and program improvement purposes. Several types of data have been important to these purposes. First, as noted, quantitative data have provided the

metrics which, in turn, support not only funding, but also the ability for the community to know that the important objectives are being met. While many assume that such simple indicators are desired only by those supporting the program financially, it is no less true for those parents (and the community as a whole) who place their trust – and their sons and daughters – in the program; they, too, deserve the assurance that the results they hoped for are being realized.

The origin of the two interim indicators – attendance and credit accumulation – en route to more definitive metrics of dropout and graduation rates owe their use to the long history of research conducted by the Board of Education for the City of Toronto (now the Toronto District School Board). In short, the studies conducted over many years and for many cohorts demonstrated the clear relationship between each of strong attendance and credit accumulation, and graduation; and, conversely, between poor attendance and credit accumulation and likelihood of dropping out.<sup>8</sup>

These interim indicators, however, are not solely important to assuage the concerns and inspire the confidence of students, parents, or funders. Rather, they are the basic data from which program staff are able to begin to unpack the relative benefit (or lack) that the program is fostering in its participants; and, further, it provides the basis for additional and more detailed analyses of those effects. For example, it was through a more detailed analysis of these basic

indicators that the need for additional special education supports for some youth who were not receiving them was discovered; as well, these data provided important insight into the likelihood of dropping out for students by stream (academic, applied, locally developed) and by gender. Therefore, these data are absolutely essential for an ongoing examination of effects which, in turn, spurred efforts at specific program improvements, e.g. more intensive support by SPSWs to address those students with serious attendance problems.

These data, which include dropout and graduation data, special education, standardized test results, etc., are provided annually by the school boards. This requirement, which includes the same detailed individual level data for historical cohorts in each community, poses some challenges to those smaller school boards which lack a research function – not a small irritant in some jurisdictions, though with only a small actual cost in its production. However, the agreements which are negotiated with each school board are an important expression of the relationship between the community and the school board and of the shared commitment to the success of these young people. As well, securing the required data directly from the school board provides an assurance to the programs and the public that the data is indeed beyond question. It also raises the challenge of the extent to which other partnerships are involved in securing similar data to examine the effectiveness of their



interventions.

More recently, as the Program has developed, it has been important to obtain data with respect to post-secondary participation. This has not been straight forward as the data exists in different locations: some with the two central application services in Ontario (one for colleges and one for universities), other data with the student assistance office (a provincial body), and yet other data with individual institutions. As well, for those students not proceeding directly to post-secondary studies, there is the usual challenge of maintaining contact for the purpose of both tracking and providing support for possible future post-secondary applications.<sup>9</sup>

Coupled with the range of basic indicators, the Program routinely has tracked several participation measures (e.g. attendance at tutoring and mentoring), again, not solely for accountability, but also to ensure that those students not sufficiently engaged are identified and supported more intensively.

Several forms of qualitative data are also examined and were structured into the local research process from the outset. These have included focus groups with students, with parents (in their first languages), and with volunteer tutors and mentors. These groups are designed specifically to gain the participants' insights into the program and its delivery; specifically, aspects of the program that are working well and those working less well, as well as to solicit ideas for addressing identified challenges. A good example of

the value of such groups came in the very first year where, during the focus groups held after the very first semester, students themselves (and parents) suggested the need for requirements to be instituted to increase tutoring attendance. As well, the same focus groups identified the students' desire for mentoring groups to meet more frequently and to locate all of these groups in the community. Through these focus groups, tutors and mentors have responded with suggestions for specific additional supports to enable them to work more effectively with the young people.

In addition, beginning in the second year of the program, "kitchen table" sessions were organized quarterly as a vehicle for parents from all cultural groups to come together with their questions and concerns about their children's development more generally, about relations with the schools, and with other institutions, etc. These more open ended opportunities provided another occasion to discuss themes related, but not specific to, their own child with a view to examining how the Program might intervene to address important needs.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, a survey of students participating in Pathways was administered annually, as were surveys of tutors and mentors.

The value of the data collected through these many vehicles cannot be overstated. Many changes to the program have been instituted as a result of the analysis of the combined data from the quantitative indicators, the surveys, and the focus

groups; with the latter providing important nuances which allowed the program to respond to the needs and/or desires of students, parents, and volunteers. This ongoing desire for "evidence-based" program improvement has been most important to the concern with "struggling students"; that is, how to better identify, and then engage, youth who remain at high risk of dropping out despite the supports being provided. Without a detailed analysis of such students and their patterns of achievement and participation, coupled with a more intense understanding of their experiences of schools, of the community, and of the Program itself, it is certainly not possible for the Program to address their challenges. The ongoing experiences of staff, while extremely valuable, must be augmented by the actual data on attainments and perceptions of those participating in the program directly.

This type of more focused research in itself, however, may not lead to effective changes. For example, an approach suggested by one such analysis led to changes in the group mentoring schedule and approach in order to address concerns about the engagement of some students. However, after two years of the revised component, the results were, in fact, little different from those that led to the change. A similar experience with a "new" approach to academically struggling students in the early high school grades also led to the hoped for alternative approach being reconsidered after results showed little difference in the attainments of such students.



While it may not be possible to have a positive result with all students, Pathways remains committed to trying to find evidence-based alternatives to support greater engagement and increased success for all participants. Stated differently, all ideas may not work; but the ones that are tried should have some basis in the identified and documented experiences of the participants themselves (including, but not limited to, the quantitative data).<sup>11</sup>

While perhaps not an intended effect of Pathways' success over the past decade, a commitment to ongoing research and evidence-based program improvement appears to have become a greater part of the lexicon of other community-based initiatives, and not solely in education. For example, with increasing frequency, more charitable agencies (including, for example, United Way in several major cities in Canada) have echoed the call for the agencies receiving their funding to produce demonstrable results and/or evidence of a clear positive impact on their clients. Similarly, there has been an increasing desire of government (e.g. the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities) to have the institutions they fund demonstrate how funding for targeted groups (for example, funding aimed at increasing access for those identified as "first generation" students) resulted in specific and measurable results congruent with the stated purposes. As well, while the concern with "struggling students" clearly predates Pathways, the topic was not on the agenda of

the provincial government at the time Pathways was created, but has since become a significant part of the common discourse about the effectiveness of schools and school systems. Whether by political will or by weight of evidence (or both), the conversation about those who were previously poorly served by the system has become a more current challenge to all in the educational system, and particularly in so many communities similar to those with Pathways programs. Were this interest to be the only benefit of Pathways' first decade, it would be a useful result in itself. However, coupled with the direct and indirect benefits to the many communities, to the thousands of young people, and to our society as a whole, the impact of the Program has indeed been significant.

### **Community or School-Based Supports**

While the general finding that young people need a caring adult has found resonance in a particular form through Pathways, the question is frequently asked about whether schools could, in fact, provide the same support. There are obviously many genuinely caring teachers and guidance staff in our secondary schools. However, there is also a legitimate question about whether this and other supports needed by so many young people in diverse, impoverished, racialized and otherwise marginalized communities can be provided in the normal, day to day functioning of our high schools.

In answering the question, it should be understood that Path-

ways developed in a particular context more than a decade ago; in particular, a political context which included the centralization of curriculum, and of school staffing, organization, and funding reforms which included the adoption of provincial policies on, for example, "safe schools", a reduction in non-classroom supports such as transportation and school-community relations staff (at least in Toronto) – changes which, taken together, had a profound effect on the latitude of local school boards and individual school leaders to address the needs of those young people from the most disadvantaged communities. This context, however, merely strengthened the resolve of residents and the Health Centre's leadership to ensure that the detrimental effects of these important challenges could be mitigated through the provision of community-based supports.

That said, the very existence of Pathways was in other ways dependent on the newly amalgamated school board. The Program was never conceived of as an alternative to school attendance, or of the mandate of the formal educational system to help young people to develop the content knowledge, skills and dispositions required for their success. Rather, Pathways seeks to maximize the opportunities for young people to succeed in rather "conventional" terms; that is, to support these students and their parents to effectively navigate the challenges of secondary schools, as well as those present in the community. The two clearly go together: both sets of "risk factors", school-based and non-



school factors (as later identified by Ferguson et al 2005), needed to be addressed. As such, the Program was always conceived as a partnership between the community and the formal educational system. It was through the success of Pathways, coupled with a change in government, that the question of respective roles emerged; namely, to what extent could and should the supports provided by Pathways be delivered through secondary schools themselves?

Several conclusions seem apparent based on Pathways' first decade in Regent Park and the initial replication of the program in several other communities.

First, it is doubtful that the range of necessary supports can be coordinated, organized and delivered through individual schools. The evidence suggests that the ability to coordinate the range of supports required is well suited to a community-based agency.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the perception of the young people is clearly that the relationships of trust required for their success – ensuring higher expectations, accountability and support – are most successfully established with staff outside the school.<sup>13</sup>

Third, even were school-based efforts to be considered, the evidence suggests that the current funding for schools does not provide for sufficient staff or staff time to be allocated to such support. Rozanski (2002) noted this by stating that the funding formula (and the programs supported through formula funding) by itself would not, in Rozanski's view, be able to close the

achievement gap. While there may have been additional funds allocated, evidence suggests that the supports identified cannot be sustained solely through the additional allocation.<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, even if a school sought to provide such comprehensive support, there is no evidence to suggest that this can be done more cost effectively than by a community-based, not-for-profit agency. There may be alternative school-based approaches which are less expensive, but these will likely include fewer (or different) supports being provided to fewer students; and evidence of successful approaches, let alone at a lower cost, is absent.<sup>15</sup>

Fifth, were individual schools, or even school boards, committed to supporting students in the range of ways structured into Pathways, there is little, if any, evidence that such supports would be more effective than community-based approaches. As Levin (2004a) noted, neither targeted nor whole school initiatives have proven to be either successful or sustainable. More recently, the Gates Foundation initiatives, also aimed at school reform, have shown disappointing results.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, there is an acknowledgement (now almost taken for granted) that the school itself need not, indeed cannot, be the sole provider of the supports necessary for student success. Whether there ever was a time when schools were actually able to play such a role for such students in any systematic way is far from clear; and, in the absence of contrary evidence, the organiza-

tion, staffing and programming necessary is unlikely to be effectively provided directly by secondary schools.

The necessary conversation needs to explore in concrete terms the proper roles of both schools and communities in supporting these young people. And this would need to be a serious discussion, perhaps eliciting our collective limitations, as much as our aspirations, with respect to providing effective support to those many, many young people who deserve the opportunity to succeed. However daunting a task it might be, there is reason to engage the difficult questions.

As Levin noted

All significant change looks impossible at the outset; the status quo looms large and the barriers look – and are – formidable. But changes do happen. If we did not believe this were possible, we would have to dismiss the idea of improvement in education. (1995:222).

Indeed, change is possible against long odds. The Pathways to Education Program is itself evidence of this proposition. More important, the improvement in learning evidenced by the young people of Regent Park – those who both individually and collectively were the “poster-children” of risk, in a community whose despair far exceeded its hope – the improvement in their educational outcomes (over ten years and now in other communities as well) has been a testament to their resilience and the community's resolve not to resign itself to the formidable barriers which would otherwise consign so



many young people to the status quo of limited life chances and a future of exclusion from the mainstream of Canadian life.

Finally, despite the importance of partnerships with local schools and school boards, Pathways has shown that important changes in the educational outcomes of these youth can be effected in a variety of circumstances. As a respected former deputy minister of education observed some years ago

It is ... important to avoid the tendency to insist that someone else has to change first - a stance that often feels satisfying but is highly unlikely to be effective... If one believes that vulnerability is largely influenced by factors outside the classroom then it will be important to take steps to broaden people's view of what is possible and desirable. (Levin 2004a:31)

Beginning a decade ago in Regent Park, and now in eleven other communities, Pathways implicitly joined this challenge and was consciously designed not to be a function of other changes. The program is predicated on the view that the supports required can in no way be dependent on changes in the schools since we have had little (though some would say important) influence on individual schools, on school board or provincial policies and practices; and Pathways results appear in varied communities and more recently in several provinces. Just as Pathways intent has not been to change schools, so its design and delivery does not assume more than the necessary good

will to see all of our young people succeed. To do so, however, requires considering a more comprehensive approach which is neither complacent about the existing system of schooling (and its differential results) nor devolves total responsibility to the community whose challenges must be addressed since neither can be successful in the absence of the other. Bowles and Brand (2009) note that the task is to

promote a vision for a comprehensive learning system that draws upon all the resources available throughout the community... They [expanded learning opportunities] improve academic performance, college and career preparation, social and emotional development, and health and wellness for youth...[and] should be viewed as a mainstream solution to help leverage scarce resources to ensure youth are well-prepared for post-secondary education, careers, and civic engagement. (2009:145, 129)<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, Pathways to Education is not yet integral to such a mainstream approach. While many observers, practitioners, policy makers, both within and outside the school system, understand the potential of such a comprehensive approach, there is much work yet to be done to realize such a vision. However, the first decade of Pathways' development, coupled with changes in both secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, suggests that a more effective, efficient and creative approach is possible which can

result in greater attainments for many more young people, youth whose potential has not been realized through the promises of the past.

While the above outlines some of the principal areas of innovation within the Program, it may be equally important to consider the ways in which Pathways might help us understand the broader landscape of social innovation which has become increasingly important in addressing complex social challenges.

### **Lessons Related to Social Innovation**

The study of social innovation is an important emerging field with many new and interesting approaches, as well as theory. While we are far from experts in the field, our understandings come directly from the work on the ground that both pre-dated and now extends beyond Pathways as a specific innovation to address an identified challenge. It is from this background and experience that we offer some lessons with practical implications for other practitioners, as well as for those studying social innovation as a field. For our purposes we use the definition used by Social Innovation Generation Canada

"New ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs. Poverty, homelessness, violence are all examples of social problems that still need dedicated solution-seeking space. Social innovation addresses these challenges by applying new learning and strategies to solve these prob-



lems. For social innovations to be successful and have durability, the innovation should have a measurable impact on the broader social, political and economic context that created the problem in the first place”. (Social Innovation Generation Canada: 1)

When we founded the Pathways to Education Program we didn’t think of ourselves as social entrepreneurs. But, like other social entrepreneurs, we could not accept the status quo. While the dropout rate among Regent Park youth was long thought to be an intractable problem, we needed – and the community desperately needed – to find a solution. We not only had to find answers to confounding questions, we also had to fundraise for the capital to develop the innovation and sustain it. We had no idea what the outcome would be, but our process was clear: action research, built on a foundation of community development, while looking through a “systems” lens. We learned the importance of tenacity, the ability to live with potential failure, and the power of passion for social justice, and of leveraging partnerships with the private sector.

Leadbeater noted the characteristics of innovators in education as follows:

The pioneers who have created these projects are blenders: they mix principle with pragmatism, the old and the new, the cosmopolitan with the community. They are often patient and persistent problem-solvers but

deeply frustrated with how long it takes to change embedded systems. They have to be ambitious and confident to overcome sceptics and doubters, yet also humble enough to borrow and listen when it makes sense. Above all they need endurance and a sense of mission, to survive a highly protracted process in which there are as many lows as highs. They believe in education but do not see themselves as educationalists. They are creative deviants. (2012:123)

What makes Pathways a social innovation worth talking about? The evidence for concluding that Pathways is, in fact, a social innovation comes from several perspectives. First, it approached a seemingly intractable problem – high dropout rates among youth from economically disadvantaged communities – from a perspective which was, ten years ago, unique. For example, today there is an increased understanding in the literature, and increasingly among policy makers as well, that youth from these communities need a program of comprehensive supports to be effective. A decade ago, neither the government of the day nor the school board appeared to either acknowledge the extent of this challenge or how they might address it. As the local school superintendent observed when asked about supporting Pathways: “what have we got to lose?”

Second, the approach adopted was clearly new and broader in the supports provided compared to then available mod-

els (e.g. Change Your Future which targeted the few potential “stars”) or, alternatively, school based and even some community-based programs which focused on a single support (e.g. tutoring or one-to-one mentoring) for a small number of struggling youth. . The capacity to deliver comprehensive supports to all youth in a community and for the full duration of high school was and remains a unique approach and one which, while often discussed, has seldom been attempted.

Third, the focus on continual program improvement based on clear – and simple – metrics has proven a key feature for ensuring that the program remains vibrant and that staff learn and adapt to the articulated needs of the young people. This commitment to evidence-based program improvement, to produce and use such data is, sadly, lacking in many other initiatives.

Fourth, the ability to sustain the program financially, and replicate it in now eleven other communities, is a function of both the demonstrable impact of the intervention and the approach taken to funding. The social return on the investment has been documented on two occasions by the Boston Consulting Group. In 2007, and 2011 the Boston Consulting Group released a comprehensive report analyzing the costs and benefits of Pathways to society. The Report’s conclusions are impressive: the direct societal “return on investment” (SROI) for each dollar invested in Pathways was calculated at \$24 in current dollars; and over the lifetime of a Pathways graduate, the



cumulative incremental benefit to society is \$600,000.

Finally, Pathways design and development was, first and foremost, a values-driven experience; values which informed basic principles and to which we now turn. Not all innovations are values-driven, though certainly some are. Some innovations might seek to reduce costs or improve an existing service. Yet others might strive to produce revenue with which to fund other ideas. While Pathways is by no means unique in being born from an ethical commitment, the particular values informing Pathways may be a unique combination or, alternatively, may resonate with practitioners in other human services.

### **Commitment to Social Justice**

A first value that underpins Pathways is the commitment to social justice. This is embedded in the mission, vision and values of the Regent Park Community Health Centre (RPCHC). Pathways is about levelling the playing field. We held firmly to the belief that low income students can do just as well as youth from more privileged communities if they are given the right supports. It was our desire to break the cycle of poverty that drove the Health Centre to develop the audacious vision of Community Succession. This passion for social justice was the driving force that propelled us forward and sustained us as we faced obstacle after obstacle. It fuelled our tenacity and perseverance to break the cycle of poverty. Tenacity and persever-

ance are prerequisites for social innovation. As Leadbeater notes

Radical innovation starts in the most unlikely places. It also comes from people who may seem slightly crazed, especially to those who are schooled in traditional and conservative ways of doing things. Radical innovators have to put up with being thought slightly mad by people who claim to know better. (2012:123)

### **Clarity of Vision, and Purpose**

We wanted to break the cycle of poverty and despair and that became crystallized in our vision of Community Succession. The vision stated what the community, through the Health Centre, wanted to bring about for their future.

*“The children of the community will become the future doctors, nurses, social workers, community workers and administrators of the Health Centre.”*

How to turn this vision into practical action came through a purposeful action research process which led to the development of Pathways to Education. We heard over and over from parents and youth that the key to unleashing the vision was education. The Health Centre embraced this because education is one of the most powerful social determinants of health. We had no idea how a Health Centre could deal with education; however, the clarity of our vision led us to education as the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and

transforming the health of the community. The action research process also led us to become clearly focused on the transition points from elementary to secondary school and from secondary to post-secondary, with the programming emphasis therefore on the high school years. This focus in turn led to the clear purpose of providing specific and identifiable supports which were based not only on the literature of best practices in the field, but, more important, on the knowledge and wisdom of the community, both parents and youth, rather than “educators”. As Leadbeater concluded, “[t]he search for innovation should not be confined to mainstream education systems. The most radical innovations may come from the most unlikely and marginal places” (2012:123).

### **Commitment to Community Development**

Another key value was our commitment to community development. In order to build community capacity one needs to use the tool of community development. Community Development is different things to different people. To some it's a project, to others it's a process and to many it's a philosophy. As a philosophy it is grounded in deep respect for people, power sharing and a commitment to a more equitable sharing of life's resources, (Labonte 1992). Australian women's leader Lily Walker said “If you come here to help me then you are wasting your time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound



up in mine, then let us begin.” In order to practice community development the practitioner must hold the belief that the community knows both its problems and the solutions to those problems. What low income communities lack are the means to organize, amass resources and implement their solutions. The role of community development is to organize the capacity of residents, and to help obtain the resources, both financial and human, required to implement a community driven solution.

The Health Centre had done years of community development with the people of Regent Park. There was a high degree of ownership of the Health Centre by the community and there was a high degree of trust. This is the result of being an organization which responded to the community’s needs by building on the community’s assets and building community capacity. This was the foundation upon which we created Pathways to Education. Consulting with the community about ways we could achieve the vision was a natural step in the Health Centre’s relationship with the community.

In the case of Pathways the idea development process to create a proposal was a bottom up process driven by the community, facilitated by the Health Centre. The vision was shared with the community via focus groups, and we engaged in a collaborative consultation process with community members and other community-based agencies to generate ideas which could be translated into interventions that

would help realize the vision. We heard over and over that education and employment were keys to achieving the vision; with a focus on education as the determining factor in achieving better employment. Once the consultation process was completed we developed a proposal with seven different ideas for activities that we believed would help us realize the vision. It’s important to note that none of these program ideas were the Pathways to Education Program. The bottom up process of community engagement helped the community members own this vision and drive us forward. We were now accountable to the community and they were part of the development and ownership of the vision. Momentum was created and we had a “vision” and a “proposal” to bring the vision to life.<sup>18</sup>

### Long Term Commitment

As a society, we need a “reality check”. There are many who want to believe that there is a “quick fix”; an easier and cheaper way to be successful. There isn’t. Reducing the dropout rate, reducing crime, increasing life chances, improving the health of the population; these things are possible – but not tomorrow, and certainly not quickly for those who have been on the outside for so long. Pathways and fundamental change in Regent Park has taken years. It took years to create the conditions and dispositions that ask “why bother?” Why would we presume they can be changed overnight?<sup>19</sup>

The challenges posed by holding to a long-term commitment are important. First, a longer time horizon is generally antithetical to governments and other funders. Indeed, this was an important rationale for the initial metrics Pathways developed and continues to rely on. Second, a longer-term commitment requires that staff (and volunteers) similarly understand that results will come in many forms, but that they will, indeed, be evident given sufficient time. Third, such a commitment needs to be communicated to community. Parents (and other residents) may be similarly impatient to see their children engaged. Finally, while funding long-term commitments has always been precarious, it is even more important in such contexts to carefully measure the expectations for program growth against the need for as much stability as can be obtained. This is no easy task. Until at least a portion of funding (likely from government) can be relied upon (by being a specific and ongoing commitment similar to how funding flows to school boards themselves), innovations, no matter how sustainable their results have proven to be, will continue to be financially insecure, despite our best knowledge that time is crucial to success.

### Measurement of Outcomes and Accountability

There is truth to the adage “what gets measured gets done”. The way we have typically done things isn’t working: we have not broken the cycle of poverty with large scale impact, nor have we



changed the life chances of young people in the most disadvantaged communities. Many programs in low income communities do not have outcome measures. Most educational innovations do not produce the data needed to evaluate their effectiveness. This means there is no way of knowing if they are making a difference and/or meeting their desired outcomes. It is vitally important that one knows what you are trying to achieve and that measures are put in place to know whether or not you are on track to meet the desired outcomes. Social entrepreneurs do not accept the status quo and want to know that the innovation is making a difference. This is the point of their work. Their efforts to find solutions to intractable problems demand that they measure at least some results; that they actually attempt to show impact. We need, and the students need: high expectations, accountability and discipline to be successful. Without measuring impact the program is unlikely to be sustainable, either financially or programmatically. Most important, for Pathways to Education, the measurement of effectiveness has helped secure funding from government, corporate and foundation sectors because they can easily see the returns their donations generate to society. And, equally important, the data allows for the detailed analyses that result in evidence-based program improvement. In commenting on “services and methods” in educational innovation, Leadbeater concludes that innovation counts for little unless it produces some-

thing tangible that people can use, a product or methods that make them more productive or which help solve a problem. Our innovators have all created reliable, repeatable methods, processes, services or tools which people can use to learn more effectively. ...The kernel of these projects is a simple innovation that successfully meets a clear need. That is the basis of their credibility...

Innovators in education, if they become successful, quickly find that they are confronted with opposition from entrenched professional ideologies about education. They have to be skilled at picking their fights, building up a coalition of support for their approaches, while also winning converts away from more traditional methods. That is why these innovators are careful to show that they improve students' chances of doing well in traditional terms: completing their grades, getting through exams, following the curriculum and making it to college. They deploy novel methods to achieve these ends and they aim to provide a more enriching and imaginative education. Yet they guard their backs and maintain their legitimacy by doing a good job in traditional terms... (2012:131, 132).

### Action Research

According to Stringer (2007) a basic premise of action research is that it starts with a genuine interest in the problems of a community. The purpose of the process is to help people broaden their understanding of

their circumstances so they can begin to resolve the problems they face. He further claims that action research is always carried out through a set of explicit social values. It is seen as a process of inquiry grounded in the values of democracy, equity, liberation and it is life enhancing. In developing Pathways, using action research was not merely a choice among techniques. It was a value based on the centrality of learning from the community and from the project's own development. Several principles and values have guided the application of an action research approach in the ongoing development of the Program; specifically, there is

- A problem which is real, grounded, lived; an existing challenge around which people have experience. Its motivation is not theoretical.
- A commitment to recover, understand, value and respect the specific experiences of the community in order to determine and continually improve the intervention and its elements.
- A felt need for an alternative to the existing system which requires a serious intervention; and a belief that one is possible.
- A basis in evidence – from other practitioners (e.g. literature on related programs) and from the community (e.g. youth, parents, local practitioners) – for the action/intervention that is developed.
- A commitment to “ob-



serve” (in many forms); i.e. to collect data to see if the intervention matters and how, why, and for whom it matters.

- A commitment to reflect on that evidence in order to continue to plan and act; i.e. to improve the program/intervention.

Action research is an iterative process of gathering data by listening to people and their experiences and making adjustments based on the feedback you are hearing. In order to innovate and create a “sticky” solution requires creating a community-driven vision. This is followed by engagement with the community in that shared vision in a purposeful process that will uncover the specific problems and challenges, along with engaging the community in finding solutions. This process of problem solving continues until the desired outcomes are achieved. The practitioner must be agnostic about the issue so that a form of disciplined listening can occur. After we listened to parents and to the young people themselves we learned that the barriers to success weren’t things that could be dealt with by the schools alone. The Pathways Program was designed to overcome these community-based risk factors, the most serious of which are poverty, lack of academic and social support, and turning a culture of failure into one of actual achievement. Shifting the lens from a singular focus on the school environment, to a broader focus on the community as a whole, was a driving force behind the design of the

Pathways program. Research shows that the location of the intervention in the community is critical since 50 to 60 % of the variance in educational outcomes is caused by community based risk factors, whereas a 3-6% variance in outcomes is achieved by dealing with school based risk factors through school reform. <sup>20</sup>

### **Risk and Obtaining the Social Venture Capital to Innovate**

Public dollars are rarely available for innovation because of the level of risk. One must test hypothesis after hypothesis when trying to find a solution to an intractable problem and the risk of failure is high. There are several prerequisites to social innovation. The risks involved in innovation mean private dollars and visionary foundations must help to fund these more risky social ventures. With respect to funding educational innovations, Leadbeater has noted:

Funding for radical educational innovation rarely comes from education ministries. There will be more innovation if more resources can be made available for early stage investment and if that funding can be invested wisely in the most promising projects. (2012:123) <sup>21</sup>

The social entrepreneur must “click” with the foundation leaders through an alignment of values and have a constitution able to withstand failure. Handling the risk of failure was extremely difficult. We neither wanted to let down the youth who were losing their life chances by dropping out of high

school, nor did we want to make a mistake with charitable dollars. A proposal comprised of program ideas to achieve the vision was created and after two years of numerous meetings, negotiations and several iterations to clarify ideas, we were granted funds for innovation. The negotiations and due diligence process were carried out with two separate and independent foundations. The Health Centre had a reputation for delivering on its commitments which gave us credibility. This credibility, along with our commitment to break the cycle of poverty and our belief in our vision as a way to accomplish this, aligned with the goals of the two foundations. This convergence allowed a relationship to develop and we were fortunate enough to be able to obtain funding, with both foundations willing to fund the “vision” and not just a “program”.

As well, from the outset, it was understood that governments neither would nor could support the initiative. Two reasons seem obvious: the governments’ levers for change are in the institutions they fund, namely schools, colleges and universities, so it’s logical that the decision of governments is to support increased educational attainment through the schools, rather than through community-based initiatives. Since governments are generally reluctant to fund a “vision” – particularly one from a community – without proven results, it is only after producing demonstrable impact that governments have been much more approachable and are now funding partners federally and in some



provinces.<sup>22</sup>

However, another important lesson from how funding was sustained is that a well-run community organization is capable of pooling the necessary resources which allows many types of interested funders (corporations, foundations, individuals) to contribute and, unlike many other “sponsored” initiatives (e.g. Gates Foundation sponsored school reform), Pathways was able to ensure the program’s independence from direction by any particular funder. Few potential funders sought to influence the Program’s design or delivery in the early years; and even fewer wanted to once the success of the model had been established.

### **Build Partnerships to Create a Network of Resources and Support**

Ashokas’ Citizen Based Initiative, states “Strategic partnerships with corporations, governments and organizations translate into new types of resources and credibility for a citizen sector organization. Leveraging networks, connections, and the influential power of a partner can propel a social mission forward and entrench values into another organizational structure—not to mention create value for both constituents”<sup>23</sup>

Partnerships are about leverage and leverage is about increasing one’s power to act. Leverage as a strategic advantage means having the power and resources to act effectively. That’s how a relatively small group can sometimes exert tremendous

pressure. We sometimes say that a particular group “punches above its weight”. This is the power of leverage.

In their book *Sources for Good* which describes characteristics of “high impact” not for profit organizations, Crutchfield and McLeod Grant (2007) outline the importance of leveraging resources.

“Tapping into the power of self-interest and the laws of economics is far more effective than appealing to pure altruism. No longer content to rely on traditional notions of charity or to see the private sector as the enemy, great nonprofits find ways to work with markets and help business “do well while doing good.” They influence business practices, build corporate partnerships, and develop earned-income ventures—all ways of leveraging market forces to achieve social change on a grander scale.” [2007: 21]

Lydia Gilbert, an Ashoka Changemaker writes, “I am most awed by commitments that leverage the power of partnership. While one person may have a good idea, another may have the resources to move that idea forward. Sometimes you need to address your weaknesses by harnessing others’ strengths. While it can take stamina and persistence to bring together different stakeholders, these partnerships often forge real-life solutions”<sup>24</sup>.

Pathways to Education started with community partners; once the community had clearly informed the plan we proceeded

to find partners who would help us achieve our goal. Corporations were approached to become partners not only for multi-year financial commitments but also, over time, for volunteer tutors and mentors, internships, and employment for the students. This requires finding corporations with similar goals and networking to get in the door and then, once in the door, to secure a long-term partnership. A win/win approach is needed to be successful and Corporations as partners offer not only financial resources, but human resources and expertise that they are willing to share. Bridges need to be built between the sectors.

### **Systems Thinking**

In order to make large system change it is vital to understand systems theory. The basic premise of systems theory is that everything is related to everything else. A system is a set of elements, connected together, which form a whole, thus showing properties which are of the whole rather than of its component parts (Checkland 1981). We cannot understand a wider system by looking in detail at its parts because some properties only emerge when they are combined together. We often say the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, in terms of the supports provided, (academic, social, financial and advocacy), their effect cannot be understood by looking at them separately: it is all of the supports taken together as a whole that make the difference. The question “which support makes the biggest differ-



ence?” fails to recognize synergy, the fact that the effect on students’ experiences are from the properties of the whole (i.e. the supports taken together), rather than the individual supports. Another example of the effects of the “whole” is seen in the change in the culture of the community. Since the Program is for all high school youth in a particular community the stigma of being in a special program apart from their peers is eliminated. All of the students’ peers are working hard after school in tutoring and they are all eligible for special mentoring opportunities organized by the Program. Since over 90% of the high school students in the community participate, they change the community’s culture from the previous assumed failure to one of actual success, thereby demonstrating that they are not the stereotypes they are typically portrayed as in the media.

According to Senge (1990), a system’s essence is seeing inter-relationships rather than linear cause-and-effect chains, and in seeing processes of change rather than snapshots. Accordingly, systems thinking is a way of interpreting phenomena as a series of interconnected and inter-related wholes. Systems are dynamic, they change and self-correct based on feedback. Pathways to Education, particularly through the role of Student Parent Support Worker, provides the structure through which the relationships among different systems can be mediated. For example, Pathways does not attempt to directly change the parents, or the schools or the

teachers, or the justice system or police. The role of Pathways is to support students, and help facilitate positive relationships between the student and teachers or parents or police. For example, in terms of the transition to post-secondary we focused on the relationship between the student and the post-secondary institutions. Successfully negotiating the transition from high school to post-secondary is as important as ensuring a successful transition from elementary to high school. Ensuring successful transitions, requires that staff have knowledge of both the youth and the institutions.<sup>25</sup>

As a system, provincially-funded secondary schools have been challenged to work with community-based partners such as Pathways who are most likely to provide the direct support struggling youth require. Governments in Ottawa and three provinces have acknowledged, through the multi-year commitment to funding Pathways’ replication in several other communities, that school-based efforts must be complemented by community based efforts which are able to establish the necessary relationships to keep low-income youth engaged and successful.

There are numerous examples of ways in which the Pathways has been able to work with formal systems, including (but not limited to) secondary schools and the school authorities; here a but a few.

As a matter of practice, some school principals have included Pathways staff routinely in case conferences of students with particular challenges. They

have asked the Pathways staff to provide the support needed particularly when specific school board staff may not be available, but increasingly from the recognition that Pathways staff may, in fact, have the strongest relationship with the student.

Pathways’ students in Regent Park have been part of “dual credit” offerings through courses delivered (as part of Pathways’ “specialty mentoring”) by the University of Toronto, Ryerson University and George Brown College. And George Brown has incorporated elements of Pathways’ approach to providing comprehensive supports to other of their “first generation” students.

Similarly with respect to relationships with formal systems, Pathways in Regent Park had, for several years, been part of orientations for police officers new to the local police division; to assist them in understanding the initiatives in the community, including the importance of, for example, young people travelling in groups to and from evening activities. Pathways (and RPCHC) staff were invited to provide input to the police in a variety of formal and informal ways, as well as in other forums (e.g. focus groups organized by the Attorney General on community policing, presentation to the Provincial Commission on Roots of Youth Violence), each of which provides the opportunity to influence how young people in such communities are viewed and are treated in the course of day-to-day relations.

If we look at the processes of change, rather than



a snapshot as Senge instructs, the success of the Program has likely been an important factor in some important shifts in the policies and practices of several institutions. Again, while these changes cannot be directly attributed to Pathways, it is likely that Pathways' approach and results have played a role. These changes in orientation and focus include school boards which, following Ontario Ministry of Education policies, have allocated staff to specifically focus on "student success", as well as providing additional guidance and social work/psychological supports. And, through an explicit focus of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, a program of support to other "first generation" post-secondary students has begun to take shape in many individual institutions across Ontario, both colleges and universities. As well, through the Ontario Student Assistance Program, the government has provided considerable – and direct – financial support for low income students to pursue post-secondary education, thereby removing an important practical obstacle to access. These are not small changes and, regardless of Pathways' influence, reflect an increasing focus on ensuring that success follows from access through the provision of concrete supports aimed at addressing shared goals and objectives.

In terms of the community as a system, made up of a multitude of sub-systems, we have seen important change. One would expect the community culture to shift over time because Pathways was designed for all

high school students living in the community and has over 90% of all eligible high school students in its Program. It is, of course, difficult to know the long term impact of the Program on the community. The program could be effective for large numbers of individual young people, but possibly not have profound long term impact on the community in terms of measurable effects on, for example, health outcomes or income distribution. We, like others, don't actually know how to measure each of many important longer term impacts (e.g. quality of life) or how to attribute longer term changes to one among several initiatives. It is extremely difficult to disentangle the effects of any one intervention from many other events in complex and changing communities. However, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest some more far reaching impact of Pathways. For example, there is evidence that the culture of the community is changing from one of failure to success as a dominant expectation; specifically both parents and program staff report that Pathways youth now discuss their plans for post-secondary education rather than if they intend to graduate at all. As well, Pathways has been informally credited (by some facilitators of discussions around the "revitalization" of the physical housing development) with being the most positive feature of the community identified by young people in numerous focus groups. These may be small, but important, examples.

Pathways results are evidence that by focusing on im-

proving the connections between the systems results in improved outcomes for students, families and communities. Systems are dynamic and the institutions that sustain them are more likely to change and self-correct based on feedback; therefore, systems change when the stakeholders of various institutions witness changes in outcomes and results.

### **Some Suggestions from Pathways to Education's First Decade**

To those readers working in communities and on the serious challenges that are posed by the most intractable of problems, it is important that you don't lose heart. Perseverance takes both hard work and much support. Agencies in the community supporting such work must provide that support, along with the guidance of important values – values that must be lived each day if they are to sustain those working on the ground. And practitioners need to ensure that there is a concrete commitment to evidence-based program improvement, rather than resting on the laurels of the past, however recent.

Funders need to walk the talk. Frequently there is lip-service paid to the need for longer time horizons, for incubating innovative, if not audacious, ideas and approaches, for taking risks. Funders need to concretely support, not merely talk about, each of these truths – and they are truths learned through much hard work. As Leadbeater concluded: "Independent finance was as important for these new ventures as independent ideas and insights



from outside education”.  
(2012:122).

Governments, as funders, but also as responsible for important policies, need to also heed these lessons. While we believe private, rather than public, dollars are key to innovation, once established, the success and durability of demonstrable and replicable results should be “rewarded” through a funding commitment that is as stable for community-based approaches as for the traditional institutional approaches. While the latter (institutions) will undoubtedly receive the lion’s share of resources, proven models (and the communities they serve) need to know that ongoing funding – even if only for a portion of costs – is just as important as the schools, colleges, hospitals, etc. that share the goals, but not the risks, of these innovations.

Finally, after more than ten years of the Program’s implementation in Regent Park and the initial replication in other communities, it may be important to reiterate the key phenomenon identified by Rendon (1994, 2002) and Barnett (2010); namely, the importance of “validation”, particularly to first generation post-secondary students. Pathways deliberately and consciously provides “the supportive, personal, human connections that send the message ‘you belong here’” (Gandara and Bial 2001:3). In addition to all else that the Program has provided, each and every effort to raise expectations and provide the support for young people to meet those expectations begins with those “validations” and the mes-

sage they send.

While it may be possible, in some idealized world, for mass institutions to provide those relationships and convey those messages, the evidence from Pathway’s experience strongly suggests that a comprehensive community-based approach is needed and is the most likely to be effective in complementing reforms in the institutions and systems which most affect the life chances of young people and their communities.

In addressing the role of new initiatives in education, Charles Leadbeater concludes his recent book on educational innovation by noting

Innovators are finding a variety of ways to work with formal education systems. It is not easy but nor is it impossible. A larger, more fertile common ground needs to be created lying between government systems and civil society innovators.

Indeed system thinkers are moving in this direction, recognizing that innovation is often as much about creating alliances and coalitions for change, as it is about reengineering. The best way to improve a system, in the long run, is to see it as a movement in the making, a coalition animated by a common cause... Success in the future will depend on government systems and social movements being brought together. Creating that common ground will be central to successful innovation. (2012:141-142)  
26

### Two Outstanding Questions

While the first decade of Pathways to Education has been one of enormous success, the next several years will undoubtedly raise numerous questions, two of which we feel are extremely important at this juncture.

First and foremost is the challenge of learning from the replication of the Program in so many communities across Canada. We have deliberately not delved into the complexities of Pathways’ replication as this could easily consume many more pages and is, rightfully, its own discussion. However, as a key feature of the Program’s development was the adoption of an action research approach, it is crucial to ask the obvious question: what have we learned from Pathways’ entry into the different communities?

And there are many important differences to begin with; in particular, the cultural differences of implementation in Quebec and in a largely First Nations community in Winnipeg. But there are also differences from the original Regent Park site with its cultural composition, compared to other more homogeneous communities (e.g. Halifax and Kingston). Do such differences matter to the basic model? To the forms of delivering the different supports? To the ability or necessity of innovating in the ways that different sites have chosen to deliver the supports or relate to specific challenges in their communities?

The growth of the Program over the past number of years has already produced grad-



uates (especially from the “second generation” sites). And, with additional sites in the planning stage, surely it is time to ask – and answer – the question of what has been learned.

The second key challenge going forward is to account for the changes in the different “environments” in which Pathways has been implemented. Specifically, the effects of the 2008 recession, including its ongoing effects on the labour market for young people in particular, pose important challenges to Program staff. For example, has the weak labour market for those attending post-secondary education changed the programs Pathways youth apply to? Has it affected how they decide on post-secondary education, or even if they choose to apply? Do they continue to feel that investing in post-secondary education is a good choice and, if not, has the weak labour market negatively affected their motivation in high school?

An additional aspect of the recession, particularly evident in some low income communities, has been a recurrence of illegal activity including some violent activity not unlike what we faced in Regent Park more than a decade ago when developing Pathways. Has this violence, including in some Pathways communities, affected the ability of the Program to develop the supports needed by both the young people and the community as a whole? Has it had effects which need to be considered in adapting the supports or their delivery to address identifiable needs? Has it affected staff and volunteers in

ways that need to be addressed? And, if so, have effective supports for staff, volunteers, parents, and youth themselves been identified and implemented? What do we know now that can help to support communities through such difficult times and experiences?

There are, of course, many other questions which might arise about sustaining Pathways both programmatically and financially, just as there are with many other innovative experiments. At this juncture, we trust that those closest to the Program’s development are best able to address these challenges.

We hope that our exposition of Pathways to Education in the three parts of this article have been able to both illuminate and challenge practitioners to work toward yet further innovation, efforts that need to be even more successful in meeting the profound needs of those we are charged to serve. The privilege of working on Pathways, its challenges as much as its joys, cannot be understated. We trust that will continue to be the case for the many practitioners whose work is so very important in creating a better world for our young people.

*The authors wish to again thank the Counselling Foundation for their generous support of Pathways and to the Journal for its interest in the Program and in publishing our lengthy article. And we celebrate both the Foundation’s and the Journal’s commitment to the field and to supporting and disseminating*

*innovative and challenging practices.*

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#### Footnotes

1 See ICF International (2008) cited above. In addition, with a focus on the problem of dropout rates, Jerald (2007) concluded on the lack of effectiveness of programs with occasional counseling, tutoring, self-esteem or leadership activities.

2 It is possible that the approach being suggested by Schorr and Marchand reflect important differences in perspective; in particular, that it may reflect a general pathologizing of these young people, or, perhaps, is a reflection of the comparative lack of a social safety net in the U.S. especially a health system, including mental health, and supports which are generally more available in Canada.

3 There are many, many positive examples of individual youth who have spoken quite poignantly about this process and the respect they feel from Pathways staff in working out these challenges, some of which have been captured on a video made by Sheena Robertson in 2006 with students from Regent Park.

4 One example of the importance of not "pathologizing" these youth can be understood in the proposition that "self-esteem follows achievement". Unlike many

practitioners working in communities and schools with such young people who believe that increasing self-esteem is a necessary pre-condition for increased achievement, Pathways assumes that, for all but a very few, increased achievement will necessarily bring increased self-esteem. This is verifiable in the simplest sense merely by observation and discussion, over time, with Pathways participants

5 This use of being "present" is related, but not subsumed in, Scharmer's view of "presencing" (Scharmer 2000) which has an organizational learning objective and is presented as a collective, rather than individual, capacity.

6 Charles Leadbeater presentation "Harnessing collaborative, cross-sector innovation for public good"; MaRS Global Leadership Series; September 19, 2011. It should be noted that there are many initiatives, in Toronto and elsewhere, where small numbers of struggling adolescent students are mentored by staff. Among the major differences between these programs and Pathways, however, are the small number of students involved in these initiatives, the lack of an approach which is inclusive of the whole community (and all its young people), a lack of documented outcomes, and the absence of a comprehensive range of supports. This is not to suggest, however, that such initiatives are of no value. Quite the contrary: their anecdotal success suggests the primacy Leadbeater and others (including Pathways) attach to relationships as a factor in learning,



whether formal or informal, 7 Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) define action research as “A form of collective, self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out”; and Grundy and Kemmis (1981) note that “The project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a strategic action susceptible to improvement”. These are but two examples of how practitioners of action research have characterized the purposeful nature of this approach; that is, to address a matter of inequity and social justice as was clearly described by residents prior to the design and development of the Program

8 As suggested earlier, Pathways to Education, and the authors personally, are indebted to Dr. Robert Brown, Research Coordinator at the Toronto District School Board, for his abiding commitment to evidence-based practice leading to school success. Not only did he produce the original custom tabulation which provided the first community-based tracking of students, and which showed the baseline dropout rate for Regent Park, Dr. Brown has consistently provided Pathways with additional tabulations, analyses and insights into the relationships between community factors and school performance. While the ability to continue to provide data on program results has benefitted from

many at the TDSB, the consistent data analyses which have informed Pathways over the past decade is a direct result of his support. On the specific item of attendance, credit accumulation and graduation data, see his numerous reports on secondary school indicators (e.g. Brown, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2008).

9 The longstanding policy of Pathways with respect to its scholarships has been that students could defer these for up to two years since some may not know what they want to pursue, some may need additional courses (or improved grades), while yet others may follow the same path as some middle class graduates who want to take some time off between high school and post-secondary studies.

10 Topics of interest included a better understanding of the high school curriculum, differences among the “streams”, access to special education, school board policies and practices related to “safe schools”, local relations with police, etc.

11 While evidence-based approaches have long been adopted in health care, both education and social service providers have been reluctant to adopt this perspective. Indeed, many small agencies and initiatives lack the capacity to pursue a comprehensive research program or to integrate its findings in program improvement. This is an important area for funders of such initiatives and agencies to consider when making funding decisions.

12 Even where support such as tutoring is being contemplated or delivered in secondary schools, the organization of such support, including recruitment, screening, orientation, training and support of volunteers has been done by organizations outside the local school or school board. In addition, there is no evidence that tutoring, as only one support, can be effective. Rather, experience suggests that tutoring should be part of a more comprehensive program of support.

13 The considerable evidence for this conclusion includes not only Pathways’ research, but that of Ferguson et al (2005) and Bridgeland et al (2006) among others who have consistently noted the perceptions of the most at-risk students that they were essentially “uninvited” by the school staff. That many at-risk students experience a “negative school culture” (Ferguson’s term) which includes their experience of a profound “disrespect” may be unintended consequences of school organization (including size), policies and procedures; but it is clearly an effect, intended or not. It would be disingenuous to suggest that significant numbers of students don’t, in fact, feel this way; and they are the most vulnerable of students. Nor can we dismiss these perceptions by arguing that their experiences are simply their own fault. While additional training and professional development for teachers may help, the challenge at this juncture is to ensure that such experiences do not lead to further disengagement



(leading to dropping out). A specific staff role is clearly necessary to avert this effect and it is likely a role most effectively delivered by community-based staff who are otherwise connected to these young people.

14 For example, the “Building Bridges” initiative of the TDSB incorporated both in-school and community-based staff, but could not continue after its initial pilot. Nor have school-based staff with a similar role to SPSWs been provided as part of the “Bridges to Success” initiative at a particular Toronto high school. These are but two examples; and the TDSB itself has noted the difficulty of sustaining its own innovative programs in the absence of sustained funding. While the provincial government has mandated additional staff to work with struggling students, the allocation of additional teachers and social work staff suggest that the extent of need is unlikely to be met; a reality which confirms Rozanski’s conclusion.

15 There is no direct data available on alternatives which have been piloted in the TDSB and which involve similar supports. However, a limited understanding would suggest that the staffing costs would be higher, perhaps considerably, while effectiveness might be somewhat lower. For example, while the evaluation of the “Building Bridges” initiative (O’Reilly, 2005) did not include cost data, the staffing information suggests higher unit costs than Pathways and with neither of Pathways financial supports, nor, perhaps,

organized tutoring or mentoring activities. A comparative analysis of actual costs, benefits and results would certainly illuminate any further discussion, the absence of which makes meaningful comparison of related approaches extremely difficult.

16 The funding provided through the Gates initiative is considerable, estimated at \$5B, and clearly directed toward whole school reform activities, primarily through the creation of smaller schools which provide greater opportunities for student to individually identify with the school and for staff to develop the closer relationships necessary. Unfortunately, the results are far from convincing that this approach is either less expensive or more effective than more “typical” approaches. Gates himself has opined about the difficulty of having an impact and recently stated that “... the overall impact of the intervention, particularly the measure we care most about—whether you go to college—it didn’t move the needle much.” (Wall Street Journal, July 23,2011).

17 As Balfanz et al have concluded: “School districts should collaborate with community-based organizations and national service participants to provide students with the supports they need inside and outside of the classroom, especially during critical junctures along the educational pipeline like the transition between elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to postsecondary education and

training. Depending on the needs of students in a school and community, these interventions could include mentoring and tutoring, participating in after-school programs, twilight and Saturday schools; developing plans with parents to boost student attendance; targeted literacy and math curricula to help students performing below grade level; 9th grade academies, career academies, and interdisciplinary teaming of teachers to promote student engagement and teacher effectiveness; and the wide range of more intensive community-based interventions to address special needs” (2010:60)

18 With respect to innovators in education, Leadbeater has noted that “Our pioneers are cosmopolitan in outlook but rooted in the communities they are serving.” (2012:123)

19 The “why bother?” story is recounted in part I of this article.

20 Lytton and Pyryte (1998) and Klinger (2000) cited in Raptis and Fleming (2003)

21 Indeed, Leadbeater notes that “[s]ocial innovators complain that government systems are slow-moving, bureaucratic, and risk-averse.” (2012:139) and that “[e]ducation systems find it difficult to promote radical innovation, in part because that kind of innovation will often come from outside the mainstream.” (ibid.:150)

22 No direct government funding was received for the first three years of Pathways. Specifically,



the Government of Ontario provided one-time funding in 2004/05 to the Regent Park program, and granted multiyear funding for a portion of the Program's costs and to support initial replication beginning in 2007. The Federal government has provided a similar multiyear grant beginning in 2011; and the Manitoba government has provided partial support to the Winnipeg site.

23 Retrieved from <http://www.citizenbase.org/strategies/partner>.

24. Retrieved from <http://www.changemakers.com/blog/the-power-of-partnership>

25 As noted in the preceding section on relationships, these transitions may be an exemplar of what Ungar has noted as the developmental need of adolescents to negotiate several tensions which include, as a practical matter, relations with schools and other systems such as health, police, etc. Negotiating such transitions is but one example of Pathways' strategic view of the importance of "systems"; that is, the ability to provide a structure through which the function of mediating discrete systems can be effective. The effectiveness of this approach does not, however, detract from the need to support other changes within each of the systems (e.g. schools, police). This has been acknowledged through the Program's understanding that its success is not predicated on changes within, for example, secondary schools, though many others (e.g. Ferguson et al) have

long suggested such initiatives as Pathways need to be complemented by significant changes in the culture and content of secondary education

26 It should be noted that, while Pathways to Education is one of sixteen innovations in education around the world that Leadbeater singled out for discussion in his most recent book, there are numerous others cited from which North American educators and policy makers concerned with success for young people in the most challenging circumstances might learn.