

# Drop-out prevention program

*Jeanne Mance High School, Montreal*

Alternative au Décrochage, a recognised charitable organization, has been active in the Plateau Mont-Royal district of Montreal since January 1991. It provides services to try to prevent 16- to 18-year-olds from dropping out of school and dropping out socially.

It has done encouraging work in developing links between school, community, young people and families. The most interesting aspect centres around partnership and intervention outcomes. The program was originally conceived by the local community service centre (CLSC), the Centre-Sud/Plateau Mont-Royal Economic and Community Development Corporation (CDEC) and Jeanne Mance High School. It did not take long for business and other representatives of the community to join in.

The organization works inside the high school, with which it has an agreement on the use of rooms, materials and teaching resources. Thus it avoids paying overhead in exchange for offering a drop-out prevention program.

## Clientele

The clientele consists of 24 students between the ages of 16 and 18 identified as potential drop-outs. It is important to mention that the mother tongue of 40-70% of group is neither French or English and 60% of the youths come from single-parent families.

## Program aims

- To develop potential drop-outs' motivation to stay in school by promoting their self-esteem and weakening the belief that school equals failure.
- To encourage the resolution of personal, family and social problems that make young people more vulnerable to dropping out of school and dropping out socially.
- To inform the youths of all the options open to them.
- To enable them to acquire employability related skills by doing a training stint in a work setting.
- To develop the young people's self-reliance, initiative, social skills and sense of responsibility so they can take charge of their lives from the academic, work and personal standpoints.
- To draw up goals related to quality of life and to the values of respect and harmony.
- To make prevention of dropping out of school and dropping out socially a neighbourhood priority by developing ties and collaborative efforts between school, family, community and local business.

## Means to achieve goals

The organisation's intervention policy is based on a comprehensive approach to the young people, that is, they are followed in the social and personal spheres in addition to the academic domain. The youngsters are given support that is tailored to their needs. Since the ties between practitioners and the young people are the key to success, two teachers and a coordinator work full time with the group. The meaningful ties established during the year and the individual attention given to every student help raise the youths' self-esteem, thereby facilitating reaching the above-mentioned goals.

The organization provides a **teaching program** focused on compulsory basic subjects. The program fosters good performance and academic success because each of these subjects is taught for more hours than usual. The schedule helps the youths muster the confidence and motivation they need to continue their studies. The facet of the comprehensive approach concerned with improving quality of life is dealt with in workshops that discuss values such as openness, sharing, tolerance, managing aggressiveness, respect, etc.

Apart from the academic side, part of the program concerns the **job market**. Here the youngsters are given the opportunity to test the work world and meet its requirements. They are initiated in the intricacies of relations with employers and workmates. Some of them realize at this point that working as a dishwasher or salesperson is not the life-style they desire, and they come to understand the merits of more education.

The third part of the program consists of **supervision**, which is provided by the two teachers and the coordinator. The coordinator is in contact with the students every day since her office is right inside the classroom. The teachers and the coordinator-educator tailor their support for every student, and this entails the following action:

- Teamwork, which brings together those in charge of the program, the students and their parents, the purpose being to involve the latter in their children's progress and foster their success.
- Regular group and individual meetings to facilitate solving problems that heighten vulnerability to dropping out of school and dropping out socially.
- Monitoring late arrivals and absences: when a student misses class, his/her parents are informed immediately.
- Drawing up, following up and evaluating a personalized intervention plan aimed at weakening behaviour that hampers academic and personal success.

## Fund-raising activities

To provide some financial support for the organization's regular activities, the students and practitioners in the program organize a fund-raising activity, which consists of a plant sale. The students each acquire a number of plants that they take care of for several months, until the sale is held. Looking after the plants and then selling them helps the students achieve the goals of improving their self-esteem and taking responsibility. As they plan and organize the sale, the young people learn to work collectively and to organize what they have to do.

## **Most recent results**

The first four years of operations produced interesting findings. The team running the program took pride in announcing the results for the 1995-1996 school year. The final report cards in June 1996 showed the following:

73% of the students passed their three basic subjects.  
100% of the students are continuing their high school education!

The youths' progress in terms of self-reliance, respect and working well as a group was noticeable. It is of course difficult to present these findings quantitatively, but we observed improvement that was substantial in some cases. Moreover, despite these students' reputation for missing school, the group had less absences during the year than any other grade nine class.

## **Positive spinoffs**

### *The world of teaching*

One characteristic of Jeanne Mance High School's educational blueprint is to have the students succeed through motivating projects. Thanks to the Alternative au Décrochage program, the school has found a novel way of achieving this. The close supervision and tailored services help shrink the number of students who leave school during the year and also improve the general atmosphere. Students who were considered problem cases in the past have become assets to the school.

### *The parents*

For parents whose child has the characteristics of a drop-out, the program is a lifesaver. To some parents, the goals of self-reliance, taking responsibility and academic success seemed impossible to achieve at times. Parents' accounts confirmed the observation that the youngsters' behaviour changed for the better at school and at home simultaneously. The program demands that parents be involved because only teamwork can produce positive results in all areas (academic, personal, family and social).

### *The students*

The youths' success at school and on the job market raise their awareness. Thanks to their success, they gain confidence in their potential and continue their studies with the aim of working toward their diploma. Also the training stint in a work setting improves their employability should they choose to enter the job market.

### *Society*

The partnership has had an effect on the neighbourhood. For youngsters aged 15 to 18, dropping out of school means breaking with their environment as a whole. Surviving on the street is what they identify with all too often. The issue is important because dropping out reflects not only adjustment and identity problems, it also mirrors exclusion. It is the result of many sources of suffering that go

from setbacks to failures, from failures to marginalization, from marginalization to rejection and from rejection to exclusion. Dropping out of school is in fact a reflection of dropping out socially. By fighting the former, Alternative au Décrochage is fighting these youths' exclusion and their dropping out from the social standpoint.

### Students' comments

"If there had been programs like this before, I wouldn't have started the same grade three times."

"Well, it's amazing how much I've changed since the beginning of the year. I do my homework, I am quiet in class.... It's great, I'm passing all my subjects."

"I wasn't bothered by exams before because I didn't care about failing; now they make me nervous."

"Thanks for everything you did for us! Especially giving us strength and confidence in ourselves to pass our year!"

(Letter of thanks to those in charge of the program from the 1995-1996 group of students)

### Parents' comments

"Since my son joined the Alternative au Décrochage program, he has changed at home. The arguments are not as bad."

"My daughter's behaviour changed a while ago, at school and at home. She does better at school and relations are more pleasant at home."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I didn't know what to do about my son. It was impossible to talk to him. Now things are better at school and they're getting better and better at home."

### What happens next

Although the program's achievements are impressive, that does not mean those in charge of it are satisfied. These are some of the new projects:

- Follow-up of the students when in grade ten to ensure they consolidate what they learned.
- Lower the drop-out rate at another school, Pierre Dupuy High School, by offering an alternative to failing grade eight and nine students who need particular supervision.
- Referral and drop-out prevention resources for Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi (in the Plateau Mont-Royal/Centre Sud district of Montreal), which will provide a single-window employability service for young people aged 16-35.

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