

Pathways to Education Canada: Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance

February 19th, 2016

Overview

Pathways to Education is pleased to offer the following comments and recommendations to Standing Committee on Finance with regards to the 2016 Budget.

The partnership between Pathways to Education and the Government of Canada is built on aligned objectives, including working to reduce poverty in Canada, supporting youth from diverse backgrounds, transition to post-secondary education and employment, and providing tailored programs and support for Indigenous youth.

We encourage the Government to continue to ensure that at-risk youth receive the supports and services necessary to graduate high school and succeed in the work place. We believe that the implementation of comprehensive and equitable programs can lead to higher graduation rates for our youth, and a better Canada.

About Pathways

Pathways to Education is a national charitable organization that seeks to provide all youth, regardless of socio-economic background, with the support needed to complete school, break the cycle of poverty, and contribute back to their communities. More specifically, Pathways provides the leadership, expertise and resources needed to run effective, evidence based community programs that help youth from low-income communities graduate from high school and make the often difficult transition into post-secondary education or meaningful employment. Founded in 2001 in Toronto's Regent Park, Pathways to Education programs now operate in 17 communities in Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and British Columbia.

Our unique program of comprehensive wrap-around supports for high school students has an established track record of reducing high school drop-out rates and increasing post-secondary enrolment of students from low-income, vulnerable neighbourhoods. This community-based, volunteer-supported program provides academic, social, individual, and financial supports to disadvantaged youth and their families. The results of this program have been ground-breaking. Graduation rates in Pathways communities have increased by an average of 75% and of those graduates, 73% have gone on to post-secondary education or training.

The partnership between Pathways to Education and the Government of Canada has strengthened Canada's leadership in understanding the challenges of high drop-out rates in low-income communities, as well as in working to address and reverse the problem.

Achieving Common Priorities

The partnership between Pathways to Education and the Government of Canada is based on a strong alignment between the mission of Pathways and the strategic objectives of the government. Pathways to Education's work in Canada closely aligns with many of the objectives outlined in the Prime Minister's mandate letters to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour.

Youth Employment and Post-Secondary Transitions

Pathways welcomes the Government of Canada's stated goal to support youth employment as outlined in the 2015 mandate letter to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development, and Labour.

In the mandate letter, the Prime Minister requests that the Minister "increase the number of good quality, permanent jobs for younger workers" by "increasing our investment in our Youth Employment Strategy and improving the strategy's impact." Pathways welcomes this increased investment into youth employment. Programs like *Skills Link* are crucial for youth who face barriers when making the transition into the labour market.

At Pathways, we share the same goal of supporting youth employment by focusing on employability skills in high school to ensure success in the workforce. Our mentoring activities are available for all students with the goal of connecting Pathways students with potential post-secondary opportunities. Preparing resumes and practicing interviewing skills, completing college and university applications, and visits to potential employers and post-secondary institutions are typical career mentoring activities. In the past, we have partnered with organizations such as Mount Sinai Hospital and Heritage Toronto to provide internship opportunities for our Pathways students. Career mentoring gives youth a chance to explore future education and employment options while sharpening the skills needed to land these opportunities.

The government mandate to support post-secondary transitions is further outlined in Minister Mihychuk's mandate letter, which calls for making education more affordable for students from low and middle-income families. As stated in the mandate letter, this would include expanding the Canada Student Grant for low income students and increasing the income threshold criteria, as well as making changes to the Repayment Assistance plan to make sure no graduate with student loans will be required to make any repayment until they are earning at least \$25,000 per year.

Pathways supports this commitment to making post-secondary education more affordable and accessible for low income students. In concert with the government, Pathways works towards achieving this goal by providing financial support to students in the Pathways program. These financial supports range from scholarships to free transit and lunch vouchers.

Furthermore, part of our commitment to making post-secondary education more accessible for all is working with parents and students to make sure that they are aware of all post-secondary funding programs that are made available to them by provincial and federal governments. In our experience, many students and families from low-income communities have limited knowledge of the various financial aid programs available to them and the actual cost of post-secondary education, making awareness a crucial part of the solution.

Poverty Reduction and Closing the Achievement Gap

Pathways welcomes the Government of Canada's stated goal to invest in a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. The 2015 Mandate letter to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development calls for the minister to:

“Lead the development of a Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy that would set targets to reduce poverty and measure and publicly report on our progress, in collaboration with the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour. Our strategy will align with and support existing provincial and municipal poverty reduction strategies.”

At Pathways to Education we see poverty reduction as a priority; as our vision statement declares, we are “breaking the cycle of poverty through education.” Each year, thousands of Canadian youth will drop out of high school. This small act can alter the course of an individual's life forever. It's a move that costs them their education and future earning potential. Nationally, it costs our economy through a reduced employment pool and tax base, and an enormous strain on public expenditures. Tens of thousands of youth in Canada's lower-income neighbourhoods have the potential to succeed in school but are unable to overcome the barriers to education that are created by poverty.

Pathways seeks to address this issue by providing comprehensive support to students, beginning in the year before secondary school when we meet with students, parents, teachers and principals and engage students in the program. We then provide tailored support to students through academic, social, individual and financial supports. Our targeted transition supports continue in the final grades of secondary school, where Pathways provides additional guidance to students making the transition to post-secondary education or the workforce, offering support in applying for post-secondary financing and preparation for entering the workforce.

A crucial step in reducing poverty in Canada is closing the achievement gap that exists between aboriginal and non-aboriginal students. In the 2015 mandate letter to Minister Mihychuk, the Government of Canada cited the need to:

“Work with the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs to fulfill our commitment to increase annual support to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.”

At Pathways to Education we see this as a crucial step towards closing the achievement gap that exists in Canada and are working continually and reflectively to ensure our program better meets the needs of the various youth we serve and the distinct barriers they encounter. Pathways to Education's proven program provides tailored and targeted support to diverse groups of learners including newcomer, as well as Indigenous students, as they transition from high school to post-secondary education. Through our research, we have identified and implemented many elements of successful programming that meets the needs of these youth.

Furthermore, Pathways system of wraparound supports helps ensure that students' unique transition needs are addressed. Each student is assigned a Student Parent Support Worker (SPSW) who works with the student to address in and out-of-school challenges that create barriers to academic success. Where needed, SPSWs refer students to a range of support services from housing to mental health, tailoring their support to students' individual needs.

Further addressing this need, the letter to the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs calls for:

"Significant new investments in First Nations education to ensure that First Nations children on reserve receive a quality education while respecting the principle of First Nations control of First Nations education."

Pathways to Education Canada is also working in partnership with Indigenous communities to explore how we can work to address the education and employment gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Pathways understands that Indigenous students are deeply impacted by the effects of colonization, in particular the effects of residential schools and the ongoing individual and systemic racism that can prevent student success.

Pathways appreciates that interventions offered or supported by non-Indigenous organizations must be rooted in key values, such as: respectful and honourable relationships between Pathways and their community partners; Indigenous community ownership; leadership and decision-making of local programming; inclusivity and adaptability of programming to meet community needs; and reciprocity where all involved benefit from walking the path together. Many Pathways Programs serve Indigenous youth in their communities, however, Mashteuiatsh, Quebec and Winnipeg, Manitoba are two examples of what a Pathways program can look like when partnering with a First Nation, Indigenous organization, or community group supporting Indigenous students either on-reserve or in an urban setting.

Recommendations

- The youth served by the Pathways program often have a more limited understanding of the labour market, which impacts their ability to make effective and realistic decisions regarding post-secondary education, training and employment. We welcome the commitment to invest into the government's Youth Employment Strategy which contains programs like *Skills Link* and *Career Focus* that are designed to support youth with multiple barriers to the work force, through a variety of employment supports. These kinds of programs and others that provide better and clearer information to students and parents regarding the wide variety of jobs and the training and/or education required, would be of value to youth in our programs.
- In our experience, limited understanding of the net cost of post-secondary enrolment (PSE) can dissuade students who would qualify for financial support from otherwise applying. Often students from low-income families, where the parents have no college or university education, assume the cost of post-secondary education is unaffordable. A study by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF, 2006) indicates that high school students and their parents have limited knowledge of financial aid programs and the actual cost of postsecondary education. As such, Pathways recommends a major effort to improve awareness and provide better information regarding the cost of post-secondary education and the programs in place to help finance it.
- At Pathways, we welcome the government's commitment to fight poverty beginning with the implementation of the new Canada Child Benefit. We hope that the government continues to implement programs that target families facing poverty. Poverty creates and reinforces barriers to successful high school graduation.

Conclusion

Pathways to Education Canada welcomes the progress made by the Government of Canada in supporting students' transition into post-secondary life as well as investing in poverty reduction. We ask the government to continue to invest in the education of at-risk youth through the kind of targeted investments and programs outlined above. Programs like *Career Focus* and *Skills link* are crucial for ensuring post-secondary success, but more needs to be done. Poverty remains a barrier for youth enrollment, particularly when it means a lack of affordable and stable housing for youth attending school. Furthermore, making sure families are well-informed about the real cost of post-secondary education and the financial programs in place to help fund students' education, is crucial in closing the achievement gap in Canada.

Thank you for your continued support in helping Pathways to Education make Canada a Graduation Nation. We look forward to a lasting partnership with the Government of Canada for many years to come.