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Finding ways to keep 'em in school

The high school dropout rate is nearing 30% and the education ministry wants to know why, writes Moira MacDonald

By Moira MacDonald

What to do about the dropouts?

That question has dogged many a provincial education ministry, and now the Ontario Liberal government says it's going to tackle it.

It quotes a "potential" 30% high school student dropout rate (they are working on the actuals now), up from 22% before the Mike Harris Tories reformed high school, piling on more to learn in less time and throwing in a mandatory literacy test.

The Liberals plan to get the dropout rate back down to where it was before the Tories. Back to where it was in the aftermath of the previous Liberal government, which relentlessly studied the issue -- because it also wanted to cut the dropout rate.

Trustees at the Toronto District School Board heard a presentation on the same issue last week by [TerraNova Market Strategies Inc.](#) The Toronto-based research company was hired by the board to study why students were dropping out of TDSB high schools. The board spent \$40,000 on the project, which involved a series of workshops, attended by 72 young people, either dropouts or on the brink of dropping out, who had seen ads for it in newspapers or in job centres. A few had just been released from of jail.

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

The gist of TerraNova's ensuing report is that these students have found themselves in a spiral of failure that has been very hard to reverse once they're in it. There's talk of a "tipping point" -- the black hole students can fall into as early as Grade 9.

"Bad things keep happening at school," wrote one person. "You try to do better and fail. The circle keeps going."

The students and ex-students talked about the usual social problems as contributing factors -- drugs, pregnancy, a poor home life (one student said they didn't want their kids to know their grandparents were crackheads, another had lost a parent) and winding up with the wrong crowd.

As for what would help, they did not ask for an easy ride. These kids are no dummies -- they've figured out what that's all about. One even commented, "They pass you if they don't want to deal with you." Another wrote, "I went to nine out of 40 classes and they passed me anyway. Why?"

The most important thing these kids wanted was adults at school to take an active interest in them, to believe in them and challenge them. They were most proud of things like, "Passing Grade 10 Civics after taking it three times" and "The marks I get when I really try." The TerraNova folks suggested staff adopt "a coaching attitude" and "a fair, collaborative, supportive 'tough love' approach."

They also said school staff need to "have high but realistic expectations" of the students and "offer praise when it's well deserved."

Students and ex-students said they wanted more after-school activities, a less politicized environment ("strikes really messed up school; and budget cuts suck" wrote one), better and safer school buildings, enough textbooks and teachers with great teaching skills.

The McGuinty Liberals are partway there in their plan to put 1,300 more teachers into high schools. But unless you make sure those people are high quality and will be working directly with students, you're just adding to the payroll. We still have a system that mostly rewards staff for time served, not for how good they are.

Patrick Rutledge, the TDSB trustee who heads up the committee where the report was presented last week, is a dropout himself, now working on an undergraduate degree. He says the board plans to use the report as a starting point for figuring out what programs are working and which ones aren't. After endless study of the dropout problem, "there's that old adage that says if you do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result, then you're doing it wrong," Rutledge told me.

Adding more teachers alone is not going to be the quick fix. These students want quality along with quantity. That may be more than the current system can handle.