All students deserve the same opportunity to succeed at school. We know this – the challenge is creating the right conditions to enable every student to succeed. This is particularly true for students living in urban neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty, criminal and gang activity, a lack of community resources and student achievement issues.

Established in 2008, the Urban Priority High Schools (UPHS) initiative targets high schools in urban priority areas to reach youth in need. The goal is to help these secondary schools develop the necessary supports and resources to meet the needs of their students and communities. Key results will include creating safe schools, increasing student achievement and building sustainable community partnerships.

To meet the unique needs of their students and communities, 34 schools located in 12 boards across Ontario are using their new resources to offer a creative range of programs from nutrition to student leadership and engagement. These schools are reaching out to students and their families, and working with communities to develop a safe, supportive and positive school environment.

This second edition of UPHS Connections highlights examples and effective practices from some of the schools involved with the UPHS initiative. We hope schools and communities benefit from hearing about this creative work and that it sparks ideas and innovation across Ontario.
Lakeshore Collegiate Institute, Toronto

New Ways to See the World through the Arts

When Toronto’s Lakeshore Collegiate Institute received its first Urban and Priority High Schools Grant, it was able to take what had been minor involvement with Lakeshore Arts, a community partner, to a whole new level. A Mimico arts service organization, Lakeshore Arts has a long tradition of working with community partners and welcomed the exciting annual collaboration that’s helped students enhance the face of their high school through their own outdoor art installations.

The first collaboration had 12 students, working with two artists, creating murals that were installed over the school’s two Kipling Avenue entrances. The next year, the number of students involved jumped to over 100, who took part in a larger-scale, multi-disciplinary project. The project began with a writer helping students work on poetry. Next, arts students interpreted the poetry visually. The result was multi-panelled mosaic art installations outside the school.

“The students explored the connection between perception and reality by writing and publishing their poems and extended the inner world of Lakeshore Collegiate to visual and tangible representations,” says Principal Antonio Santos. He adds, “Today, you can enjoy the students’ poems … Murals depicting the community have given the students not only a way to be engaged, but also a voice to proclaim that they belong to the Lakeshore community.”

Lakeshore Arts Programming Manager Melissa McGrath agrees. “The students are really proud of the work they’ve done,” she says, noting, “They wanted to let people know that good things are going on there.”

This year’s project began with two artists who worked with three different classes on the concept of public space – how it can be activated in a positive way. First, three classes representing different grade levels generated ideas and settled on creating functional works of art in the form of seating outside the school.

That idea was then shared with Grade 12 students in the school’s cyber-arts program. “They have a level of skill and we gave them the challenge of designing this seating,” says Ms. McGrath. Through Lakeshore Arts, a number of other partners got involved, including archiTExT, which

Lakeshore Collegiate’s installation inspires students and the community with its message:

“What you see is not often who we are. Through my eyes and your eyes the world can look different.”
helped facilitate the process of design/fabrication for the students. The students only had two weeks to come up with their designs. Another partner, Lakeshore Arts, brought into the project was Eventscape, an architectural fabricator, which invited the students to see its Toronto facilities firsthand. “The tour really energized the kids in terms of seeing real world aspects of what they’re doing,” says Ms. McGrath. “It gave them a lot of things to consider.” Working with the different partners also helped students see some of the many directions work in the arts can take.

On the last day of the two weeks, everyone who’d been involved got together. The Grade 12s presented their ideas, and then got feedback. Eventscape is now doing the technical drawings, and once the TDSB approves them, the company will fabricate the pieces by the end of the school year. The company has donated its time and labour, notes Ms. McGrath.

The impact on the students is visible every day, says Mr. Santos. “There is a palpable pride in the hallways; the kind of feeling that comes from knowing that we are a community with a voice and a strong sense of identity.”

Mr. Santos also reports that the results of the initiative, which the grant has made possible, are tangible. In addition to a reduction in the amount of graffiti, fewer suspensions and more involvement in arts programs, student participation in intramurals doubled in 2010-11 from previous years. Parents are inspired too – Parents’ Night attendance increased by 16 per cent last year and the number of parents that regularly attend the Parent Council has doubled.

Since 2008, student achievement has increased: in Grade 10 Applied Math, passing grades have gone up 15 per cent and Grade 10 Applied English passing rates have also gone up by 20 per cent. And, although most students (75 per cent) reported feeling safe in school in 2007, that’s now up at 91 per cent. Likewise, 82 per cent of students now report feeling safe in the community, up from 73 per cent in 2007.

Perhaps the students who took part best sum up the great sense of pride in themselves, their school and their community: “I loved the concept of the project and the final outcome. It looked awesome”; “I like that we can use our own ideas”; “I liked that I wrote a lot and they appreciated my thoughts”; “I liked how we worked in groups, and had the freedom to explore with different forms of art.”
Finishing grade school may be an exciting milestone, but beginning the next chapter of schooling can cause significant anxiety for students entering Grade 7. That’s especially true when the school they are headed for runs all the way through to Grade 12 – as is the case with Collège Catholique Samuel-Genest in Ottawa. High schools that include Grades 7 and 8 mean its incoming Grade 7s face a huge transition. But a new program has turned things around in the past three years, with most Grade 7s now feeling at home there even before the school year begins.

This change for the better is thanks largely to the school’s Parent and Community Engagement Program, made possible through UPHS funding. The program starts by reaching out to families of students in Grade 6. “Many of them are new Canadians and come from countries that had very elitist education systems,” says Principal Réal Charette, adding that the school makes every effort to help parents and their kids feel welcome and comfortable at Samuel-Genest.

While the school has always had links with its feeder schools, it’s really been making the most of these connections in the past three years. “The UPHS funding has allowed us to ensure activities and transportation are available to make the events at the elementary schools and at Samuel-Genest happen.”

Beyond the initial outreach, the program consists of orientation activities that take place before the start of Grade 7. These include a pizza event with families and SAM’Artiste – a play on the school’s name – which is a group of older students who put on shows at elementary schools, making many Grade 6 students’ introduction to the school an entertaining one. SAM’Artiste also stages bigger productions at Samuel-Genest, inviting Grade 6 students to attend, which gets them through the door, often for the first time.

“Right away,” says Mr. Charette, “students feel a sense of belonging, of being at home. It gives them a leg up on the experience of being at Samuel-Genest. It feels like it’s where they are meant to be.”
There’s an activity where each Grade 6 student is twinned with an older student before school starts and gets to follow them around the school for part of a day, thus becoming more familiar with the building and environment and having a personal guide. One Grade 7 student, who discovered the guitar club with his older student partner, attributes the welcome the program provided with his decision later to participate in the club.

There’s also SAM’Sportif, where physical education teachers organize games at the school for Grade 6 kids, again, before school starts. Last year, for instance, each participant got to build a kite and then fly it at the school. Another activity that takes place in the spring is called SAM’Rassure, in which Grade 11 and 12 students interact with prospective Grade 6 students. The social workers and the School Resource Officer (police) train the older students, who then talk with the younger kids about issues such as bullying, violence and conflict. “This helps ease any anxiety the younger students may have about entering a big school with older kids,” notes Mr. Charette.

What the activities all have in common is that they aim to lower anxiety and increase comfort levels in the big, new school. “Right away,” says Mr. Charette, “students feel a sense of belonging, of being at home. It gives them a leg up on the experience of being at Samuel-Genest. It feels like it’s where they are meant to be.”

The UPHS program has had a noted effect, not only on incoming Grade 7s’ comfort level, but also on student engagement, particularly in Grades 7 to 10. As well, the number of suspensions among Grade 7 and 8 students dropped from 131 in 2007-08, before the program began, to 51 in 2010-11. And the number of students in Grades 9 to 12 dropping out of school altogether has decreased from 18 in 2007-08 to 9 in 2009-10.

In the end, says Mr. Charette, “activities that facilitate the transition have an impact on student engagement, and student engagement has a clear impact on student success.”

“In the end, says Mr. Charette, “activities that facilitate the transition have an impact on student engagement, and student engagement has a clear impact on student success.”
Weston Collegiate Institute's African Canadian Leadership Committee (ACLC) is all about striving for excellence through celebrating culture, ethnicity and diversity. It got started when founding teacher Duane (Chris) Reid developed a common vision with students of African heritage who were looking for ways to learn new skills to build on their strengths and help lead them to succeed at school and in life. Then, in the 2009-10 school year, the ACLC received some UPHS funding, allowing it to broaden its mandate by increasing and deepening partnerships with community and businesses. Over the years, the ACLC has evolved from primarily serving students of African heritage to representing students from all cultures and ethnicities.

The ACLC Student Action team leads a wide spectrum of initiatives at Weston. They strengthen relationships by bringing students together to develop their leadership skills through a variety of activities. They include an annual “Spirit Week”; a 3-on-3 student and staff basketball tournament; and an annual staff luncheon for teaching and support staff to promote a positive school climate.

ACLC students also help their peers improve their achievement by partnering with “Licensed 2 Learn”, an organization that teaches students how to tutor other students. This partnership has resulted in an after-school homework club that runs twice a week, Lunch ’n’ Learn sessions in math and numeracy and after-school literacy classes. This, in turn, has helped contribute to an overall increase in student achievement from 2009-10 to 2010-11. For example, pass rates increased from 63 to 82 per cent in Grade 10 Applied English; 83 to 91 per cent in Grade 9 Applied Science; and 67 to 72 per cent in Grade 9 Applied Geography. Similarly, EQAO scores of students achieving at Level 3 or Level 4 in Grade 9 Applied Math increased from nine per cent to 23 per cent and from 61 to 71 per cent in Grade 9 Academic Math.

In collaboration with the International Institute of Restorative Practices Canada, students in the ACLC are also helping shape Restorative Practices at Weston C.I. ACLC students have received training as Formal Restorative Conference Facilitators and act as peer mediators, working through student-to-student concerns using the framework of Restorative Practices. The ACLC has helped students maximize time on task, which has resulted in a dramatic decrease in office referrals and a reduction in suspensions, from 151 a year before the introduction of Restorative Practices down to 36, as of February 2012.
Several ACLC students described their journey with the group as follows: “It is more than a group, it’s a family” (Eugene Ayertey); “Unification of leaders, restoring a people” (Shericka Hepburn); “Knowledgeable, talented, excited fellow leaders” (Fidan Topyurek); “We are family, we are leaders” (Kazeem Agboola); “We want change, we start here” (Shierine Shkais); “Uniting progressive leaders, bringing about change” (Radeka Clarke, President of ACLC).

Radeka Clarke perhaps summed it up best by adding, “Connecting with your roots empowers you to be a better person.”

However participants may describe their ACLC experience, it is clearly an inspiration to many as the group continues to touch the lives of students as they grow into future leaders.
Monarch Park Collegiate Institute, Toronto

Grade 9 Orientation Makes Everyone Feel Welcome

Before Monarch Park’s Grade 9 Orientation Program got underway in 2005, says Assistant Curriculum Leader Michael Mead, one of the program’s founders, it was a troubled school. “There was declining enrolment and minimal parent involvement, and bullying was a concern, so we started investigating our options and came up with a Grade 9 Orientation Program,” he recalls. Mr. Mead and other teachers soon noticed a marked difference – the kids who took part in the program were getting along better at school.

At first, the program involved taking Grade 9 students to Camp Robin Hood in Markham for a day in September then for three days to Algonquin Park later in the fall. Although some students have never been away from home and parents may be reluctant to send their child, the principal or a vice principal calls parents to encourage them to allow their child to participate. “We reassure them about the venue and the supervision at camp,” says Principal Cynthia Abernethy. “Because we have already spoken about the trip at the Grade 8 information night, and again at the meet and greet with parents the week prior to school starting, it has been my experience that very few students do not participate,” she adds.

As one Grade 11 student put it, looking back on her Grade 9 Orientation experience, “I only knew one person coming to this school, but by the end of the first trip, I knew a lot of people and I wasn’t so scared.”

UPHS has made it even easier for students to take part in Orientation. Before UPHS, students who needed a financial subsidy to participate needed to come forward and ask for it; now with UPHS funding, all Grade 9 students can access the program regardless of financial need.

Six years of running the Orientation program has taught staff that starting early makes a difference, so they now jumpstart the program before school begins in September. “We invite all Grade 9 students for a half-day at the end of August,” says Mr. Mead, adding, “We have T-shirts for them, we show them around the building, where things are. A lot of them are really afraid of starting high school, but after this half-day, by the time they start, they already feel at home.” As well, he notes, “Students are less likely to bully when they know each other.”

Asked whether participation is mandatory, Mr. Mead replied “almost”. “We’ve found that the kids who don’t want to come usually need it the most.” Over time, Mr. Mead, co-founder Linda Jones and other Monarch Park staff saw the need to extend the program into the second semester of Grade 9, and starting this semester are offering a breakfast that helps the first-year students stay in touch with them and with each other.

The effects of the Grade 9 Orientation have included a much lower incidence of bullying compared to before, when the school was fighting a stigma, even among other schools, says Mr. Mead. From September 2011 to February 2012, there have been only three suspensions involving Grade 9 students, out of 178 Grade 9s. From 2008-09 to 2010-11, there has been a 24 per cent average decrease in the number of suspensions at the school.
In the Safe and Caring School survey completed in the spring of 2011, almost 90 per cent of Grade 9 students said they felt welcome in the school and 83 per cent of students responded that they felt safe in the school.

That feeling is also reflected in the number of students who applied for optional attendance for the 2011-12 academic year. When asked why they chose Monarch Park over their home high school, many of those 68 Grade 8 students stated that it was because they felt very welcome in the school. Many parents stated that they feel the school is a very safe place and are comfortable sending their children there.

Some further results from Monarch Park show lots of positive changes: absences have dropped by 14 per cent; student involvement in intramural activities has increased by 125 per cent; and the number of parents/caregivers attending Parent Teacher Nights has increased by 150 per cent.

Academically, too, the results have been promising: in June 2011, 76 per cent of Grade 9 students had accumulated eight credits. Perhaps the best evidence of the difference the program has made to those just entering high school, however, is seeing them go successfully through high school and onto university, which many have done.

Mr. Mead summed it up by saying, “Orientation has been a real turning point.” As one Grade 11 student put it, looking back on her Grade 9 Orientation experience, “I only knew one person coming to this school, but by the end of the first trip, I knew a lot of people and I wasn’t so scared.”
Notre Dame High School, Ottawa

“ND After 3” mixes Help with Homework and After School Fun

Ottawa’s Notre Dame High School launched its “ND After 3” program in February 2009, with the help of UPHS. It was developed to help its students, who are in Grades 7-12, keep busy after school, stay out of trouble, get homework done and take part in different activities. As teacher-coordinator Kate McGarrity-Fournier put it, “This is a chance for them to take part in fun extra-curricular activities and get homework support.”

The 2.5 hour program begins with fun. At the end of the school day, students get to spend an hour engaged in activities which range from designing an outdoor mural, music, woodworking, knitting and cooking to road hockey, outdoor education, swimming and CPR. To take part in the program, students have to commit to also doing an hour of homework, which follows the activities. They also get two snacks a day, which could include hot meals such as pasta or soup.

The program is staffed each day by two teacher supervisors and five tutors. Many of them are past graduates of the school and are currently in university or college, or have recently finished their postsecondary education. As well, a few students who started in the program in Grades 7 and 8 and are now in higher grades come in after school as mentors. “They’re a great example of success for the younger kids,” notes Ms. McGarrity-Fournier.

Some of the activities take place at Dovercourt Recreation Centre, located just up the street from the school. The tutors walk the students to the centre, where they can swim, do pottery, take a free babysitting course and more.

This year, about 277 students are taking part in the program – an increase of 133 over last year – with an average of about 70 kids per day, says Ms. McGarrity-Fournier. She adds that, while most are in Grades 7-9, all students are welcome. In fact, she says, they are just in the process of starting a university-college preparation course as part of the program. They have got many resources for this from Carlton University, as well as Algonquin College.

The results speak for themselves. Since the program began, credit accumulation among Grade 9 students has risen from 73 per cent to 83 per cent in 2010-11; for Grade 10s, the rate has increased from 66 per cent to 80 per cent in 2010-11. In addition, the number of incidents has gone down by half, between 2008-2009 and 2010-11. Because many of the students in these groups participated in “ND After 3”, these improvements are a testament to the difference the program has made.
Catholic Central Secondary School, Windsor

Helping English Language Learners Succeed

Catholic Central Secondary School is the designated school within the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board for English Language Learners (ELLs), which means it has a higher than average number of students who need extra support. Before their ELL Literacy Support program began in 2008, the Windsor school’s ELL Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) scores were low, as was credit accumulation. The new program changed all of that.

The UPHS-funded program allows each ELL student writing the OSSLT to take part in five workshops, a practice literacy test, follow-up and remediation, as needed. The program is open to students in all grades – whoever wants and needs it can receive support. Each year, about 40 students take part in the program or about 20 in each of the two sessions per year. Normally, teachers group students according to their ability.

Within the workshops, students are divided into small work groups. They focus on one skill per week for 76 minutes each, giving teachers a chance to model, practice, assess and then give students feedback. Students also write a Practice Literacy Test; students who need it get further follow-up.

The program’s five workshops cover all aspects of the OSSLT and run over about five weeks. The workshops offer an introduction to the test as well as practice with:

- News report writing and reading;
- Writing paragraphs expressing an opinion; organizing ideas;
- Graphical text;
- Reading and answering multiple-choice and short-answer questions.

In addition, they use all of the EQAO materials for these sessions.

Department Head, English Literacy Support Teacher Andrea Rice notes that the program has students from many different countries, adding, “There seems to be an influx of ELD students from Arabic-speaking countries at present.”

The results have been tangible: the school’s ELL students have seen their OSSLT scores rise substantially since the program began. In fact, 83 per cent of first-time eligible ELLs were successful and 100 per cent who wrote the test while enrolled in an ESL/ELD course were successful. The school has seen an 80 per cent increase in OSSLT results among its ELL students since the inception of the program.

Merna Sadiq is a Grade 12 student who took the after-school literacy program last year, when she was an ELL. She had this to say about her experience:

“… the after-school sessions for the literacy test practice are absolutely the reason why I passed it. At the beginning, I did not want to participate because I thought that the literacy test is very easy and simple and no one fails it. However, I strongly believe that the practice that the teachers gave us was quite helpful and I thank them for giving the students this great opportunity. I believe that whoever takes the after-school sessions seriously…will pass for sure.”
Chinguacousy Secondary School, Brampton

FLY program helps students soar

The “Finding Limitless You” (FLY) program took flight at Chinguacousy Secondary School in September 2009. It came from a distinct need at the school to re-engage senior boys at risk of not graduating. According to Julianne Greenwood, Cross-Curricular Head of School Success, “We had things in place for junior students, but not senior students.” So she and a colleague looked to recent research that showed the connection between being physically active and improved school results, current studies on disengaged boys, and other schools with interdisciplinary packages. Then, they created FLY for the Brampton school’s senior students at risk, using UPHS funding.

FLY is an interdisciplinary, alternative learning experience with a class size of about 18-20 students. For the most part, students volunteer to take part, often after a teacher recommendation and personal invitation from the FLY teachers.

Once in FLY, students are immersed in an experiential learning environment with an outdoor adventure theme where they not only learn the traditional academics, but also such life skills as character development, teamwork and leadership. For the first semester, students work on four credits: Physical Education, English, Geography and Leadership. FLY runs for two semesters, with an opportunity for new students to join after the first semester.

FLY 2 came about when the school realized that some students who had spent a full year in FLY were still not ready to transition back to a mainstream classroom. FLY 2 is a similar learning experience, with students working on Food and Nutrition Science, Biology, Personal Fitness and Leadership.

Students in FLY are with the same students and two teachers (two periods each) for the full day. They are physically active every day, and take about one field trip per week related to what they’ve been learning that week. Because it has an interdisciplinary focus, the days vary from one to the next, depending on the students’ needs. Unlike the traditional classroom, where one period is devoted to a single subject, in FLY the courses are interrelated and taught within the flow of the day.

Once students are used to the flow of FLY, they learn about themselves and their needs so there are days when they know they need to be active first and will advocate for that. “In those instances,” says Ms. Greenwood, “the teachers often drop what they are doing, allow the time for activity and then bring them back to the task.” She notes that students are always more willing and able to concentrate and work after activity. “Because of Urban Funding, we were able to purchase bikes and snowshoes, which allow us the freedom to be physically active all year long,” says Ms. Greenwood.
The FLY program also teaches students to “pay it forward” through community outreach activities, such as a mentoring program run in partnership with Big Brothers and Big Sisters that has FLY students act as mentors with their feeder school. Other activities include running a leadership conference at another feeder school; volunteering at a soup kitchen and organizing initiatives like a food drive, coat drive, Terry Fox Run, etc.

In the end, says Ms. Greenwood, the secret to FLY’s success is that it builds a community. Much of the beginning of the year is spent on teamwork, trust and enhancing initiative. “Without fail, before the end of the semester, the students refer to our class as family,” she says. “For some students, the FLY class is the most stable, caring thing in their life and it does become a substitute for family.”

The impact is life-altering for many students for very different reasons. In the same class there was a student who was suicidal before FLY and one who admittedly was planning to quit school after Grade 10 to sell drugs. Now, they are both set to graduate and are submitting college applications.

The numbers tell the rest of the story: before FLY, students accumulated a total of 1,838 missed classes in the first semester (2008-09). While in FLY, that dropped to 622 missed classes in the first semester (2009-10). As well, before FLY, average credit accumulation was 2.8 per semester. With FLY, that increased to 4.0.

“Weapons fail, before the end of the semester, the students refer to our class as family,” she says. “For some students, the FLY class is the most stable, caring thing in their life and it does become a substitute for family.”
Mr. Hack is quick to point out that the program has a much more positive than punitive bent. Together, they focus on work habits, organizational skills, time management and exam preparation. They also provide snacks. And at the end of the year, a 0.5 GLS credit is granted. “The first year, Grade 9s really enjoyed it,” recalls Mr. Hack.

If a Grade 9 student is identified as needing additional support, it’s available after STAMP, through the Study Hall which offers tutoring from 3:30 to 4:30. At the first two reporting cycles, student marks are reviewed and any student without a passing grade must attend Study Hall. The school contacts their parents to support the students’ attendance. This program is staffed by Educational Assistants. According to Mr. Hack, “We focused about 70-80 per cent on school work, but it was also a bit social too, which is fine.”

While all Grade 9 students attend STAMP, only about 10-25 per cent of these go to Study Hall, until they’re getting passing grades again. In addition to the academic boost and skills the programs provide, they’ve also added a bit of after-school socializing and fun – all part of the equation.

The formula seems to be working. Credit accumulation has risen from 50 per cent before the program to 75 per cent now. At the end of the day, notes Mr. Hack, “None of this would have been possible without the UPHS funding. We would absolutely not be able to fund the Educational Assistants, the food or the workbooks without it.”
Thistletown Collegiate Institute, Toronto

A school-community partnership that’s changed life after school

Although Thistletown Collegiate teachers were providing a lot of extra support for the students, it was clear more help was needed. They decided what students really needed was an after-school program, where students could get help from their peers. In November 2009, with the help of UPHS funding and community partner, the Braeburn Neighbourhood Place, the Braeburn Partnership got off the ground.

What started small, with one classroom and about 20 students, has now become about 40 students attending for peer tutoring every day after school. There are 250 students registered in the program and 16 tutors, all of whom are Grade 11 and 12 students. Braeburn’s Colleen Barbosa has led the project from Day 1. She says one of Braeburn’s goals is also to create employment in the community and expose students to real-life work experience. It made sense, then, that to become tutors, the students would experience the same process they would elsewhere to get that type of job, including an interview, background checks, orientation and training on tutoring.

The program grew through many teacher referrals, recalls Principal Randy Palermo, but also word of mouth from other students. “The response has been very positive; we’re at capacity every day and have expanded to two rooms this year,” he says. One nice feature of the program is that students get a hot meal after school, created and delivered by students in the school’s Culinary Arts program. They then transition into homework time until 4:45, during which help is available in all subjects. There’s one room devoted to math tutoring; the other subjects get a table each and students sit at the table for the subject they need help with. Tutors wear a badge listing the subjects they can help with, so students know who to ask for help.

After the homework time, there’s an hour of recreation, which includes organized sports, nutrition, cooking and foosball. The UPHS funding has supported the food for the students as well as materials and equipment, including items like African drums for the recreational part of the program.

The latest addition to the program, says Mr. Palermo, is the creation this semester of a lunchtime tutoring program for 30 students. For this program, the morning Culinary Arts students provide a hot lunch.
Mr. Palermo reports the school has seen a significant increase in credit accumulation in most subject areas. The most notable increase, he says, has been in the area of math, which can be the toughest for so many students. “We are seeing pass rates of approximately 75 per cent now in the Applied Math classes, whereas rates were closer to 50 per cent before the program,” says Mr. Palermo.

He credits the program’s success with the fact that it is consistent, it’s a terrific partnership and students know they can get the help they need through one-on-one support. In addition, he says, students who are not necessarily struggling also take part: “Some of the kids who are enrolled are just keen to do better and get one-on-one support.” He adds, “The food also helps!”

“It has taught me to be more responsible and hold a real job. The program helped me achieve better marks in school. Now I help others to do the same.”

A Grade 11 student, who used the tutoring services in Grade 9 and 10 and is now an English tutor, said of the program, “It has taught me to be more responsible and hold a real job. The program helped me achieve better marks in school. Now I help others to do the same.”

Another Grade 11 student, who has used the tutoring services for the past three years and was also a student in the Culinary Arts class that cooks for the program, noted: “The program really helped increase my marks. It also keeps me active by playing sports after homework time. The tutors and staff really know their stuff. Cooking for the program was fun too; I learned a lot about cooking and I felt really proud to have my friends eat my food in program.”
W.F. Herman Secondary School’s Alternative Education Program got underway in March 2008, with the help of UPHS. The Windsor school’s administration realized many of their students were at high risk for a variety of reasons, ranging from non-attendance or credit deficiency to social/emotional or mental health issues; as well, some students were living in independent arrangements, some had young children. So, the school designed the Alternative Education Program, giving these students the opportunity to continue their academic programming in a safe, flexible, accommodating setting that allows them to be successful.

“The model was designed to include a Teacher and a Child and Youth Worker,” says Teresa Piskovic of Guidance and Student Services. “Students complete courses designed by the Independent Learning Centre, so each student can follow a customized program based on his or her needs.” She adds that, as much as possible, to further accommodate students’ busy schedules and personal needs, courses are also offered online.

The school’s Student Success Team, under the direction of the Vice-Principal, selects the students who take part in the program. Each semester, students are reviewed and a determination is made regarding student progress and who would benefit from the program. In the last school year, students got an average of two credits in a morning or afternoon arrangement – some earning as many as six. Many of these students might not have achieved these credits in a traditional setting. For some, it allowed them to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma.
Attendance rates among students in the Alternative Education Program have improved significantly – they are attending 25-50 per cent more days than in previous years. Suspension rates for this group have also dropped approximately 60 per cent. As well, the program has meant decreased disruption to remaining classes since students are able to address issues with the support of the Child and Youth Worker.

The school’s After School Academic Support Program (ASAP) also began in March 2008 to help increase credit accumulation and academic success. A major concern for many teachers was incomplete assignments and/or homework. Therefore, a space was created where students could go each day after school to receive additional support from teachers. The program was also created with the understanding that the socio-economic status of the community warranted a safe environment where students could be supervised and have access to teachers as well as computers and printers. Many of these students might not have achieved these credits in a traditional setting. For some, it allowed them to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

This program was extended to the elementary students in the school community to facilitate transition between elementary and secondary school and give a leg up to students who often had the responsibility of caring for younger siblings or neighbours after school.

As well, ASAP has given students a place to work with their peers on collaborative class assignments and projects and to socialize with each other. The program is available Monday through Thursday from 2:30-4:30 p.m. On any given day, an average of 28 students attend.

“Since the inception of these programs,” says Ms. Piskovic, “we have seen our Grade 9 credit accumulation reach 80 per cent. Our pass rate for Grade 10 Applied Math reached 90 per cent and, for Grade 10 Applied English, 80 per cent.” She added that the school’s EQAO Grade 9 Applied Math results have increased from 38 per cent to 58 per cent in the last three years. All impressive moves in the right direction.
Monarch Park Collegiate Institute, Toronto

Tutors in the Classroom Making a Difference

The end of the 2009-10 school year was fast approaching when Monarch Park Collegiate’s Principal and Vice-Principals decided something had to be done to help a number of high-risk students. They made use of their UPHS funding to bring in several retired teachers from the TDSB’s pool of supply teachers to help students rescue their credits.

At first, the program consisted of bringing in two teachers towards the end of the fall 2009 semester to work as dedicated tutors. They were on-site two to three days a week and worked with the students outside the classroom. “They had a lot of impact as they got to know the students,” recalls teacher Linda Jones, a Student Success teacher who is the point person for the program.

The next semester, the school realized bringing in the tutors right from the start of the semester would have an even greater impact. “This made a huge difference with skills development and improvement,” says Ms. Jones, adding, “the teachers used assistive technology programs to help improve certain students’ reading and writing skills, which helped them become more successful and feel better about school and learning.”

One aspect of the program, though, still wasn’t quite right, recalls Principal Cynthia Abernethy: taking the students out of the classroom for help. “Students don’t like being singled out,” she says.
So, the second year, 2010-11, they embedded the special tutors right in the classrooms. The school quickly found that students were indeed much more comfortable with this arrangement. As well, says Abernethy, “other students who also needed help from time to time could get it too.”

Ms. Abernethy and Ms. Jones agree that having teachers who are comfortable having tutors in their classrooms is key for this type of program. “Teachers have been most receptive to embedded tutors,” says Ms. Jones. “They’ve found that it helps them do their jobs more successfully.”

Now in its third year, the program has grown to include four tutors embedded in at least 12 different classrooms for two to three days per week. In addition, a retired French teacher is at the school Mondays to help students with French. These students do leave the classroom to work with him.

Ms. Abernethy says that one of the keys to the program’s success has been continuing to assess how it’s doing, what they might need to tweak, then taking action. “We have a warm and caring atmosphere here – the sense of belonging is most important and you especially need it at this age. It’s important to me that students feel they belong and that their being here everyday in this building is important to us.”

The school has seen improved attendance, with the number of absences falling by an average of 14 per cent from 2008-09 to 2010-11, and involvement in intramural activities increasing by 125 per cent in that same period. Both of these facts point to a healthy growth in student engagement.

One student who was a senior last year was disengaged until he took part in the tutoring program, says Ms. Jones. “But in the program, he was able to learn strategies by working with the tutor, get his Grades 11 and 12 English credits and is now attending George Brown College in culinary arts – something he could never have dreamed of without the special boost he got from the program.”

Another girl in the same class was able to watch this unfold, although she had given up on herself. But then, a whole year later, she approached the tutor and got the help she needed.

Another key ingredient to the program’s success, says Ms. Jones, is its flexibility. “The tutors are available before school, at lunch and after school. They use late start days and every opportunity to work with the students who want help. Just having them in the school removes any stigma that might have been attached to seeking tutoring.”

“It’s a busy place,” reports Ms. Abernethy, “and a lovely place to be – a building full of caring adults.” Adults who want, above all, for the students they teach to learn to succeed.
Catholic Central High School, Windsor

G.A.I.N.S. Helping Students Find the Steps to Success

When Catholic Central High School identified a need in 2007 for alternative programming and academic support for at-risk youth, its answer was to create G.A.I.N.S. Short for “Guidance, Academics, Independence, Next Steps and Success”, the G.A.I.N.S. program came about with the help of UPHS in 2008. It is now firmly entrenched in the Windsor school – and making a difference.

The program, which works to support and improve student behaviour and help students build personal skills to equip them for social and academic success, starts with a teacher referral. He or she assesses the student’s needs, prepares a Student Success Referral and sends that to the school’s KARE (Kids at Risk in Education) support team to initiate an intervention. The KARE team consists of administration, guidance, Student Success, a behaviour support specialist, a social worker and the campus minister. Says Student Success teacher Katherine Guenette: “We collaborate in an effort to all be on the same page with regard to student programming.”

There are currently 65 Catholic Central students using the G.A.I.N.S. program regularly for academic/social support. They have their parents’ consent to access programming, and their teachers allow them to access the support as needed.

In September 2011, says Ms. Guenette, “we added a behaviour specialist to expand the reach of our program.” Individual attendance counselling and student mediation have also been included as part of G.A.I.N.S. services via the Behaviour Specialist/Student Success teachers.

The Student Success teachers offer daily, out-of-classroom academic and behaviour support in the G.A.I.N.S. room. They also consult with teachers and the KARE team regarding student concerns/program progress; monitor student academic progress; hold group skill-building sessions; work with Suspension Re-Entry and Follow-up.

The Behaviour Specialist assesses the students’ behavioural, social and emotional needs; provides resources and strategies for problem classroom situations; provides one-on-one counselling; leads group social skills-building sessions; develops Individualized Behaviour Plans; consults with administration and staff regarding classroom behaviour strategies and does conflict mediation.
They team also developed alternative to suspension planning, discipline packages and specialized programming and manage suspension re-entry and follow up.

“Throughout the year I struggled, but in this room I came to find myself and discovered where I wanted to go with my life. Because of the support and dedication of all those involved, I am graduating this year.”

While Semester One data on the expanded program is still being collected and analyzed, Ms. Guenette reports that out-of-school suspensions have been significantly reduced due to the on-site alternative programming offered in the G.A.I.N.S. room – a total of 92 students have served 173 alternative programming sessions in G.A.I.N.S. so far since September. As well, to increase work completion, students have been assigned periods in G.A.I.N.S. as part of their suspension program to assist with re-entry and transition back to class. In the first semester, 57 per cent of G.A.I.N.S. students earned all credits they attempted. “Because the students in the G.A.I.N.S. program have been identified as needing support due to high attendance issues, suspension rates and low credit accumulation to date, the fact that 57 per cent attained all credits attempted is a big gain for them,” says Ms. Guenette.

“My Grade 9 year, I was greeted by Ms. Guenette and introduced to the Room 110 program. Throughout the year I struggled, but in this room I came to find myself and discovered where I wanted to go with my life. Because of the support and dedication of all those involved, I am graduating this year. This is something I never thought I could accomplish and I am 100 per cent sure I couldn’t have done it without the support.”

“Lana” is a Grade 12 student at Catholic Central who shared her experience with the G.A.I.N.S. program: "Coming into high school, I would say that I was full of attitude and anger that I couldn’t understand. I felt like no one could understand me and that I wouldn’t have the support system like I did in grade school. But I was wrong.
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