

COMMUNITY: Youth pitch in to help at-risk communities

School board opens doors to offer employment

July 3, 2008 12:59 PM
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More than 300 TDSB students from high priority neighbourhoods are taking a big step toward success this summer with help from the Toronto District School Board.

The school board launched its 2008 Focus on Youth program at Rosedale Heights School of the Arts on Friday, June 27. The program gives young people jobs that will help them enhance their leadership skills while giving back to the community.

The students were selected from a large pile of applicants from across the city. They will work with children and youth in Toronto schools, in partnership with more than 100 Toronto-based community agencies. Participating youth will earn nearly \$3,000 over the course of the summer for their efforts, with their salaries paid through funding from the TDSB and the United Way of Greater Toronto.

Ward 3 (Etobicoke-Lakeshore) Trustee Bruce Davis, one of the driving forces behind Focus on Youth, said the program is geared to helping not only the students who have found work but the community as a whole.

"When we started with this idea, we asked how we could make the schools, pools, gyms and fields available to the community (in the summer)," he said. "We decided we wanted to hire young people to help run the schools, fields, pools and gyms."

The program's success has helped it expand over the past few years, to the point where 93 school sites will be open throughout the summer, serving more than 15,000 children and youth in the city's at-risk neighbourhoods.

Participating youth have earned extensive training in health and safety, conflict mediation and even child abuse awareness.

"This is not just about opening up schools, it's about turning the city around with (the youths') training," Davis said.

The community agencies also benefit from the expertise offered by the youth, not to mention the additional space provided by the school board to allow them to expand their programs.

"The message we constantly hear in our (member) agencies is that there's a constant need for space," said Gillian Mason, United Way of Greater Toronto spokesperson. "When (school) doors are open, they can be a real part of the community."

Shubham Datta participated in Focus on Youth last year and said he is looking forward to dedicating another summer to helping out in his community. The training he received has helped him become more independent and allowed him to expand his own horizons.

"The leadership training I got last year has helped me become a leader at my school and in my community," he said. "In my community, I founded my own tutoring business."

TDSB Director of Education Gerry Connelly said there has been an impressive increase in the number of students and community agencies participating in the program as word of mouth has spread.

"This is making a difference for students," she said. "It gives them a job and more importantly, it gives them hope."

The students will work within their own communities over the next few months, helping others in their community with sports, recreational programs and community improvement efforts.