

PREE Project touts 10 years of success reducing dropout rates

Record Staff

After 10 years of work on student retention and academic success in the Eastern Townships, this year is a time to take stock and redefine guidelines for the Partners for educational success in Estrie (Projet PRÉE), a project of the Eastern Townships Table of inter-level cooperation in education (TECIÉ). The results demonstrate that their efforts on educational success have paid off, particularly with respect to the rate of dropouts, according to newly released data from the Quebec Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEES).

Targets and effort that must be maintained

Some of the Estrie targets can be used to measure progress in the Eastern Townships for the last 10 years in school perseverance and educational success. In

all cases, targets have been reached, but efforts must be maintained to prevent losing ground.

In terms of the dropout rate, it has gone down by an average of four percentage points over three years to ultimately go from 25.5 to 21.5 per cent.

For both girls and boys, the average rate over three years of departure without a degree or qualification for the public network decreased by 5.1 points between the triennial 2006-2009 and 2011-2014 and went from 25.5 per cent to 20.4 per cent. Despite a slight increase in this rate in 2014, the overall target was reached.

Gender goals were also identified and reached. The average three-year dropout rate for boys, in the public system, decreased dramatically from 32.2 for 2006-2009 to 24.8 per cent for the 2011-2014. For the same periods, the rate for girls

decreased from 18.6 to 15.8 per cent.

As announced on Tuesday by the Minister the Estrie region MNA Pierre Paradis announced funding of \$591,438 to the PRÉE Project to support its work on student retention and academic success. This support includes \$75,000 already granted for 2015-2016 in the context of a specific agreement on regional mobilization to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation and qualification of young Townshippers during 2011-2016.

"This announcement is timely and will enable us to continue our concerted efforts in the Eastern Townships," said TECIÉ co-chair Christian Provencher. "The funds will help us maintain certain activities during the next year. It is still too early to define the priorities that will be kept. We have begun an analysis of our needs in terms

of educational success and we expect some guidance from the Department for the use of this new leverage".

The year 2016 will be a year of transition for Projet PREE and will new directions defined that need to be acted upon to promote the success of the greatest number of young people. The issues that will be identified will help stay the course in ensuring that the Estrie region is among the best in Quebec in terms of student success.

"These findings regarding the dropout rate speak for themselves: the efforts carried out over the past 10 years and the mobilization around the issue of educational success has led to positive results. But nothing should be taken for granted. We should not give up and the work must continue," said TECIÉ's other co-chair Lucie Laflamme.

Trisomie-21 awareness campaign

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Students at NHES sat in the gym to listen to their principal, Nicole Gregoire, explain the importance of the book and to introduce a short educational video about Down syndrome.

The video interviewed students with Down syndrome and their friends and addressed some common misconceptions. It also explained what causes Down syndrome and discussed some of the challenges that people who have it go through.

The video was followed by a question and answer period with Laura and her parents, Suzelle Bolduc and Mark Sanderson.

The questions varied from what Laura liked to do at home to when Bolduc and Sanderson found out that Laura had Down syndrome.

Both her parents and Laura were happy to answer questions, and further the awareness of what Down syndrome is.

"She's unique," said Bolduc, addressing the question brought up about some of the obstacles Laura has had to overcome. "We have to adapt, we have to take our time."

For the first couple years of her life, Laura was not able to speak, and so communicated through sign language. Down syndrome affects muscles, particularly in the mouth. Now Laura speaks often, both in French and English.

Despite having some difficulties, "she's just like any kid," said Sanderson. Laura loves to colour, ride her bike, play with her friends, and read.

It was her love of reading that set the stage for her photograph in the book. "It's what she loves," Bolduc commented about Laura's passion for books.

The photographs were taken while Laura was at school. Bolduc noted that the photographer was surprised to learn that Laura was attending school, and enrolled in a regular schedule of classes. That made the setting of the photographs just as important.

"The school is wonderful," said Bolduc. Laura started at NHES a little over two years ago. Preparations were made to welcome her into the school, described by Bolduc as, "a big family."

Principal Gregoire admitted that Laura coming to the school meant that they had to adapt. "It took us some time," she said, adding that they had never had someone with Laura's needs before.

The priority was to have good communication with Bolduc and Sanderson to make sure that they were doing all they could for Laura. "We just said try your best. And they have surpassed it," said Sanderson about the support from the school and teachers.

Both parents agreed that the sense of family and stability from the school was a huge benefit to Laura.

Teacher's aide Georgia Angelopoulos has been with

Laura for two years, and is a key part of that stability. She is consistently with Laura, and is able to help her through any obstacles or difficulties she faces. "They're worth it," said Angelopoulos about working with Laura, and other kids who need the extra support.

Gregoire feels the exact same way. "Laura is a ray of sunshine," she commented, and added, "everybody knows her, and everybody loves her".

Laura's fellow students are very comfortable with her, and feel the same way she feels about them. "Laura is very funny," said one student about her classmate.

"We learned a lot," one student said about the assembly. This was part of Gregoire's goal. "If I can raise awareness, that's great." Her hope is that students will take Laura's book home, and their parents will read it, furthering the message.

"It's spreading," she said in regards to the awareness the Société Québécoise de la Trisomie-21 is raising through the book and the exhibitions.

Part of the assembly involved a video of individuals with Down syndrome dancing to 'Happy' by Pharrell Williams. The students of NHES jumped up to dance along, showing unanimous support for Laura and the awareness she is helping to raise.



RACHEL NEWCOMBE

Principal Nicole Gregoire introduced the book and an educational video about Down's Syndrome to NHES students



RACHEL NEWCOMBE

NHES student Laura Bolduc-Sanderson handed out copies of the book to her classmates at the end of the assembly



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