PERSEVERANCE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR FIRST PEOPLES: YOUTH FUSION AS AN INNOVATIVE MODEL

CONTEXT

Early school-leaving is a major social problem in Quebec. Indeed, 25% of young people still abandon school before the age of 20 with no diploma or qualifications. In addition, 90% of young people from Inuit and Cree communities get their high school diploma in five years (37% in the rest of Quebec) and the absentee rate is especially important: it rates at 27.6% in the secondary and at 18.7% in the elementary, according to the Cree school Board’s 2014–2015 Annual Report.

OBJECTIVE

Youth Fusion wishes to foster the perseverance and academic success of young people, including those of the First Peoples, through a comprehensive intervention model culturally appropriate and rooted in communities.

DESCRIPTION

Youth Fusion is a charitable organization created in 2009 by Gabriel Bran Lopez, a young social entrepreneur, who has chosen to develop a new effective response formula for perseverance throughout Quebec.

The formula is both simple in concept and innovative in its application. Youth Fusion hires university students (or recent graduates) as project coordinators to implement and support projects that motivate at-risk youths to excel creatively, stimulating them to become more involved in their academic success, and instill a sense of belonging at school.

It is the only organization to be present every day of the week throughout the school year, in eight northern villages of Nunavik and nine First Nations communities (Cree, Innu, Mohawk), in addition to having a unique partnership with the Aboriginal Student Resource Centre from John Abbott College. In the seventeen communities where the organization is present, 31 university students work (30 hours per week from September to June) as project coordinators, in elementary and secondary schools, to implement 30 suitable projects adapted to local contexts (Arts
and Media, School Engagement, Leadership and Healthy Lifestyles, Science and Robotics or Science and Outdoors). These projects cover nearly 1,800 at-risk youths on a weekly basis, representing 29,000 hours per year directly in schools, classrooms or after school. The unique and innovative Youth Fusion model clearly favours student retention and academic success in communities. The presence and constant commitment of project coordinators therefore create a continuum of activities that are intense, frequent, and similar in both classroom and extracurricular activities.

Youth Fusion wishes to act as a bridge between communities and schools: it offers the opportunity for schools to transcend their own walls by proposing activities in various community organizations, outdoors or on the territory. The idea is not only to reach young people most at risk, especially those suspended or who have already dropped out, but also to work with community members’ expertise so that these young people develop a positive relationship with learning and school.

Enhancement of autochthonous languages, traditional knowledge and local culture through the adoption of an educational model based on experiential learning can mobilize the whole community for youth, to reach young people and encourage them to engage in their lives and their education.

In Kuujjuarapik, participants in the Sciences and Outdoors project developed extensive knowledge of their territory (biology, geology, meteorology) and made a special cross-country skiing trip to the next village, Tasiujaq. At John Abbott College, the Youth Fusion project participants created traditional therapeutic herbal teas, sewed okpiks with the Inuk host; they discover Montreal during cultural outings every two weeks and are also mentoring young people in their home community. Youth Fusion developed video conference meetings between youths from its projects in high school and a John Abbott College student from their community to answer their questions about the college, share their experience, but also keep a strong bond with his home community.

In Puvirnituq, the Leadership and Healthy Lifestyle project participants decided to use the cooking classes offered to them to regularly prepare dinners for Elders in their village. These shared meals are a valuable opportunity for intergenerational exchanges and systematically become a favourite of the participants. In Salluit, the Leadership and Healthy Lifestyle project led to the creation of a student council who shared the lack of space and of meeting opportunities in their village. They developed a community market that takes place once a month; all the villagers can come and sell the products they make. In Inukjuak, the Arts and Media project participants designed a fanzine which recounts tales and legends that their Inuit Elders have passed on to them.

These activities are always executed in collaboration with the school team to ensure the establishment of effective links with the Training Program for Quebec Schools along with a dynamic and welcoming atmosphere in the school. This complementarity facilitates efficient work of university students and teachers. Moreover, the collective approach (in small groups composed of a majority of at-risk youths and a minority of young people who are not at risk) is prioritized rather than an approach focused solely on the individual in order to avoid ostracism.
Youth Fusion also values the importance of creating positive relationships with peers. This is why mentors from the community, high school students, are involved with elementary and high school students or with both, in the same community. This win-win relationship is a rewarding work for mentors and allows young people to have genuine exchanges and a positive outlook on the future. Young people participating in activities are also placed in mentoring and leadership situations by conducting activities for younger people in the community. In Waswanipi for instance, the School Engagement project Coordinator proposes a literacy activity in which sixth-grade students read for kindergarten or first grade pupils. In Salluit and Aupaluk, motivated secondary four and five students were also hired as local trainers, to support the work of the project coordinators. This position provides them with a first employment opportunity (an average of five hours per week), in addition to helping them develop many project management skills as in specialized fields (music, video production, etc.). They are inspiring models for youths of their community.

One of university students’ objectives is to organize success and academic achievement experiences through various activities and create opportunities to celebrate local talent with extraordinary events, such as: the Salluit Art and Music Festival, the Leadership camp and conference, the Robotics Festival, the CLIP short film Festival or local concerts. The whole community can attend young people’s performances and parents meet with teachers in a context other than the parent-teacher meetings. Youth Fusion also seeks to bring the school team and community members to know each other better to improve their relationship and perception of the educational institution within the communities.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF YOUTH FUSION

The following data refer to two anonymous surveys in spring 2015 using Survey Monkey in which respondents participated voluntarily. The first survey was made with students among some 1800 participants in Youth Fusion activities during the 2014-2015 school year, more specifically 218 responding students; the second was administered to the school staff, community members, and other organizations stakeholders, including teachers, principals, behaviour specialists and advisors, namely 64 responding members. The surveys were developed in collaboration with the Centre de recherche et d’intervention sur la réussite scolaire (CRIRES—Research and academic achievement Centre), based at Laval University and specializing in the evaluation of educational programs.

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Centre for Educational Success in Quebec) and statistics are set forth in relation to 218 students as well as 64 staff members who participated in the surveys.

**At-risk youths**

Youth Fusion programs directly involve at-risk youths and tackle the issue of absenteeism in school.
- Over 57% of students surveyed had missed at least one day of school in the week preceding the survey: 25% had missed a day or less, 11% had missed two days, and 21%, three days and more.
- During the past year, 18% of students surveyed seriously considered dropping out of school.
- 71% of students surveyed have participated in Youth Fusion activities each week: 45% attended once or twice per week and 34%, three to five times a week.

**Motivation:** 85% of participating students and 98% of staff claim that Youth Fusion activities have been a motivating factor and improved school attendance. 80% of them have also found that Youth Fusion activities have contributed to youth engagement in their school and their community.

**Social skills:** 99% of members of school teams said that Youth Fusion activities have helped to improve social skills, such as: expression of personality, communication, teamwork and leadership.

**School results:** 80% of surveyed school staff said the Youth Fusion activities support academic goals. 99% of students surveyed felt respected and encouraged by their coordinator.

**Healthy lifestyles:** 84% of students surveyed said that Youth Fusion activities made them more active and healthier.

**Self-esteem:** 100% of the school staff surveyed said that Youth Fusion activities promoted the development of self-esteem and confidence in students. 96% of students surveyed said they were proud of what they had done during Youth Fusion activities.

**CONCLUSION AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Experiential learning is a model that has proved its worth in the communities where Youth Fusion worked. The organization hopes to support more communities who would like to address absenteeism and early school leaving issues with its innovative approach.

**NOTE**

1 Youth Fusion annually offers nearly 6000 events in the participating indigenous communities.

**REFERENCE**