

Education

STEP takes learning into a new direction



Georgetown's STEP program has left good footprints to follow in its first semester of operation in this community.

STEP (Secondary Teen Education Program) expanded to Georgetown in February after the program in Milton became overcrowded. Successful programs have been running in south Halton for about 15 years.

A pilot program in Georgetown opened in the old Wigglesworth School, beside Georgetown High School, with 20 students and two teachers in February. It operates five days a week, from 8:30 a.m. to noon.

Geared to students, aged 16 to 20, it gives them an opportunity to complete their secondary school diploma away from the often stressful and distracting high school setting.

According to Brenda Deshane, head of alternative programs at the Halton District School Board, "STEP is an opportunity for students, who have been asked to leave school, or have decided to leave on their own for personal and academic reasons, to complete their education and learn some skills to make them more ready for work."

For 18-year old Danielle it was an opportunity to get an education after dropping out of school two years ago.

"It's independent. You can do the work when you want to do it; you don't have deadlines, you don't have pressures, and your teachers come to you to see how you're doing in class."

Anthony, 18, likes the convenience of the program that allows him to go to school in the morning and to work in the afternoon. It gives him a chance to earn money and be in a different environment than school.

Afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder, Anthony said being in the smaller class helps him cope. "There's not so many teachers down your back saying 'get to work or I'm going to suspend you'. They give you more chances here when you work; they're not so hard on you but when they need to be hard, they will be."

STEP is independent learning; all the students are working at different levels, different courses at their own pace. The teachers are required change hats frequently and to be competent in several subjects, said Deshane. If the student runs into a problem

with an assignment, the teacher can work with them one-to-one.

Deshane said, "I think the biggest barrier the students have is that they learn at a different pace or learn differently than the mainstream system permits them to."

The new curriculum, implemented by the Ontario government, is having a decided impact on this type of student.

"It's a lot of new material; kids in Grade 9 are taking four different classes per semester. If they get behind in one, they get behind in four, and then they don't want to go," said Deshane. "And then they just continue to get behind, so they spend their whole day in the smoke pit because they don't want to go to class and be asked questions they don't know. It's kind of difficult for them to survive in that atmosphere."

Danielle agrees. "Kids feel overwhelmed from how much school work they have and by Grade 11 you have to basically know what you want to do," she said.

In STEP, the students don't have to do the tests and assignments until they understand the material.

"We are certainly monitoring them for productivity," said Deshane. "It's not a place to come and

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—STEP participant Danielle, 18

'Successes have been tremendous.'
—STEP head Brenda Deshane

hang out. We do try to keep them moving, but they do have the opportunity to learn in their best format.

"They respond very well I think to the fact someone cares whether they're here or not or whether they're producing or not."

"You can benefit from this program, for sure, if you do it the right way. You can do a lot. You can fast track and get school done so quickly— if that's what you want," Danielle said.

Deshane said students have been responding extremely well and the "successes have been tremendous."

"They see success fairly quickly because it's their success, rather than a success that might be regulated. They're pretty much

'And there's not so many teachers down your back...'
—STEP participant Anthony, 18

'They learn at a different pace or learn differently...'
—STEP head Brenda Deshane

responsible for their own success here, in terms of making it

happen for themselves," Deshane said.

There are about 170 students registered in the Halton public board's alternative education program (STEP and TEAM— Teen Education and Motherhood), and that is expected to grow to about 200 when Georgetown's STEP class moves to full capacity— 35 students and three teachers in September. Last year there were 45 Grade 12 graduates from the two programs.

"There's obviously a need, from the number of students out there looking for some form of alternative to the regular," said Deshane. "It seems to me that the kids are getting younger and younger, the ones that are coming to our doors, asking for help. We used to get the 18 and 19 year olds and now we're getting the 16 year olds who are for whatever reason not in the system."

"The more we learn about how people

learn in groups of 30, it is an impossible task (for the teacher) to reach all of them," she explained. "We're basically the resource support for the regular system, and that's how a lot of kids get here. The staff is not available in the regular system (to help the students who fall behind) and the kids fall through the cracks, and this is where they end up."

'The kids are getting younger and younger, the ones that are coming to our doors...'
—STEP head Brenda Deshane

Some of the students are redirected back into the system when they feel confident enough to

handle the workload again or because they need courses not offered by STEP.

"Our returnee rate has risen dramatically in the last couple of years. Last year we had 80 kids across the system come back to us and this year it'll be higher number returning, because I think they do feel that success and they know they can continue on with us until they need go back to the system or graduate," Deshane said.

STEP shares its space and resources at Wigglesworth with TEAM, which has 19 girls, between the ages of 16 and 20 studying in the afternoon. TEAM started out 13 years ago in the Acton Baptist Church and then moved St. George's Church, until moving to the Wigglesworth School last October.

The Ontario Early Years Centre, which is also located in the same building, has been supportive of TEAM, offering the girls a lot of access to materials, said Donna Kerton, STEP/TEAM site co-ordinator.

"It (the proximity of the Early Years Centre) is also a really good environment for the teen mothers," said Kerton, "because they're seeing the interaction of the other adults with their kids."

Anyone interested in learning more about STEP or TEAM, can call Kerton at 905-702-7925.

—By Cynthia Gamble, staff writer



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