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ONTARIO WORKS ON-LINE EDUCATION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, May 25, 2004, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. The Provincial government fund the provision of on-line General Education Development learning options for young single parents through Ontario Works employment funding, and provide 100% funding for home based technological supports (computer and on-line access) required.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides Committee and Council with information and results from the Ontario Works On-line Education Demonstration Project conducted in York Region. In addition, it supports the continuation of this learning option for young parents involved in the Learning Earning and Parenting program.

3. BACKGROUND

During the period of April 2002 to October 2003 the Social Assistance Division participated in a pilot project designed to assess the suitability of an on-line general educational development (GED) learning option for young single parents between the ages of 16 and 22 years enrolled in the Ontario Works LEAP program (an outline of the LEAP Program is provided below). The project, named the LEAP GED – On-line Demonstration Project provided the opportunity for participants to prepare for their Grade 12 equivalency from home using on-line learning technology.

York Region was invited to participate in the pilot project by the Ontario Works Branch of the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). The concept for the project was developed by the Ministry in conjunction with a York Region based not for profit training agency, The Training Renewal Foundation, who provided technical supports to the on-line GED learning, and partners including TV Ontario, who provided equivalency testing.

To support the project the Training Renewal Foundation had received funding from the MCSS Challenge Fund. The Community Services and Housing Department provided participants with childcare, and employment related financial supports for materials, transportation and other program specific expenses, as needed.

3.1 LEAP Program Design

LEAP is a Provincial Ontario Works initiative that assists young single parents between 16 and 22 years of age on Social Assistance in achieving their Grade 12 education, while building parenting and job related skills. The program is mandatory for 16 to 17 year olds and voluntary for those 18 to 22 years of age. The Community Services and Housing Department implemented LEAP in York Region in December 1999.

A national study (*Family Mosaic: Margaret Dechman's Nova Scotia study on Social Exclusion and Social Assistance 2001*) has shown that achieving a Grade 12 education is critical in reducing the need for, and the duration of time on, Social Assistance for young parents. LEAP is designed to meet the individual needs of each participant. It provides referral to regular or alternative educational resources for achieving Grade 12 education or an equivalency. The development needs of the child and parenting skills of the participant are also assessed and an appropriate service plan is agreed to. Referrals to appropriate parenting programs are made for the young parent. In addition, the program provides supports in the areas of career planning, training and job search strategies based on current labour market information. The LEAP participant is very involved in all stages of the development of their individualized service plan with their case coordinator and community service providers.

The LEAP program is also designed to provide a single contact for intake, information, and case management to ensure consistency and support. An 18-week maternity period is provided to support parent/child bonding prior to the parents' participation in educational activities. School and activity attendance and participation is monitored monthly on a formal basis with weekly contact with each young parent being the norm. This approach supports the early identification and resolution of problems.

3.2 LEAP Financial Supports

The LEAP program in York Region provides each participant with a range of financial supports for the educational, parenting and employment components of the program. They include support for childcare, school clothing and supplies, graduation, post secondary entrance fees, tuition fees for alternative education, parenting and employment sessions, as well as fees for recreation and literacy programs. Support for transportation to and from activities is also provided. No childcare user fees are charged to participants.

3.3 Integrated Services

Childcare is critical to success in the LEAP program for young parents who require focused time to study and attend parenting activities. The Social Assistance LEAP Case Coordinator works closely with the Family and Children's Services Program Coordinator to obtain quality childcare for the child/children while the participant is in the LEAP program.

In addition, Community Services and Housing Department and Health and Emergency Medical Services staff have developed a LEAP Referral Protocol related to the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program to access the services of a family visitor under

direction of a public health nurse. A registered dietician from the Health and Emergency Services Medical Department also provides nutritional counselling to LEAP participants.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 LEAP GED Demonstration Project Components

The LEAP GED On-Line Demonstration Project consisted of two separate phases of intake over the period of April 2002 to October 2003. A total of 21 participants took part in the pilot project.

The project included the following components and supports:

- Young parents selected to take part in the pilot project attended a two week group session that included: an orientation to computer hardware and software, instructor supports to facilitate study over the internet, as well as information on parenting skills.
- Participants were provided with a free recycled computer through the Training Renewal Foundation for their use at home to study over the internet.
- Learning support was provided by a staff teacher from the Training Renewal Foundation who also conducted ongoing monitoring of progress throughout the program.

In addition to the above components, a weekly learning support and networking group session was incorporated in the second phase of the pilot after the initial two week training session to facilitate enhanced support to participant's on-line learning at home. The incorporation of this component was introduced following feedback from participants in the first phase of the program. Prior to this, most learning supports were provided on-line or by telephone.

While the program took into account the challenges facing young parents and allowed for time flexibility in regard to the various components of the program, on average it took seven months for a participant to complete the program components.

4.2 Participant Outcomes

Participant outcomes from the GED On-line Project are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1
LEAP GED Participant Overall Outcomes

Status of Participants	Total
Number of Enrolled Participants	21
Number of Participants Completed Program	9
Number of Participants Did Not Complete Program	12

Table 2 reflects the results achieved for those participants that completed the program.

Table 2
LEAP GED Participant Program Completion Outcomes

Status of Participants	Total
Fully Completed GED Preparation	9
Written and Passed Grade 12 Equivalency	1
Employed Part-time	1
Enrolled in Post Secondary	5
Planning for Post Secondary Enrolment	4

4.3 Program Evaluation

The LEAP GED Demonstration Project allowed a range of important information to be gathered. Participants who completed the Demonstration Project reported increased confidence, self esteem, and pride in what they were able to achieve. All of those who completed the GED Learning portion, plan to write their Grade 12 equivalency test. In addition, all have indicated an intention to pursue post secondary studies with over half of them already having enrolled.

Of those who did not complete the program four left the program as a result of securing employment, one left due to a serious personal matter, and the remaining seven participants were unable to complete the program due to a range of issues including the complexity of balancing the demands of home based learning with parenting. These participants were redirected to other educational supports.

Overall, it was concluded that home based learning can effectively meet the needs of many young parents when regular face to face supports are in place that meet learning style needs, and address isolation. For some, however, this mode of learning is not the most appropriate thus more thorough orientation and some screening processes are needed to ensure that the best learning option is chosen.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services is currently reviewing the results of this project to inform future planning. As there are costs associated with the provision of this type of educational option, the Ministry will, as part of its assessment, need to take into account support that would be provided to enable service delivery agents to offer this type of programming on an ongoing basis.

Provided that adequate funding and program supports were available, this model would be welcomed as a viable educational option for York Region LEAP participants in the future.

4.4 Relationship to Vision 2026

The LEAP GED On-line Demonstration project meets the Vision 2026 objectives of engaged communities and a responsive region through effective training partnerships.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The GED On-line Demonstration project was delivered at an approximate cost of \$50,500. Table 3 outlines how funding was provided.

Table 3
LEAP GED Program Funding

Funding Source	Amount	Cost Share
MCSS Challenge Fund	\$30,000	100% Provincial
Ontario Works Employment Funding Envelope		
• Learning Supports (books, materials, etc.)	\$10,500	80/20 Provincial/ Municipal
• Employment Related Expenses (child care, transportation, etc.)	\$10,000	80/20 Provincial/ Municipal
Total Cost: \$50,500	Provincial: \$46,400	Municipal: 4,100

In addition to the above, clients were provided with donated computers through the Training Renewal Foundation at no cost. Funding for computers for home use would need to be considered as a separate item in future funding assessments, as it may not always be possible to access no cost equipment suitable for this type of program on an ongoing basis.

Financial review of the Demonstration project's total cost of approximately \$50,500 was undertaken utilizing two levels of analysis:

- Cost based on the total pilot participation of 21 clients resulting in a cost of approximately \$2,400 per participant
- Cost based on the total number of clients (9) who successfully completed the program resulting in a cost of approximately \$5,600 per participant.

While the total cost per participant was significantly higher when analyzed against successful program completion, it is important to point out that this was a Pilot Project aimed at assessing a new approach to learning for young parents. As a result of this project, valuable information was gathered. The application of the lessons learned, outlined in this report, will promote more successful future participant program selection processes, supports and outcomes, resulting in the maintenance of lower costs per participant.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

There is no direct impact on local municipalities. However, lower Regional costs of assistance that may result from providing alternative educational supports to young single parents to lessen their reliance on Social Assistance is of benefit to local municipalities.

7. CONCLUSION

The LEAP GED On-line Demonstration project successfully piloted an alternative approach to assisting young parents to pursue their Grade 12 equivalency. This approach provides a viable option to increase the participant's education and employability. While twelve clients did not complete the program, four withdrew because they had already secured employment. For the nine who completed, all nine have indicated an intention to attain their grade-12 equivalency and pursue post secondary education, increasing their employability and future financial independence prospects. It is recommended that the province provide funding to support the continued provision of this valuable on-line learning approach.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.