INTEGRATION THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Employment is a key factor in the integration of immigrants into a community, and in turn, the integration of immigrants whose first official language is English is a key factor in strengthening the vitality of the English-speaking minority. This is especially true in the Eastern Townships, which after decades of youth outmigration, has a comparatively low number of persons aged 18-44. This essay describes four recent initiatives by Townshippers' Association in the Eastern Townships of Quebec which are aimed at helping English-speaking minority youth, including immigrants, gain employment; www.topportunity.ca, Make Way for YOUth, Theatre Townships and the Health & Social Services Human Resources Development Project—Brome-Missisquoi and Haute-Yamaska.

INTRODUCTION

EASTERN TOWNSHIPS ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

The region historically known as the Eastern Townships is a largely rural area east of Montreal and south of Quebec City. It encompasses the cities of Sherbrooke, Granby and Drummondville, and all of the Estrie administrative region, and adjacent MRCs (Municipalité régionale de comté) in the Montérégie, Centre-du-Québec and Chaudière-Appalaches regions.

The Townshippers' Association, a non-profit non-partisan organization founded in 1979, has the mission of promoting the interests of the English-speaking community in the historic Eastern Townships, strengthening its cultural identity, and encouraging the full participation of the English-speaking population within the community at large.

Approximately 42,000 persons in the Townships have English as their first official language spoken (FOLS-E), comprising 6% of the total population. This minority population is scattered across the territory, with the highest concentration of English speakers in the MRCs of Brome-Missisquoi and Memphrémagog, at 24% and 18%, respectively, of the population (Canada Census, 2006).

Overall, the Townships English-speaking minority is missing its middle generation, aged 18-44. In this age range, it has proportionally fewer persons than in the French-speaking majority, and those who remain have, on average, lower levels of education, employment and revenue than do their French-speaking counterparts or English-speaking elders (Floch & Warnke, 2004). Within this context, Townshippers' Association gives particular importance to strategies addressing youth, employment and in-migration of English speakers.

Recognizing the right of free movement, and the natural tendency of many young people to explore the world, expand their horizons and follow perceived opportunity, the philosophy underlying Townshippers' strategies does not contain the word "retention." Instead, our focus is on opening doors of opportunity for young people already living here, those who have left the region but who would prefer to return if economically feasible, and those who are interested in moving here from elsewhere. Our community research showed us that many English-speaking teenagers felt that economic and employment opportunities were lacking in the Townships, despite a very attractive quality of life and their high level of bilingualism (Brault, Garber, Karpenko & Kishchuk, 2005).

Ironically, the Eastern Townships contain a number of very active economic sectors offering employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. We drew a link between attitude and action: if disheartenment and disengagement are powerful barriers to perceiving opportunity and pursuing it, then perceiving attainable opportunity could be a powerful antidote to these attitudes. We anticipated, therefore, that connecting English-speaking youth, newcomers and potential newcomers to relevant opportunities would help motivate more people in these groups to become engaged in the region's economic, social and cultural life.

Among these target groups, new immigrants are of special interest, because their barriers to getting jobs are the greatest, yet their attitudes may be the most optimistic. Given the depleted numbers of the English-speaking minority, integrating immigrants whose first official language is English could help strengthen its vitality. The Townshippers' Association is working with partners to develop an initiative specifically targeting immigrants who are more comfortable in English than in French, and we are hoping for financial support for this initiative in the coming months. This initiative will build upon our current initiatives aiming to inform English-speaking youth about employment and entrepreneurial opportunity in the Townships.

INITIATIVES TO FOSTER INTEGRATION THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

The following are brief descriptions of four recent or current initiatives at the Townshippers' Association focusing on integration through employment. They are: a website www.topportunity.ca, Make Way for YOUth—Estrie, Theatre Townships, and the Health & Social Services Human Resources Development Project—Brome-Missisquoi and Haute-Yamaska.

www.topportunity.ca

The www.topportunity.ca website is a gateway to various employment, entrepreneurial and educational opportunities in the Townships, as well as other initiatives by Townshippers' Association. Information is offered in English, with links to relevant resources, whether they exist in English or French. The site describes the top 40 job prospects in the Townships, based on demand, including careers requiring university, CEGEP, high school or vocational education. For each of these top 40 prospects, the site lists training or educational programs that provide entry level qualifications and sources of financial support for students.

The site also features weekly postings of job openings which require English, entrepreneurial resources and success stories. These openings can be posted by employers, but the majority are selected, translated and posted, with permission, by a Townshippers' staff member.

This strategy has the advantage of high visibility for anyone with an internet connection—youth, immigrants, perspective newcomers and others, worldwide. If you google "jobs" and "Eastern Townships," www.topportunity.ca is one of the top resources to come up. Traffic in 2008 was 28,000 unique visitors. We are told that high school orientation counsellors in the Townships refer students to Topportunity as a resource to help them map their career and educational paths after graduating.

MAKE WAY FOR YOUTH

Make Way for YOUth—Estrie, is the only project for English speakers in Quebec among more than 60 *Place aux jeunes* projects that foster migration by young graduates aged 18-35 into rural regions. This movement also aims to prevent the exodus of rural youth to urban centres, encourages the social engagement of rural youth, facilitate the employment of youth in rural areas, sensitizes youth and their significant others as well as decision makers to the impact of the youth exodus, and stimulates the creation of new enterprises in rural areas.

Each year, the project offers 42 hours of exploratory activities for new or soon-to-be graduates from outside the region. They are introduced to community leaders, prospective employers, entrepreneurial opportunities, and quality-of-life factors that respond to their career and personal interests. Past activities have included networking events in local communities, participating in Townshippers' Day, learning about new rural opportunities based on new technologies, visiting businesses, touring job fairs, snowshoeing, theatre, and so on.

The Make Way for YOUth migration agent also offers individual support to persons wanting to settle in the region. Support can include job search coaching, referrals to entrepreneurial support resources, finding housing, schools for children, and more. The agent also posts job openings which require English language skills, cultural events and recreational activities in the region on www.accrodesregions.qc.ca, the vast resource website of *Place aux jeunes en region*, and carries out activities in schools to inform teenagers about employment opportunities in the region.

Challenges in carrying out this project include, inevitably, raising the funds required to do so: A minimum of $8,000 is required in addition to the support offered by *Place aux jeunes en region*. In addition, extra time, energy and finances are required to carry out a visibility strategy in universities and other educational settings frequented by English speakers and which are not targeted by the Quebec-wide *Place aux jeunes* communications. Finally,

our experience has been that the *Place aux jeunes* model, while extremely effective, does not account for certain characteristics peculiar to the English-speaking minority. Among these are its population distribution and its members' identification with the Eastern Townships as a whole rather than the Estrie administrative region.

The strength of this approach lies in the personal contact and support offered by the migration agent, community members and mentors, targeting persons who are most likely to act on perceived opportunity to integrate into the Townships English-speaking minority and community at large. These include a high proportion of immigrants. Almost 50% of the 2008-2009 participants in Make Way for YOUth—Estrie were from outside Canada, representing no less than 14 different countries (Tables 1 & 2). In this context, our migration agent has found that helping gifted and well-educated young immigrants obtain employment in the region is extremely difficult. Barriers may include unconscious biases based on ethnicity, religion, culture or language.

However, one of the most rewarding discoveries of this project has been the readiness of local community members to rally to welcome the potential newcomers from other countries and other parts of Canada, and the excellent collaboration our agent has experienced with French-speaking *Place aux jeunes* migration agents who share our territory.

THEATRE TOWNSHIPS

Through the Youth Employment Strategy (Skills Link Program) of Service Canada, Townshippers' Association carried out two Theatre Townships projects, created and led by Christopher Freeman, Artistic Director. These project aimed to help youth aged 16-30 overcome barriers to employment, develop employability skills and knowledge, and promote education and skill development as being key to labour market participation.

How it worked: A group of young people who were underemployed were selected, and enabled to form a theatre troupe. As a team, they researched and wrote original theatre pieces, designed sets and constructed them, rehearsed and produced their theatre pieces, marketed them, sold tickets, and fundraised. All these initiatives, achieved through teamwork, build an important employability skill base for jobs in any field. In addition, through case management and workshops, each participant developed job search skills and a career action plan.

Theatre Townships—Mansonville had 10 participants over a 24-week period in 2008. Theatre Townships —Stanstead had 8 participants over a 20-week period in 2009. Among the 18 participants in the two projects, 15 successfully completed the employability program; 3 left early in order to return to school or get a job; 1 completed an internship and subsequently was employed in the career of her choice. At project end, almost all the participants reported having achieved a significant re-orientation in their career path, and either had jobs or had returned to school (Table 3).

A challenge inherent in this approach was the time-consuming administrative requirements of the funding agency, and rather stringent funding rules. It is difficult to anticipate every contingency in an emergent project such as this one, where new theatre pieces were being created and produced. Unavoidable costs were incurred which were not covered by the funding, even though the overall budget was well respected.

We also discovered that employers are wary of offering internships—even though salaries would be fully reimbursed—because they perceived participants as "problem" youth, by virtue of their taking part in an employability project.

The greatest reward of this approach was to see a group of creative youth gain a sense of direction, self-confidence and hope for the future. The intensive attention and skilled interventions by the group facilitators, as well as the team-work and mutual support among group members were, we believe, key factors.

Health & Social Services Human Resources Development Project—Brome-Missisquoi and Haute-Yamaska. The Townshippers' Association also leads a fourth employment initiative, which recruits English-speaking health and social services professionals to work in institutions in the Brome-Missisquoi and Haute-Yamaska MRCs. Similar projects exist in the Estrie region, led by the Centre hospitalier universitaire de Sherbrooke (CHUS), and in the Thetford Mines area, led by the Megantic English-speaking Development Corporation (MCDC). All three initiatives are part of the province-wide Training and Human Resources Project of McGill University, supported by Health Canada and enjoying the collaboration of the Quebec government ministries of health and education and many health and social service institutions in areas of Quebec where more bilingual personnel are needed.

Briefly, our coordinator recruits bilingual students who are interested in exploring career opportunities in the western part of the Eastern Townships, and arranges internship or externship (summer jobs) placements for them. He acts as a broker between the educational programs responsible for establishing internships for their students, and institutions who are seeking bilingual personnel. He ensures adequate supervision is in place, and arranges transportation and living facilities for the interns, orients them to the region, and supports them in their job search.

Based on existing needs for health and social services personnel among institutions in the area, interns have included students in the fields of speech therapy, social work, nursing and physiotherapy. An annual initiative of this project is to bring a group of five speech therapy interns and their supervisor from McGill University to the Eastern Townships School Board for a 6-week speech therapy clinic in Cowansville. The coordinator also collaborates in an initiative to recruit family doctors for the area.

One of the challenges is to reach busy students in urban-based institutions with the message that they can do an all-living-expenses-paid internship in a rural environment with a great quality of life. Another is to fit out-of-town internships into the schedules of the educational programs which sometimes require students to pursue part-time internships and coursework simultaneously, rather than dedicating a separate block of time to internships.

This initiative depends largely on the collaboration of a wide array of partners—and progress in this area has been excellent. The results have been good: In total, 21 internships or externships were arranged between 2006 to 2010. Obviously, this project benefits both the English-speaking minority and the community at large in two ways: First, by attracting young, educated newcomers to the community, and second, by addressing the desperate demand for skilled, bilingual health and social service professionals in the region and, in particular, by improving the chances of services in English being available to those in need.

CONCLUSION

Historically, English speakers in the Eastern Townships come from relatively diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, compared to the French-speaking majority. This, along with the experience of being a minority, uniquely equips this community-within-a-community to help welcome new immigrants into our region. Townshippers' outreach to new immigrants who have learned English in their country of origin can be advantageous to the community at large, through easing the adjustment period while they master French.

Reaching out to persons whose first official language spoken is English seems an obvious means of maintaining the minimum vitality of our community, both in terms of population numbers as well as in terms of cultural identity and vitality. Another potential asset that new immigrants bring to our community is a sense of optimism and willingness to invest their efforts into the region.

We at Townshippers' Association anticipate capitalizing on future contributions from English-speaking immigrants towards the development of our minority community, enabling the English-speaking community to better contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of the Townships community at large. Central to this overall aim are our initiatives to integrate both English-speaking youth and new immigrants into our community through connecting them to employment opportunities.

REFERENCES

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