



eva's

**BREAKING  
BARRIERS TO  
EDUCATION:  
EVA'S EDUCATION  
PROGRAM**



Eva's Education Program is a proud recipient of Toronto Foundation's 2016 Vital Ideas Award

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# BREAKING BARRIERS TO EDUCATION: EVA'S EDUCATION PROGRAM

## INTRODUCTION

This manual provides an overview of approaches and promising practices of Eva's Education Program for youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness. It was made possible through support from KPMG and the Vital Toronto Fund at the Toronto Foundation.



TORONTO  
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Deepest thanks to Eva's Team members who developed this manual:

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## ABOUT EVA'S

Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth is an award-winning organization that provides shelter, transitional housing, and programming to help homeless and at-risk youth reach their potential to lead productive, self-sufficient, and healthy lives. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, 123 youth aged 16 to 24 find safe shelter and support in our facilities every night. Eva's gives youth the tools to transition out of homelessness permanently.

Eva's is named in honour of Eva Smith, a Toronto community leader who noticed that youth at-risk and those who were homeless were unrecognized and unsupported. Her advocacy led to the opening of our first facility, Eva's Place, and Eva's now runs three facilities in the City of Toronto.

- ◆ **Eva's Phoenix:** townhouse-style transitional housing for 50 youth, providing education support and employment training.
- ◆ **Eva's Place:** 40-bed emergency shelter and home to the Family Reconnect Program.
- ◆ **Eva's Satellite:** 33-bed emergency shelter that also specializes in harm reduction for youth with substance use and mental health needs.

## ABOUT EVA'S PHOENIX

Eva's Phoenix provides housing for 50 youth aged 16 to 24 for up to a full year. We provide youth in residence as well as youth in the community with educational support and employment and independent living skills. Youth at Eva's Phoenix live in shared townhouse-style units with access to common community spaces including a teaching kitchen and study areas. While at Eva's Phoenix, youth develop the skills to live independently through goal-setting exercises, workshops, and hands-on programs delivered in a supportive environment. Major activities during a young person's stay at Eva's Phoenix include gaining employment experience, saving money to fund their transition to permanent housing, and meeting educational goals.

## BACKGROUND: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND EDUCATION

*Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*<sup>1</sup> provides insight into the scope and implications of youth homelessness in Canada. The survey includes 1,103 youth respondents from across Canada between 12 and 27 years of age.

Here are some important findings from the survey:

- ◆ 57.8% of youth reported some kind of involvement with child protection services. Youth who left home for the first time before age 16 reported even higher levels of child protection involvement (73.3%).
- ◆ 29.5% of youth identified as LGBTQ2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two spirit).
- ◆ 30.6% identified as Indigenous and 28.2% identify as members of racialized communities.

It is also no surprise that homelessness creates major disruptions in schooling and that homeless youth face multiple barriers to education. 65% report not finishing high school, compared to only 9% Canadian youth in the general population. At the same moment, the National Survey found that almost 74% of youth respondents who had dropped out of high school have a strong desire to return to school.

The survey also found that 50% of homeless youth were tested for a learning disability at school and fully 83% were bullied in school. LGBTQ2S and gender non-binary youth reported the highest levels of bullying. Overall, homeless youth reported that learning and physical disabilities posed significant challenges to their success in school.

Mental health is also a major factor in a young person's learning, development, and well-being. Over 84% of homeless youth reported high symptoms of distress, 42% reported attempting suicide at least once, and 35% had been hospitalized for drug overdose at least once. While only 7.6% of Canadians are victims of violent crime, 60% of homeless youth reported experiencing violent crime. With such a high likelihood of sexual and physical violence, not to mention the traumatic nature of homelessness itself, it's no wonder that homeless youth experience high rates of mental health concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Sean Kidd & Kaitlin Schwan. (2016). *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

## STATISTICS IN PRACTICE

Results of the national survey reflect the experiences of the diverse young people who access services at Eva's at large, and specifically, Eva's Phoenix. They demonstrate the importance of creating programs and services that respond to unique barriers and discriminations that homeless youth face. They also serve as a reminder that young people who experience homelessness carry unique strengths, resilience, and dreams that must be honoured and built upon.

Education programming tailored to homeless youth is all the more critical considering the reality that the mainstream education system is not designed to meet the needs of students who experience homelessness. In general, the system functions best when students have a stable home and parents/guardians who provide support such as helping with homework, paying for supplies, and advocating for student needs in the classroom. Students who are homeless often do not have these supplementary supports and schools are not equipped to provide it.

## EVA'S EDUCATION PROGRAM

**"If you are able to learn—that is success. Shutting down is failure." (Moussa Nyabenda, Education Coordinator)**

**Goal: connect every young person in our care with educational opportunities to equip and prepare them with academic credentials and skills, which lead to work opportunities and sustainable housing.**

Eva's Education Program was created in 2014 to respond to the stated needs and desires of young people served by Eva's. They recognized the importance of better education to improved employment, housing, and quality of life outcomes.

Housed at Eva's Phoenix transitional housing and employment training facility, the Education Program facilitates reintegration of homeless youth with academic programs and assists them to plan toward their educational goals as they move toward living independently in the community.

Some youth who participate in the program have dropped out of high school and/or have not been able to pursue post-secondary programs. Most face multiple barriers and lack the resources needed to access education. Some have not been in formal academic settings for a while and some have had negative experiences in school settings such as bullying and curricula that doesn't reflect their communities and histories. As such, we provide homeless youth specialized supports they need to re-engage with education and grow in confidence and knowledge as they navigate school systems in pursuit of their learning goals.

Through the Education Program, youth gain:

- access to supports and resources that help them re-engage and/or continue with education
- help with identifying academic interests and setting academic goals
- support with developing and implementing their own individual learning plans
- help with enrolling in General Education Development (GED) programs and securing their GED
- confidence to pursue higher education

- help with exploring post-secondary education options and determining which are best-suited to them
- support with pre-admission English/math tests for mature students
- support with academic applications (e.g. securing transcripts/reference letters; interview preparation)
- insight into post-secondary life and maintaining balance while pursuing school
- understanding of financial aid options (e.g. scholarships, bursaries, student loans) and help identifying the best options for their circumstances
- help with applying for financial aid
- connection to online learning opportunities and resources (e.g. Khan Academy, Cool School)
- access to Eva's student bursaries, which provide financial support for educational pursuits
- connection with tutors
- access to onsite homework club with peer and staff support

When Eva's launched the Education Program at Eva's Phoenix, only a few residents per year were accessing school opportunities—typically less than five. In our first year of operation, half of our residents ended up accessing education, and that number continued to rise year over year. Since then, it's clear that residents who go back to school experience improved self-confidence and grow in their desire to continue learning and bettering their lives.

## PROMISING PROGRAM PRACTICES

**“Everyone has something that they do really well without having to think about it. How did you master that? Let's reproduce that learning strategy over and over on something new.” (Jim Woodbridge, Manager of Employment and Training)**

### TRUST-BUILDING AND TRAUMA-INFORMED

Trust-building is key to Eva's Education Program as a component of a broader trauma-informed approach. Program participants often express trauma as a result of their experiences of homelessness, which can also link to their negative experiences in the education system. It is no wonder that the thought of re-engagement with school can be anxiety-provoking.

Our program staff engage youth gradually, building youth confidence that staff are truly interested in supporting their learning goals. Staff provide space and support for youth to start by researching educational options and sharing what intrigues them. This allows them to gain a sense of control over their own educational project.

It's important to note that re-engagement with school is often similarly gradual for homeless youth. For example, a young person might want to begin with part-time classes in a supportive alternative school environment or with online courses to rebuild that core sense of safety and achievement. They may want to audit a class before taking it, which can help reduce the stress of school and course selection. They may also want to talk with students who are already enrolled to get a sense of their experiences. We have learned how important it is to allow this exploration process to happen naturally at the pace of the program participant.

When we first launched the Education Program, we automatically scheduled appointments between program staff and Eva's Phoenix residents. Of course, we quickly learned that the approach would not be a success. Not all youth were ready to discuss school. Program staff

decided to take a more indirect approach, seeking out residents and listening to them in a supportive, open manner. If youth exhibited discomfort, staff encouraged them to do their own independent research on their education options and life goals. They encouraged youth to drop back in when they felt ready. Care was taken not to overwhelm youth or prescribe an educational outcome. This approach has proven to be much more successful, and we have found that the initial trust-building process with young people usually takes about a month.

Trust is best built when education support staff work from a deep understanding of the scope of issues that homeless youth face, especially mental health, trauma, and experiences of criminalization and interaction with the legal system. In addition to this professional knowledge, it is important that staff can connect to the lived experiences, realities, and intersectional backgrounds of youth.

## TAILORED LEARNING

There is no one “right method” that a young person should use to build on their education, and educational opportunities themselves exist on a broad spectrum. Youth may need and want to pursue an array of options, such as remedial literacy support, basic skills upgrading, alternative education, standard classrooms, night school, GED testing to gain an Ontario High School Equivalency Certificate, community college bridging programs and regular community college programs, vocational college programs, and university programs. Eva’s Education Program approach is flexible enough to suit the diversities, needs, and desires of the individual participant.

For example, jumping into a 5-day per week class schedule can be too sudden and stressful for a young person returning to school, and it can be a set up for failure. In these cases, our staff negotiate with education programs and institutions to find the best setting for the participant, such as an alternative school with flexible and fewer hours per day. A part-time school schedule can give students an opportunity to earn money and manage their energy and time both inside and outside the classroom.

We have found that it’s often better for youth to do fewer courses and get better grades than to be overloaded, and we aim to foster the right mix that will support lifelong learning rather than cramming too many outcomes into a short timeframe.

We believe that it’s important to take a supportive role and foster young peoples’ independent goal-setting and decision-making. We know that when youth feel stuck and someone else steps in to make tough decisions for them, it rarely leads to successful outcomes and can create an unhealthy power dynamic. Instead, our education support staff encourage young people to take the time they need to develop their own learning plans. Rather than prescribing a learning plan, staff ask key prompting and probing questions to help a participant work through the components of their learning plan. Staff help by making sure that essential resources are identified and arranged with plenty of time for youth to be able to move forward and achieve their goals. Staff monitor the participant’s readiness and help them find a suitable learning situation that will allow them slowly build back their own learning successes.

In our experience, participants involved in post-secondary education tend to be more autonomous in working toward their educational goals and will approach staff when they need help. High school students tend to require more proactive support. This is not at all unexpected given young peoples’ typical developmental stage in high school versus post-secondary

schooling. It is important for us to have the skills, knowledge, and sensitivity to be able to provide tailored, case-by-case help for the array of youth in our program.

## POSITIVE TIES AND ROUTINES

Youth homelessness so often interrupts schooling as it weakens the social and community relationships, daily routines, and habits that are conducive to success in the mainstream education system. Education systems and institutions are often best suited towards those students with high levels of support and stability, who have tools and resources to maintain a regular schedule. On top of that, curricula and teaching styles of mainstream education systems and institutions often fail to mirror the histories, realities, and communities of many homeless youth. In other words, mainstream education practices as we know them easily disengage students at highest risk of homelessness and housing instability, unless students receive specialized supports with accessing them such as those offered by Eva's Education Program.

A young person who is homeless often experiences chaotic sleeping and activity patterns that shift wildly from day-to-day in a context high stress and marginalization. Eva's Education Program intentionally supports youth to be able to start a manageable and regular school schedule, which can help create new routines and patterns, bolster the building of skills that improve school and employment achievements, and grow healthy community relationships. We also help youth prioritize their schooling alongside work and other responsibilities.

Residents who live at Eva's Phoenix often have relationships with other residents who are going to school—they may even be roommates. We often notice that the positive school experience of a peer can help encourage a resident to consider school themselves. This serves as a reminder that peer mentorship, even in an informal process, can be a powerful influence on school participation and success. Young people are brilliant at assisting other young people to achieve their goals.

## SUPPORTIVE ADVOCACY

Education program staff act as advocates in school systems and institutions. They make sure that participants get any and all benefits and subsidies that will help them move forward with their learning goals. These include materials and books, tuition support, and assistance with transportation to and from school (e.g. public transit fare, route planning, initial accompaniment). At the same time, we support students to build up their own resources by working part or full-time or accessing supports such as financial assistance through Ontario Works or computers through Renewed Computer Technology.

Eva's Education Program currently provides participants some access to school supplies and financial assistance to register for supplies such as subsidized computers. We also help with costs of some certifications (e.g. food handler, security training). These supports are offered on a case-by-case basis with the main emphasis on helping participants access and earn funds to support their own education, wherever possible.

We also find creative ways to help participants get recognition for the community-based or "non-traditional" learning they have done or are in the process of doing. For example, there are instances where other programming offered at Eva's Phoenix such as our Construction and Building Maintenance Training and Graphic Communications and Print Training can count for a high school credit. This can be particularly significant for young people who are close to graduating secondary school and can benefit from applied training at the same time.

Finally, the program staff provide homework support and extra tutoring on a casual, flexible drop-in basis. The kind of support youth require include math and reading comprehension tutoring sessions, which last between thirty minutes to an hour.

## PROGRAM RESULTS

There is no question that education is a significant factor in the lives of homeless youth, even in the midst of their often stressful and difficult circumstances. Nearly 63% of all residents at Eva's Phoenix are working on their education in some manner—53% of all residents are working on their secondary school diploma or its equivalency, and 28% of all residents take up post-secondary education. Young people have a remarkable drive to learn.

The reality is that young people experiencing homelessness are determined to build their education. It's our privilege and responsibility to help them get and stay on that path.

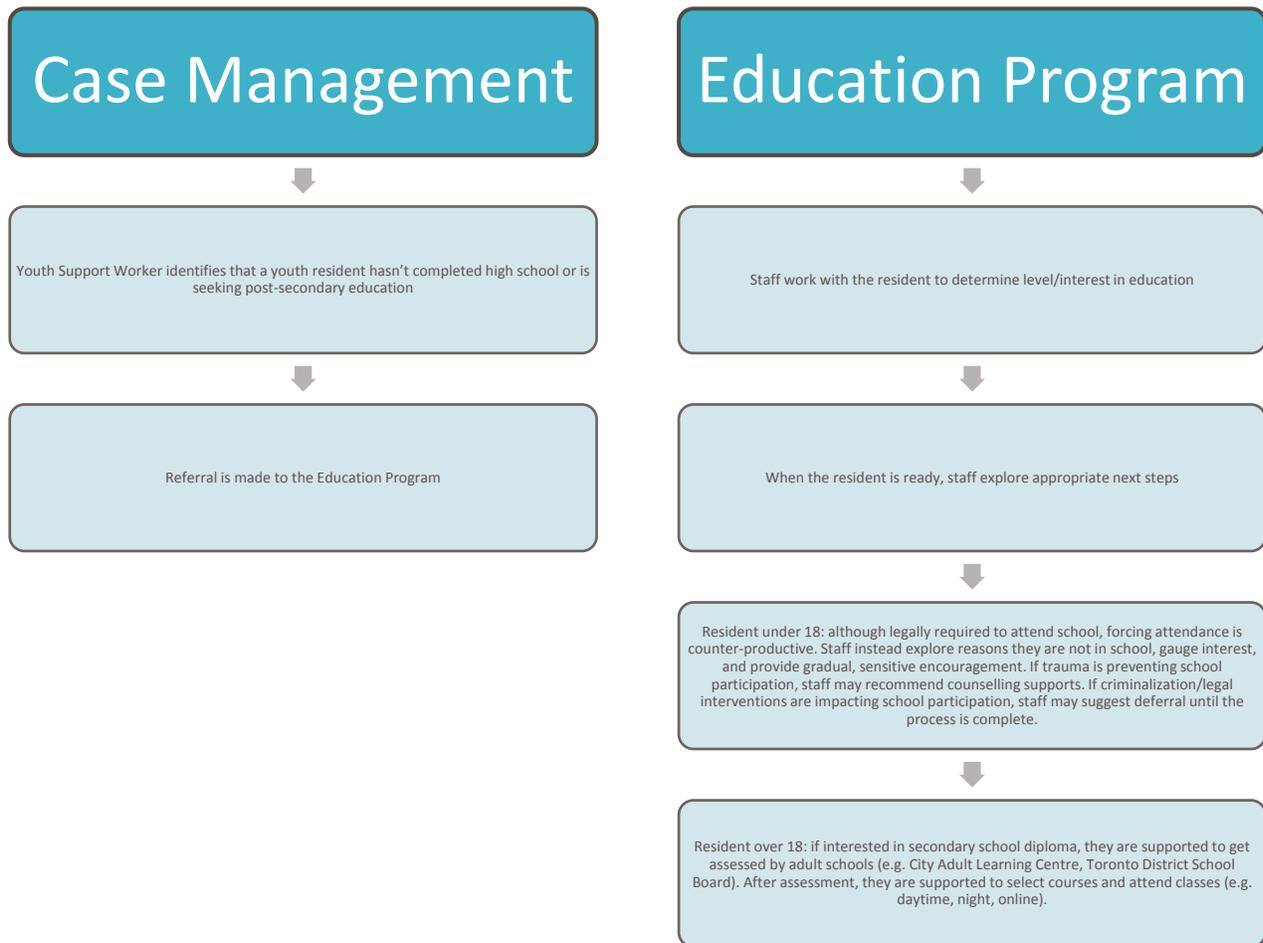
Much of the research on youth homelessness, including the national survey itself, demonstrates that education and employment supports are key to help youth get and stay housed. From the inception of the Education Program to February 2017, we found that 53% of all Eva's Phoenix residents went on to stable housing. Of the youth that were housed, 88.9% were engaged with school or had completed school, 24.1% had completed their education prior to coming to Eva's Phoenix, and 64.8% worked with the Education Coordinator. In this group of former residents, 8.3% had their GED, 13.0% were still in high school, 26.9% had their Grade 12 diploma, and 38% were engaged in post-secondary education. These numbers suggest a strong link between better education and stable housing.

Upon exiting the program, 55% of participants complete their schooling goals and 77% are still engaged in schooling. The higher number for those still engaged in schooling represents those who have taken up and are attending post-secondary education.

## FLOW OF SUPPORTS

This section gives you a step-by-step breakdown of how young people often come into Eva's Education Program and receive supports they need, depending on their life circumstances and learning tracks.

### INITIAL INTAKE



### TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD ASSESSMENT (FOR ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL DIPLOMA)

- ◆ Program staff complete an Academic Diagnostic Assessment with youth participant. Results determine the development of an Individual Education Plan.
  - If youth can attend regular classes, staff refer them to a regular high school stream.
  - If youth require specialized and individual support, staff refer them to an alternative school. They may attend part-time and/or take online classes. If working at the same time, staff work with the school to explore possibilities for youth to get credit for their employment.
- ◆ Staff support youth to access life skills training and community volunteer hours required to complete high school.

## GENERAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

- If a youth participant needs too many high school credits to complete their diploma in a reasonable time, staff help them explore GED assessment testing with community partners (e.g. West Neighbourhood House, Frontier College).
- After the assessment, necessary subjects are completed through supported self-study (online or textbook).
- After the preparation is complete, staff support youth to do final tests at a designated testing centre.

## SKILLS UPGRADING PROGRAM

- If the GED Academic Diagnostic Assessment indicates that a youth participant requires additional help to bring their math and reading up to secondary school levels, staff refer participant to a Skills Upgrading Program.
- The participant is supported to attend evening classes per week to work on math and English.
- Once skills are achieved, the participant is supported to join larger day time upgrading classes.
- Once the participant gains needed skills, staff support them to move on to pursue secondary school or GED equivalent.

## POST SECONDARY/HIGHER LEARNING

- Staff support youth participant to research programs/career paths (e.g. online).
- Staff support participant's access to free university/college math and writing courses, which help students adapt to post-secondary environments prior to embarking on diploma/degree programs.
- Staff may support participant in conducting informational interviews with people in career paths of interest and visiting relevant workplaces.
- Staff may help participant access free pre-apprenticeship programs through community colleges, depending on trade of interest (e.g. fashion, culinary arts, construction).
- Staff may support participant with auditing relevant classes.
- Staff may support participant with seeking advice from academic counsellors.
- Staff may support participants with accessing course descriptions, determining if courses meet their educational needs, and completing pre-requisites if needed.
- Staff help the youth participant assess their finances, explore options (e.g. work, scholarships, bursaries, OSAP), and create financial plans.
- Staff help the participant complete application processes and forms, and assists them with securing funds for application fees as needed.
- Staff encourage participant to connect with student resources/peer mentors and attend orientations.
- Staff support participant with accessing school student support services and arranging for accommodations, if needed.
- Staff assist participant with navigate educational institutions, asking for support, and advocating for themselves as they navigate the learning process.
- As youth prepare to leave Eva's Phoenix, housing workers assist them with finding suitable housing to help them continue with school (e.g. close to campus).
- After participant leaves Eva's Phoenix, program staff are available to assist with homework on a casual drop-in basis and can support t with finding volunteer opportunities in their fields of choice to gain experience.

## SUCCESS STORIES

- ◆ A young woman was living in the shelter systems for over two years due to her mental health. She did not get along with her family and moved into Eva's Phoenix. During a counselling meeting, she identified that she wanted to complete her high school credits and get her diploma. Eva's helped her finish high school and she enrolled in post-secondary school while maintaining her employment. The Education Program provided her the supports she needed to graduate and she also gained the confidence to further her education.
- ◆ A young man moved to Eva's Phoenix. He had dropped out of school and was struggling with mental health and family issues. His primary worker suggested he connect with the Education Program to discuss his education plan. "In my meetings with education coordinator," he said, "he helped me find myself as a person and pushed me to succeed. He believes that if I worked hard, I could go out in the world with the skills and attitude needed to be a shining star. I decided to enroll in the social work program at George Brown College."
- ◆ A young man said he used to think that, since no one in his family has gone to college or university, he shouldn't either. He said his friends thought school is a waste of time, and he internalized the racist stereotype that he was "just an immigrant." He said that Eva's Phoenix stepped in and gave him a foundation that helped him build his confidence to apply college. Now he's well on his way to graduating.
- ◆ A young man had lived in the shelter system for over four years due to mental health. He did not get along with his stepmother and his father moved him out of the house. He came to Eva's Phoenix. During a meeting with the Education Coordinator, he identified that he was looking to complete a high school diploma or get his GED. Staff supported him to finish his GED and hold down a full-time job. He said the Education Program gave him a new life and confidence to further his education. He is planning to apply for college once he saves enough money.
- ◆ It was his childhood dreams to learn how airplanes work, but this young man did not believe his dream could come true because of his life challenges: he had been raised in a difficult family situation and started using substances. But Eva's Educational Coordinator helped him overcome his anxiety with math before he enrolled in the Bombardier Aircraft Maintenance program at Centennial College. Once he started, he averaged 80% and was the program's top student. He expressed great thankfulness for the help he received from Eva's and his dream become a reality. He landed a well-paying job at Bombardier's aircraft manufacturing plant. He's optimistic about a successful and long career into the future.

## EVA'S INITIATIVES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

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