



## Fostering Solutions At Jane/Finch

Dr. Lorne Foster

When Roger Rowe was profiled in the 2004 edition of Osgoode Hall Law School Alumni Magazine, *Continuum*, as one of the movers and shakers in the legal profession, the article remarked: “Rowe's impressive resume of community involvement leaves one wondering where he finds time to practice law.”

As a socially conscious Black lawyer, however, the conventional distinction made between the practice of law and community involvement is arbitrary and inapplicable, when your life commitment is to make the world a better place.

As the president of PEACH: Promoting Economic Action and Community Health, Roger Rowe has been able to exercise his commitment by bringing his considerable advocacy and legal skill to bear on the issue of marginalized and visible minority youth.

PEACH is a community organization that delivers a continuum of innovative and leading edge services designed to improve at-risk and high-needs student performance. As such, it has become a key strategy in increasing school effectiveness for children of colour through the promotion of co-operative, collaborative and group-centred learning, which not only involves teachers and pupils but the wider visible minority groups' perspectives and “knowledge” as well.

Through his groundbreaking work, Rowe has come to see “where the rubber meets the road” in terms of services for kids, the limitations of law in dealing with kids, and the consequences for the kids being expelled under the zero tolerance policies in schools.

The current findings of school improvement literature in England, the United States as well as Canada indicate that the marginalization of visible minority youth begins with the question of school curriculum as the vital ingredient in the formation of identity. In order for students to have a healthy identity formation, they need a strong sense of community that is consistent and organized. The community history, the stories, the leaders, the writers, the poets are all elements of “cultural capital” that inscribe a way of thinking about yourself. If a school offers nothing that reflects a child's history, language, or his or her life, it forces children to make an identity that is anti-school. School becomes a meaningless journey. School becomes an attack on a child's identity. Some research has gone as far as calling it “educational genocide.” For the purpose of curriculum should not be to create wounded identities, but rather, to strengthen the identity that children seek.

This is consistent with the recent report prepared for the Ontario Commission of Human Rights, which indicates that the implementation of the Safe Schools Act and related policies exacerbate the impact on students at-risk. Like Roger Rowe, many educational researchers, human rights organizations and concerned citizens believe that increased suspensions and expulsions of students are having a broad, negative impact not only on the student, but also on his or her family, the community and society-at-large. The most commonly identified elements are negative psychological impact, loss of education, higher dropout rates and increased criminalization and anti-social behaviour.

In the current climate of an expanding disciplinary model of education and zero tolerance codes, PEACH runs three pioneering programs focused on youth and community development in the Jane/Finch Community. The programs allow visible minority students to belong to intentional learning communities that actively work against a wounded identity by providing the

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resources and the tools for students to be achievers. In this respect, the strength of the programs is that they bring together theory and practice at both the individual student and institutional levels. PEACH works in partnership with the Toronto District School Board and other community partners to provide programs that are geared toward reducing the marginalization of high-needs youth.

First, the Suspend and Study Program (SAS) matches up expelled and suspended students with a certified teacher and a youth worker in order to address the special needs of students of colour. SAS provides a supplemental and additional learning experience that enables and empowers kids.

The Get On The Bus program (GOB) is designed to connect kids with employers for six month placements for job training and labour force experience. The program also involves a six week pre-employment skills training package, including resume writing, job search techniques, and other soft-skills that improve prospects for gainful employment. PEACH is seeking funding to continue this program.

Finally, the Wrap Around Program is a comprehensive social service delivery system for youth designed to identify the strengths of high-needs students and build on them by setting up an entire support team, that nurture and respect the students and who want to see them succeed. This signature program emphasizes the importance of collaborative, or participative, decision making which aims to engage all educational stakeholders including teachers, students, parents, and community members. But it is the students who take ownership of the project and have a voice in their own learning. The Wrap Around concept has become so successful as a proactive and enabling strategy for high-needs visible minority students that it now receives referrals from schools as well as the community. Rowe hopes that the Wrap Around Program will become a permanent fixture as a teaching-learning tool utilized by the Toronto school system. “Even if schools reverse the expansion of the disciplinary process, there is still a need for the holistic approach with a family focus and hands-on guidance that the Wrap Around Program provides,” he says.

In the face of high drop out rates and charges that Ontario schools have failed Black students by having too few teachers of colour, too few courses on Black thought and a zero tolerance code that hits Black students hardest, the current public debate regarding “Black focused” schools is understandable and necessary.

As Rowe points out, “these are complex issues and there are no easy answers. If we really want to help our children to be successful, we’ll have to work together to find solutions that are effective.” The debate must continue to advance and refine the complex and nuanced issues of our children’s education and future.

*Lorne Foster is a professor of Public Policy and Administration at York University who teaches in the areas of social justice and human rights studies.*