

Guide to best practices

for community organizations seeking to support youth in post-high school transitions



Introduction


Réseau réussite Montréal is drawing on its experience in guiding community initiatives to support post-high school transitions, along with empirical data collected as part of its key topic material on this subject, to offer this implementation guide for community organizations that wish to offer counselling services for young people leaving high school.

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Background

Young people face many challenges as they transition out of high school and either continue on to CÉGEP or vocational training or embark on another path (e.g., employment or adult general education). Whatever they choose, young people must adapt to new environments with new responsibilities, and they are expected to be increasingly autonomous in their academic or professional development. Post-high school transitions also generally coincide with the passage from adolescence to adulthood, which involves specific changes and adaptations at the social, financial, and personal level. But we can make this transition smoother – and thus improve young people’s chances of achieving success in their academic, professional, and personal lives – by better preparing them while they are still in high school, and by offering support before and during this transition.



Practitioners in community organizations are ideal allies in terms of prevention and intervention on this issue because they can follow young people through the various stages of the post-high school transition, in particular over the summer. These professionals can provide reassuring continuity through the changes and serve as trusted resources if concerns or problems arise.

Such bonds of trust also put community practitioners in an excellent position to introduce young people to programs that can help them financially, academically, professionally, or psychosocially and assist in accessing them. For more vulnerable youth, these relationships can make a real difference by compensating for shortcomings often observed in situations of socioeconomic disadvantage, such as under-educated parents or a lack of social capital and informal knowledge of post-secondary education or job markets, which otherwise enable young people to navigate the codes and requirements of these environments.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is thus for community organizations that wish to implement (or enhance) their services related to post-high school transitions. The guide's suggestions and strategies concern young people in their last year of high school, enrolled either in the general education program, or in training for a semi-skilled trade (TFST), in sociovocational integration (SVI), or in a special preparatory professional training program, regardless of their choices after leaving high school. This guide uses the term "transition agents" to refer to practitioners in the community sector who work with young people at this important stage in their lives.

The recommendations in the guide are grouped by major stages in the post-high school transition (see figure 1), ranging from preparation during the last year of high school and the following summer to adapting to the new educational or work environment. These recommendations stem both from practices deemed beneficial in the scientific literature¹ and from experiences in the field gathered as part of the support provided by Réseau réussite Montréal (RRM) to community organizations such as Pathways to Education and Horizon Carrière.



Photo: Ky Vy Le Duc

¹These references are available in the key topic page linked below, developed by our staff:

<https://www.reseautreussitemontreal.ca/en/key-topics/school-transitions1/transitioning-from-high-school-to-cegep/>

1. Preparation during high school



It goes without saying that preparing students in advance for post-high school transitions will go a long way to increasing their chances of later success. Professionals working in high schools, in particular guidance counsellors, already dedicate a significant amount of time to this issue, and transition agents can lend a hand in this respect. The last year of high school is a key period, when young people must generally decide on which educational or professional programs they wish to pursue after high school. It is a time when certain students have greater needs and require more sustained support; this is especially true of students who are anxious about the admission and registration process, those whose grades do not meet admission criteria, or those whose academic or professional aspirations are at odds with their parents' expectations (e.g., among immigrant communities).


Photo: Ky Vy Le Duc



1.1 Access to students and universal prevention

Transition agents can help guide young people who need greater support. To do so, however, they must first be able to identify and contact these students, which can present a challenge for community organizations that do not provide services directly to high school students. This is why it's preferable to have a presence in schools, since it allows agents to get to know students who are finishing high school and identify those likely to benefit from their services².

Universal prevention activities (prevention that benefits all youth, regardless of vulnerability or challenges), generally aimed at providing information and raising awareness, are excellent opportunities to engage with young people. In relation to post-high school transitions, such activities might cover myths and false beliefs about CÉGEP or vocational training to add nuance to young people's expectations and preconceived ideas. They might also cover the main steps of applying for admission, along with tips and tricks, and pitfalls to avoid. Since most schools already offer workshops along these lines, transition agents should first familiarize themselves with the resources already being offered and suggest complementary content concerning the transition from high school. Another strategy might be to offer to co-facilitate activities and workshops offered by the school, or to simply present their own role and support services for post-high school transitions.



As mentioned, the goal here is to build informal relationships so young people understand that transition agents are there to support them during this transition, whether it be while they are still in high school, over the following summer, or once they have embarked on their next educational or professional journey.

² Access to students is not a problem for all organizations. For example, dropout prevention organizations typically engage with students at risk of dropping out and support them until they earn their diploma. Organizations such as Pathways to Education have taken the initiative of offering students support after they have earned a diploma to meet the needs of young people transitioning out of high school. In these specific cases, integration into schools is a less crucial step.

Examples of universal prevention practices for post-high school transitions while students are still in high school:

- Workshops on the important stages of the transition and what not to miss
- Introduction to the job of being a student: learning how to learn (e.g., active note taking, using mnemonics)
- Workshops on managing school-related stress
- Opportunities to meet with former students now in CÉGEP or vocational training, who can talk about their transition experiences
- Awareness about work/school balance in CÉGEP or vocational training
- Meetings with parents to demystify the transition from high school and discuss various options available to young people
- Tours of work environments that students are interested in so they can compare their aspirations with reality

1.2 Individualized prevention and support

During the universal prevention phase, or after agents introduce their role and services, transition agents can provide individualized support for students who require greater assistance with the transition process. Some students will seek out help on their own, but others will require transition agents to be more proactive. Proactive recruiting can be facilitated by referrals from members of the school staff, who may have noted signs of vulnerability among their students (e.g., family conflicts, disengagement). Other information, such as academic results, can also point to the need for prevention measures. For CÉGEP in particular, recent studies have shown that students with an overall high school average below 70% are less likely to register and earn a diploma. Students with intervention plans; or students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties (HSMLD) may also encounter additional challenges in transitioning out of high school.

Photo: Christina @ wocintechchat.com



Examples of personalized support for vulnerable youth:

- Do additional tours of various teaching establishments or professional environments; do trial runs of getting there using public transport.
- Assist students with admission forms, or, in cases of previous rejections or changes in orientation, with readmission forms.
- Help students with applications for financial assistance.
- Support students in maintaining continuity of services and support measures in their new teaching establishment. Help them identify prerequisites, people to contact, procedures, etc.
- Develop a transition plan that covers the major steps to take between now and starting school.
- Help students identify what worries them about the transition, along with any personal problems hindering their academic or professional advancement. Guide them toward the appropriate resources when necessary.

Transition agents can work with members of the school staff to gain access to the subset of students who present one or more of certain characteristics (e.g., dyslexia, an average under 70%) so they can later inquire whether they would like to get extra help. Whether or not these students are interested, this initial contact will enable agents to make themselves known and learn more about the students' plans upon leaving high school. It is also an opportunity to provide the students with their contact info if need be and offer to follow up over the summer or before they start school, depending on their plans.

Photo: Sam Balye



2. Over the summer

The summer after high school is another key moment, in particular because students may, for the first time, experience concerns or complications with their transition while at the same time having limited access to staff or resources from their high school. This is where transition agents can be important allies, because their services are typically offered year-round; they are thus able to answer young people's questions, respond to requests, and direct them to the appropriate resources.

In addition to one-off sessions, agents can also follow up with students they have engaged with in high school, especially those deemed vulnerable (e.g., students with an average under 70% or HSMLD students). They can inquire (by telephone, email, or text message) whether they have questions or concerns about their transition. One recommended practice is to send email reminders in advance of important steps such as choosing classes, orientation day, picking up their agenda, or submitting bursary applications.



At the same time, transition agents should encourage participation in student life, either by registering for orientation activities offered by the establishment, or by registering for an extracurricular activity. These activities will help students integrate into their new environments, which will contribute to their well-being and success.

Meanwhile, transition agents can also compile contact information of resources in the vocational training schools and CÉGEPs frequented by the students they are supporting, in case a student requests a service or support measure authorized by the new teaching establishment. This will enable agents to be more efficient during the back-to-school period, when students tend to have greater and more intensive needs.

Changes of plan

Before covering strategies for the back-to-school period, it is important to stress that over the summer, young people tend to experience events or have encounters that cause them to reassess or change their academic plans.

This often happens with students who have received conditional admittance to CÉGEP or vocational training but failed to obtain the necessary prerequisites (e.g., failing a summer course or the ministerial French exam). Youth may also discover new interests over the summer, through either jobs or leisure activities, that prompt them to change or postpone their study plans. Others may decide to start full-time work rather than going to school for various reasons, including family obligations or not knowing what they want to study. In such cases, transitions agents can support youth through any disappointments or changes in direction.

More specifically, for young people planning to enter or remain in the job market, it may be wise to refer them to the expertise of a youth employment centre. For students who must retake a credit or a course, registration in a general adult education centre is often a good option, but this will involve them adapting to another new environment before they can move on to the academic program they originally wanted to pursue after high school.

In such cases, transition agents can offer the same sort of guidance offered to students heading to CÉGEP or vocational training mentioned in the preceding section. They can also refer students to SARCA (Reception, Referral, Counselling and Support Services) in school service centres and school boards, which support youth aged 16 and up in the expression, development and implementation of a meaningful career or education plan.



Photo: KyVy Le Duc

3. In the new teaching establishment (vocational training or CÉGEP)



3.1 Starting school, or the contact phase

A student's first days in a new school mark the "contact" phase of the transition. This is a short period when students' beliefs and preconceptions are confronted by their actual experiences.

Regardless of how prepared students are, it is normal for them to feel somewhat unsettled at first, given that the transition inevitably involves adjustments and a change of environment.


Nevertheless, the more advance preparation students receive, the less likely they are to be fazed upon arrival at the new school. For example, by attending workshops on how CÉGEP works and taking part in welcome and orientation activities, they will both meet other new students, and their new school will feel more familiar and, consequently, less unsettling.

During this period (generally corresponding to the first two weeks of school), transition agents can visit the teaching establishments attended by the students they are following (informing them in advance of their visiting schedule). They might, for instance, help students find their way around campus, implement their transition plan (if applicable), or respond to one-off requests (e.g., how to change a course, see an academic advisor, and so on).



3.2 Adaptation

Once students' beliefs and preconceptions about vocational training and CÉGEP have been laid to rest, the next step is for them to adapt to their new reality. Transition agents can assist in this respect by remaining available during the first few months of the term (until December/January), continuing to visit teaching establishments, and responding to occasional requests by email or telephone.



During this final stage of the transition, the goal is to gradually enable students to be autonomous in their educational endeavours and in their personal and academic success. In other words, to have them adopt the tools and strategies they need to be successful and understand where to turn if they encounter problems.

For students, having a bond of trust with a member of the school's staff or a counsellor can make a huge difference, since it can be a source of support during the most stressful times, such as during exams or when applying to the next level of their education. Indeed, it is a good strategy for transition agents to identify school staff members who can potentially fulfill this role and put them in contact with the students. Since educational and psychosocial services differ from one school to the next, it can be difficult for agents to immediately identify which professionals to approach, but in general, psychosocial professionals (e.g., people working in the fields of special education, social work, psychoeducation, and rehabilitation) are key allies.

During the holiday period, transition agents can start preparing students for a reduction in their availability, since they will be returning to work with the new cohort of graduating students at their assigned high school. Before they withdraw completely, it can be helpful to give students a checklist of key resources and services (ideally free of charge) they can use if they encounter financial, academic, psychological, medical, or relationship problems. Depending on their workload and schedule, transition agents can continue supporting several more vulnerable students if they are still having trouble adapting to the new school. Some will have greater needs and will take longer to adapt. To help them avoid accumulating problems that might hinder their perseverance and success, it may be wise to stay in contact with certain students who are at a greater risk of leaving school before earning their diploma or certification.

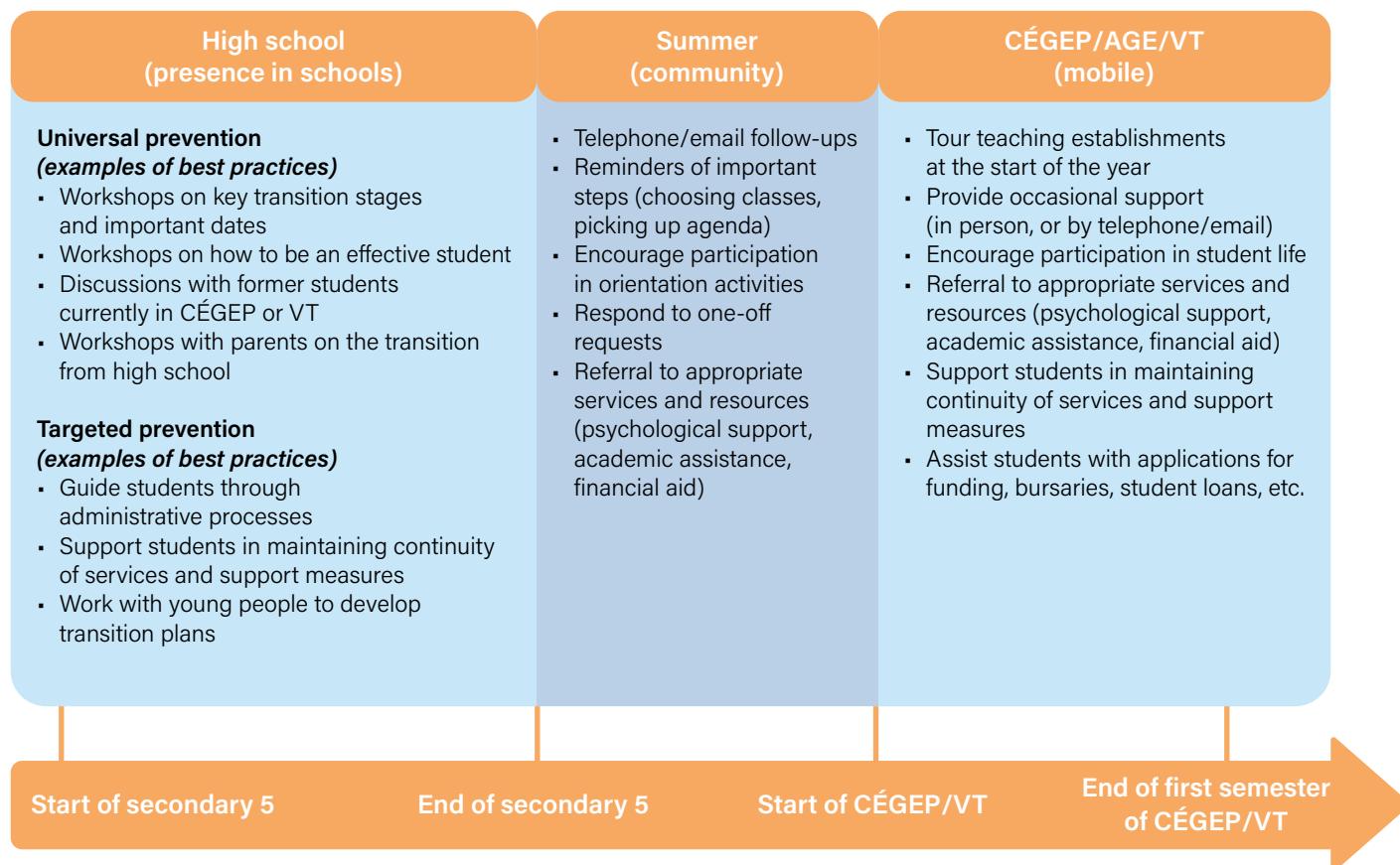
Appendix

Figure 1. Logical model of community intervention for post-high school transitions

Resource

Transition agent, working in conjunction with staff from high schools and community organizations (guidance counsellors, teachers, special-education teachers psychoeducators, school-family-community & CJE agents).

Activities and achievements



Short-term benefits

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understanding of how CÉGEP/VT operates Reduced anxiety/ preconceptions about life after high school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuity of youth services and support measures Softening of the "shock" of transition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced exclusion and social isolation Compliance with administrative procedures Reduced absenteeism |
|---|---|--|

Long-term benefits

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in applications for CÉGEP/VT Improved success at CÉGEP/VT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved rate of graduation from CÉGEP/VT Reduced psychological distress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easier social and professional integration Increased applications for university |
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