

Winning program deserves support

Success stories in the long battle to lower Quebec's high school drop-out rate are few and far between. You'd think that when a program has been set up and found to work spectacularly well that no government would dare stop funding it. You would be quite, quite wrong.

Five years ago, the federal government, as part of its national crime-prevention strategy, granted a \$385,000 subsidy to a program called Alternative Suspension. The program, run by the Montreal YMCA out of its Park Ave. branch, was designed to help secondary-school students who were at high risk of dropping out.

They were among the 175 students whom the Montreal School Board suspends on average every year. They are suspended, usually three to five days at a time, because they threatened another student or a teacher, behaved violently toward someone else at school, or, oddly enough, for constantly skipping school.

At Alternative Suspension, a program worker helps four to eight students. Rather than let youngsters spend their days at home or wandering the streets, the program offers these students a structured environment where they can catch up on their school work and try to adopt a new attitude toward school.

They arrive at 8:30 a.m. Mornings are devoted to their homework; afternoons are spent on individual meetings and, later, group discussions. They're allowed to go home at 3:30 p.m., although many elect to stay at the Y to take part in after-school activities.

The goal of Alternative Suspension is make the

youngsters take stock of themselves, accept responsibility for their actions and manage their crisis in a constructive manner. At the end of the session, which is the last day of the suspension, the youngster signs a contract formally acknowledging responsibility for the acts that led to his or her suspension and promising to behave better in the future.

Additionally, a meeting is held with the student, his parents, the Alternative worker, the school principal, and sometimes, the teacher, as a fence-building exercise.

In an interview this week with *La Presse*, Krystel Capocci, 15, said she found the experience helpful. "Here, we have someone with us all day, who doesn't judge us."

The program is successful. In 85 per cent of cases, a change in attitude and behaviour is seen in the short term by the student's family and the school. In the medium term as well, an outside evaluation found half the students were still benefitting from their experience at Alternative Suspension. In fact, only 13 per cent of the students from 2004-05 who had used the Alternative service had quit school before the end of the academic year.

This was despite their long history of problems and delinquency. Because the federal government has cut out its funding, only half the number of students will receive help this year as last. The Commission scolaire de Montréal has come up with \$107,000 for the program. The board should support it, of course. The board should probably be capable of running a similar program on its own. But there's still no reason for the federal government to pull out of a winning strategy.