

Study looks at dropout rates in region

Large number of immigrants quit high school

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An increasing number of immigrant teens are dropping out of high schools in Waterloo Region because of a high-stress mixture of social, family and academic pressures.

That's a key finding in a study to be released next week by the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

The research project was done at the request of local agencies that see a large number of dropouts while working with immigrant and refugee families, research director Rich Janzen said.

Because of concerns about identification and racial profiling, detailed data are not available from local school boards on the number of young immigrants, aged 14 to 20, who are quitting school, he said.

"But figures from Calgary show a shocking level -- 74 per cent of young immigrants dropping out," he said. "We don't know the total here but we do know we have many dropouts because we interviewed many of them as part of this report."

When researchers examined why so many immigrant teens quit school, they uncovered stress factors that included problems at home where parents were out of work.

"We found the dropout problem had to do as much with immigration issues as well as what was happening in schools . . . the whole issue of parents trying to work at survival jobs," Janzen said. "Sometimes, young people would quit school in order to work and support their families."

Other factors in the dropout rate included social isolation at schools or, as refugees, prior traumatic experiences.

Maria Alvarez is manager of Cross Cultural and Community Services, a Kitchener agency that helps newcomers settle in the community. She suggested doing the research after constantly hearing stories about immigrant dropouts from officials who provide English classes for immigrants and refugees.

She said those working with newcomer families want more information about why the teens are quitting high school.

"And we also want to know how we can better adjust our services to meet their needs."

Ontario's overall dropout rate is 30 per cent -- about 45,000 students a year.

Legislation is expected to be passed today forcing kids to stay in school or apprenticeship programs until age 18.

The bill gives the province the right to deny a driver's licence to students who drop out before they turn 18. The changes to the Education Act also increase possible fines for dropouts to \$1,000 and introduce financial penalties for parents who don't make their kids go to school.

Robin Pearson, English as a second language consultant at the Waterloo Region District School Board, said significant attention has recently been given to new immigrants and refugees.

Educators don't have ways to track their dropout rates but they know many young newcomers have trouble passing standard educational tests.

In addition to other problems, immigrant teens often learn English faster than their parents and end up acting as interpreters when a teacher calls home to talk about a student's progress, Pearson said.

Janzen said some teachers provide excellent support for immigrant teens, but school boards a comprehensive program to address the causes of the dropout problem.

New Canadian students, parents, teachers and school board representatives and immigrant agencies helped with the \$30,000 study. Research was financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

A community forum to discuss the report will be held at Kitchener City Hall from 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. Wednesday.

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