

Learning LAWS

U of T and TDSB partner to benefit Annex students

BY KAREN MACKENZIE

A unique partnership between the University of Toronto Faculty of Law and the Toronto District School Board is encouraging high school students to take the law into their own hands.

Law in Action Within Schools (LAWS), launched in 2005, is offering students from two Annex schools an in-depth look at the legal system and its issues by facilitating job shadowing, focused curricula, and summer employment opportunities.

Over 300 students at Central Technical School (725 Bathurst St.) and Harbord Collegiate Institute (286 Harbord St.) now are involved in the pilot initiative, according to Alexis Archbold, director of the LAWS program, and a graduate of the U of T law program.

"They're testing out their own views on fundamental things, like euthanasia, equal rights, and the role of the Supreme Court in Canada," Archbold said. "It's about the big questions we like to grapple with over the dinner table—they fascinate young people as well."

That knowledge helps them to be more engaged citizens, she said. "They better understand their role in their communities."

University law students, local lawyers, and other community partners donate their time and expertise to students throughout the year, as mentors, tutors, and advisers.

Each school is piloting a different model of the program.

At Central Tech, students are currently enrolled in the program at both the Grade 10 and 11 levels, and will continue through until Grade 12. LAWS participants attend classes in the core subjects of English, Science, Physics, and Math, which include theoretically constructed units based on law and justice, according to teacher Stan Klich.

"For instance, science has a unit on forensics and how forensics is used in law and justice," Klich said.

At Harbord Collegiate, a core group of 25 Grade 10 students are enrolled in the LAWS program, while up to 142 civics students participate in ancillary activities, like a public interest fair on Dec. 6, featuring a number of non-governmental organizations and community groups.



Grade 10 students Marina Pratt (left), Nikolaas Tzventarny, Sara Kanagasabai, and Sabrina Abu-Taah explore issues of law and justice through the Law in Action Within Schools program at Harbord Collegiate Institute (286 Harbord St.).

The core students participate in job shadowing and weekly tutoring sessions, and also have access to summer job opportunities based on their performance throughout the year, according to teacher Tim Dingwall.

"It really opens kids' eyes to a number of opportunities around them. First and foremost, post-secondary education, and secondly, to become more engaged in the world around them," he said. "They are enthused about activities they had no idea existed."

Some students expressed an interest in continuing into the fields of law and justice after school, Klich said, citing one student who now wants to be a justice of the peace. "But the purpose is not to create a bunch of lawyers, but to give them more of an idea about what the university is like, and what the Faculty of Law is like," he said.

Guidance counsellors at each school chose students who they believe would benefit from an alternative learning experience, according to Archbold.

They had to be willing to work and be engaged, but "didn't have to have the best marks, or the worst marks," Dingwall said.

Harbord Collegiate student Marina Pratt, 15, said she was given the opportunity to shadow a duty counsellor at Old City Hall for a day. "He took me downstairs to see the jail cells, and gave me a tour of the whole city hall.... It seems like such an amazing job. It's so different from what you see on TV," Pratt said.

Nikolaas Tzventarny, 16, also a core LAWS student at Harbord Collegiate, said the opportunity has made him more interested in politics at the federal level.

"It helps you to understand how the whole thing works. Before I just knew you voted for the [political party], and then they made the laws—now I know how the laws get made," Tzventarny said, adding he would like to work for the Conservative party some day.

Both Klich and Dingwall said they have noticed practical improvements in LAWS students' performances at school, including improved attendance and class participation.

"Kids who had never considered going to post-secondary education, or leaving the Annex area of Toronto, have expressed an interest to do so immediately upon participating in one of these activities," Dingwall said. While the proximity to U of T made the Annex schools an obvious choice, and Archbold said she hopes to see the program expand across the city.

"We hope that after successfully piloting this, the idea will catch on and other law schools will take this on," Archbold said. "It is an opportunity to really further their involvement with the local community, so that when they graduate, they will not simply be technicians of the law, but have a compassion and understanding for what their clients are going through," Archbold said.

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