



Project Insights Report

# Reality, Education and Applied Life Skills (R.E.A.L.) School



**PARTNERS**

Urban Rez Solutions  
Social Enterprise



**LOCATIONS**

Ontario



**INVESTMENT**

\$238,426



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## ☰ Executive Summary

Youth who grow up in neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty face significant barriers to educational attainment and employment readiness. These barriers perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty. Urban Rez Solutions Social Enterprise developed Reality, Education and Applied Life Skills (R.E.A.L.) School so that Black, Indigenous and racialized youth in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods can identify and pursue their career interests. The program combines a deep understanding of the communities from which its participants come with support for youth to identify interests and skills that will support them in their career goals.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 R.E.A.L. School participants experienced an increase in their confidence in navigating workplace environments, project management and interpersonal conflict.
- 2 Providing stipends can be one part of a successful recruitment strategy for youth.
- 3 Building trust and rapport with the local community and with youth participants is essential to gaining buy-in to broader program objectives.

## ▶ The Issue

Youth who grow up in socio-economically challenged neighbourhoods are more likely to face barriers to employment readiness, educational attainment and strong mental health. Youth from these communities often lack trust in government or other institutions as a result of systemic racism—specifically anti-Black racism—and are at greater risk of experiencing violence.

There are not enough programs that integrate (1) a deep understanding of socio-economically challenged communities with (2) professional development, education opportunities and crime prevention. But these programs are needed to break intergenerational cycles of poverty.



## What We Investigated

The project was implemented in four communities in the Greater Toronto Area: the neighbourhoods of Canlish, Glamorgan and West Hill in Toronto, as well as Oshawa.

R.E.A.L. School consists of 54-session workshops and experiential learning sessions delivered multiple times per week over a 20-week span. Through individualized coaching and the workshops, R.E.A.L. School staff help participants identify goals and develop long-term career plans, a business plan and skills that will serve them in their career search, such as basic business language and etiquette and financial literacy.

R.E.A.L School aims to prepare socio-economically marginalized individuals with a combination of life and business preparatory skills that help them better manage conflict, make productive choices and commit to transformative and meaningful change. The objective was to have R.E.A.L. School participants leave with actionable steps toward attainable career goals, prosocial interpersonal skills and a supportive network of peers.

An important part of how R.E.A.L. School implemented its programming was to prioritize building rapport and trust with the local communities that it was working with. This included increasing organizational presence and engagement with the community, and being involved in conflict resolution, where needed. For example, the school hosted community barbecues and ran retreats to allow potential participants to engage with the program prior to committing to it.

## ✔ What We're Learning

R.E.A.L. School had three separate cohorts with a total of 98 participants over a 12-month period. Almost all of the participants completed the program, and staff reported that participants experienced an increase in their confidence in skills and in navigating workplace environments, labour markets, project management and interpersonal conflict. Program staff also noted that participants increased their business acumen, financial literacy and decision-making.

### **Stipends are a successful way to get people in the door**

Program staff for R.E.A.L. School noted that many of the participants they were able to recruit initially came to the program just to get the stipend, but over time, the stipend became less important to why those participants stayed in the program.

### **Rapport-building is aided by hands-on, practical support**

R.E.A.L. School staff felt the rapport-building process with the local communities went more quickly than they had anticipated because they were able to quickly identify and meet the immediate needs of the communities. For example, in one community there was a violent incident that resulted in the death of a community member, and program staff were able to support the broader community's healing process by offering victim services support, financing the funeral reception and providing spaces for the community to grieve and seek assistance.

## ★ Why It Matters

Young people in Canada today are more diverse than any group that came before. Given the reliance on immigration for growth, by 2041, it's predicted that more than 40% of the working age population of Canada will be racialized. In places like Toronto, where more than half of the population is racialized, efforts to address the systemic barriers faced by racialized peoples are at the core of increasing equity and inclusion. This project has lessons for other skills and training interventions that seek to engage racialized youth living in marginalized neighbourhoods.



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The commitment of the partner organization to build rapport and trust over time with the community prior to engaging youth, is a best practice for all service organizations – a method that allows for the integration of lived experiences into the intervention design and implementation.

Focus on early career guidance programs to introduce youth to a range of career paths, empowering them to make informed decisions with a strong emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

## ► What's Next

Urban Rez Solutions continues to offer its R.E.A.L. School in new locations and with new groups, including with inmates from the Toronto East Detention Centre, Donald Doucet Youth Centre in Sault Ste. Marie and the Cecil Facer Youth Centre in Sudbury. The program is geared toward individuals who have entrepreneurial intentions and business ideas upon release from jail.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### How to Cite This Report

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