

CAREERS & EDUCATION

Make most of career fairs

Parents urged to accompany students, but refrain from pressuring them

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Glenna Goffman just may have this career thing all sewn up. "I'm pretty determined," said the Grade 11 student at Royal Vale High School in Notre Dame de Grâce. "I have an interest in interior design."

At 16, Goffman knows she'd like to study in a three-year program at Dawson College. After that, she might pursue further studies in the U.S.

"I do have some friends who aren't sure of what they want to do in their careers," she said.

That's why career fairs like the one Goffman attended last week are so useful for high-school seniors. November marks the peak of career fair season — that time of year when a young man's and a young woman's fancy turns to thoughts of where to attend school next year and what to do with the rest of one's life.

With those burning questions in mind, the English Montreal School Board organized a mammoth career fair last week for about 2,200 Grade 11 students in 25 high schools.

"We used to hold career fairs in individual schools but we decided to consolidate them here," said John Szuber, an EMSB guidance counselor. "This is the second time we've done it."

The "here" in question is St. Pius X High School in Ahuntsic, to which students were bused from the board's various schools to spend 90 minutes each perusing brochures and talking to representatives from five English CEGEPs, Montreal's two English universities, five EMSB vocational centres, two professional colleges and the Armed Forces.

"Certain students may have crystal-

lized their career plans and coming here may confirm what they want to do," said Lew Lewis, the EMSB's director of student services. "Others are being exposed to options they may not have thought of."

One of the messages the school board hoped to communicate to the students is that making a career decision in Grade 11 doesn't mean they're making a lifelong choice.

"Students of this generation may have two or three careers throughout their lives, never mind seven or eight jobs," Lewis said. "The vast majority of these students will not work in the same company for the length of their careers."

The other message students received last week is that without higher education, they'll be unlikely to find jobs.

"Our goal is to help them keep as many doors open as possible," Szuber said, adding that many "are giving vocational training a second look. There are kids who aren't academic. They want to work with their hands. But their parents insist they attend CEGEP. They give it a shot with the books and find they're unhappy and unsuccessful. We get resistance from parents, but if you have a student who doesn't enjoy academics but enjoys putting things together because he has a curiosity, I would suggest they explore all the vocational options."

Nevertheless, an estimated two-thirds of students graduating from EMSB high schools are headed for university or three-year CEGEP programs, Lewis said.

Parents have a key role in helping their teenage children figure out what career path they want to take, said Carmen Sicilia, president of Discovery-Works, an organization that helps teens explore their career interests through workshops and one-on-one counseling.

"Youngsters often don't know what questions to ask when they attend career fairs," Sicilia said. "So it's a good idea for parents to sit down with their kids ahead of time and ask them about the various programs they'd like to look into. Then find out why they've selected a particular program. Ask questions. Probe."

She suggests parents accompany their children to career fairs when possible.

It's important, Sicilia added, to establish whether a student genuinely wants to pursue a particular career or is being influenced by peers.

"I had one 16-year-old boy in one of my workshops who was thinking of going into sciences in college but he didn't have the right pre-requisites," she said. "It turned out that one of his friends was planning to study health sciences but he knew nothing about the field. We discovered that he really liked theatre so we found him some extracurricular work in a theatre group and he's now studying theatre full time in CEGEP."

Sicilia said students should write a list of questions for the representatives of educational institutions at the career fairs.

"Parents should tell their children to check out every school that offers a particular program, not just one. If the

student is interested in art or computers, for instance, he should check out all the schools that have those programs. He needs to find out the differences between the schools."

Moreover, parents should not fret about children who haven't made a career selection by age 16.

"A lot of students think that their career decisions will have to last them 45 years," she said. "Parents can explain that these decisions are not written in stone."

She said parents can help prepare their children for career fairs by encouraging them to ponder which academic subjects and extracurricular activities they enjoy. Parents should also refrain from pressuring their children to choose certain careers.

"I do see parents who have a fixed idea of what they want their children to do. They need to step back and remember that it's about the their kids, not about them."

Another favour parents can proffer is to find careerists who can talk to their children about the work they do.

"Should your child be interested in a particular career, you can find someone who is in that field and get the child to talk to the person about his work to gain an understanding of what the job is about."

Finally, Sicilia said, parents should accompany their children to the colleges their kids are considering attending.

"You can talk to an admissions officer or tour the school. That way, you're showing an interest. Make it an adventure because it is an adventure for your child."

❖ Carmen Sicilia's next career workshop for teens is scheduled for Jan. 11. For information, call (514) 382-9696.

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