



# GREAT GRANT STORIES

## Burns Memorial Fund *Supporting Academic Achievement: A Partnership Success Story*



Sometimes, a simple solution can address a complicated problem.

In 2009, Burns Memorial Fund was approached by a Calgary high school serving a high-needs population. Many students at the school faced tremendous challenges, living in families new to the country and struggling to make ends meet. Over a quarter of the students were part of low-income households.

These students often travelled long distances to get to school; walking was not an option. As a result, access to transportation was a barrier to student attendance and achievement. Simply put, at the end of the month, many families had to choose between the cost of a bus pass and necessities such as food and rent. When families could not afford the bus passes, students struggled to get to school.

In an attempt to address this issue, the school proposed a pilot project to provide bus passes and transit tickets to students. At that time in Calgary, several reports and studies identified difficulties accessing transit as a barrier to success for low-income individuals. Although the issue

was gaining attention, there was little data available about whether transit support could make a measurable difference in people's lives. Burns Memorial Fund was interested in studying the link between direct interventions, such as transit assistance, and academic attendance and achievement. The foundation provided a grant to the school for the pilot, with the request that the students receiving support be tracked to determine the impact on their academic success.

The results from that first grant were very encouraging. Of the 27 students who were regularly issued bus passes, 55% demonstrated exceptional academic achievement and 23% exhibited normal achievement. Of the 58 students who were issued transit tickets, 74% had high attendance rates and high credit achievement. The school staff concluded that "financially needy students, who are appropriately identified and who receive monthly regular support, will demonstrate significantly positive attendance and achievement rates."

On the strength of those early results, Burns Memorial Fund entered into a partnership with the United Way of Calgary to co-fund the pilot project for another year and to learn more about the interplay between practical supports and school achievement. During this second pilot phase, the program became more structured. The students were identified in confidence and interviewed by their school counselors. They were told that they would receive a free monthly bus pass dependent on certain conditions: their attendance and achievement at school needed to be reasonable and would be monitored. The students were given a monthly form to be signed by their parents and they met with their counselor and the project coordinator every four weeks to review their attendance and receive their bus pass. This monthly meeting was also an opportunity for the school staff to encourage the students and provide some mentoring.

Results from that second grant, which tracked 45 students, have also been positive:

- On any given day during the school year, approximately 17% of the school's student population is absent. The average absence rate for the students in this program was 5.9%.
- 77% of students in the program had better than 90% attendance.

- A small subset of 14 program participants, who were receiving ESL programming, showed even better results, with an absence rate of only 3.44% and with 100% having better than 90% attendance.
- The program participants were not only earning credits at a rate 27% higher than the rest of the school, but they were also earning those credits with averages in the 70% to 76% range.

The project partners have learned much from this pilot. It is clear, from both the student tracking and from the conversations which have taken place with the school staff, that direct and practical assistance to students can improve their academic performance. Such assistance seems to be most effective when combined with a structured, supportive program in which students meet one-on-one with their school counselors on a regular basis.

Burns Memorial Fund and the United Way of Calgary are now in discussions about the results of the pilot project and the possibility of an ongoing partnership to meet the transit needs of low-income students. It is our hope to continue the program at the pilot school and to expand the support to more schools across the city. Together, we are working to ensure that as many students as possible stay in school, reach their academic potential, and graduate.

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