

**Topportunity Talks:**  
**Life choices among English-speaking youth in the Eastern Townships**

**Focus Group Research Report**

Dann Brault  
Annis Karpenko, MEd  
Natalie Kishchuk, PhD

Association des  
**Townshippers**  
Association

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# **Topportunity Talks:**

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**Facilitator:** **Dann Brault**

**Notes, Analysis and Report:** **Annis Karpenko, M.Ed.**

**Research Consultant:** **Natalie Kishchuk, Ph.D.**

**Research Design and Direction:** **Rachel Garber, M.A.**  
**Executive Director**  
**Townshippers' Association**

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Townshippers' Association  
257 Queen St., Suite 100  
Lennoxville, QC J1M 1Z7  
(819) 566-5717  
Toll free: 1-866-566-5717  
[ta@townshippers.qc.ca](mailto:ta@townshippers.qc.ca)

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Toppportunity Talks:  
Life choices among English-speaking youth in the Eastern Townships

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**Topportunity Talks:  
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**1. Introduction**

This document reports on a set of eleven focus groups conducted as part of an ongoing program to inform Eastern Townships English-speaking youth about career opportunities in the Eastern Townships. This was done by introducing participants aged 15-20 to the Topportunity website, [www.topportunity.ca](http://www.topportunity.ca), which describes the top 40 job prospects in the region and tells how to qualify for them, including language requirements, educational requirements and how to obtain financial aid to finance this training.

The focus groups also explored English-speaking youths' ideas and attitudes about their current opportunities, future career choices, employment/life action plan, where they see themselves living in the future and why. Two sets of questionnaires were filled out; one before the focus group and the other 3 - 4 weeks after. The data from the questionnaires and the focus group discussions will lay the foundation for a long-term communications plan that aims to empower English-speaking youth to develop careers in the Eastern Townships if they choose.

The topics examined were based on previous reports finding that English-speaking youth in the Townships are 27% less likely to graduate from high school than French-speaking youth (Canada Census 2001) and are more likely to drop out than English-speaking youth in other areas of Quebec (Floch & Warnke, 2004). This study also showed that the unemployment rate among English-speaking youth aged 15-24 is 31% higher than among French speakers in the region. Those who are employed tend to have a lower income than their French-speaking counterparts.

The need for this study was also suggested by demographic and extensive anecdotal evidence that a high proportion of English-speaking young people have left the Eastern Townships in recent decades (Floch & Warnke, 2004; Warnke, 2002; Caldwell, 1992).

In this context, the career prospects for many of the project participants may seem bleak. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the perception that the Townships offers only very limited opportunity for English speakers has been communicated and reinforced to the youth by peers, parents and possibly the schools. The heritage of many English speakers in rural Quebec includes the belief that to be successful one must leave in order to achieve success. Those who do choose to stay may not have the resources or motivation to perceive the opportunities that do exist in the Eastern Townships, and may therefore feel inadequate.

Townshippers' Association aims to create solutions to alter the negative attitudes that English-speaking youth may have about remaining in or returning to the Eastern Townships.

## 2. Method

Eleven focus groups were held throughout the Eastern Townships (Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, Cowansville, Richmond, Thetford Mines) in November and December 2004: One CEGEP, two vocational education programs, one adult education program and seven high school level 4 and 5 groups were included. Topportunity coordinator Dann Brault organized the groups.

Participants were recruited by in-person solicitation at career fairs and with the assistance of guidance counselors at the schools. Guidance counselors arranged for students to take part in the groups during their regular class hours. All of the students volunteered their time. A total of 116 students participated (49 males and 67 females), all in the 15-21-age range. All participants currently live in the historic Eastern Townships.

Questionnaires and focus group questions (Appendix I, II and III) were developed under the guidance of Natalie Kishchuk, PhD (Social psychology), an applied social research consultant in Montreal. Dann Brault facilitated the groups\* and Annis Karpenko transcribed discussion notes during the sessions using a laptop computer, sitting outside of the discussion group circle. Participants were asked to complete a brief anonymous socio-demographic questionnaire before and 3 - 4 weeks after the focus groups. The second questionnaire included new questions about the Topportunity website ([www.topportunity.com](http://www.topportunity.com)) and its usefulness and design. There were 116 responses to Questionnaire I (100%), 110 participants in the focus groups (95%) and 94 responses (81%) to Questionnaire II.

The focus groups were held in schools and lasted approximately 1 ½ hours each. Notes were taken during each session with the participants' permission. All participants received snacks and drinks during or after each session.

*\*Dann Brault facilitated ten of the eleven groups. In Thetford Mines, because of scheduling, two groups were held simultaneously and Annis Karpenko facilitated the second group. Two volunteers took notes for those sessions but Brault and Karpenko also kept handwritten notes during the sessions to assure accuracy.*

### 3. Results

The results have been itemized in relation to the focus group discussion with questionnaire results included in each item. A Participant Response Quick Look chart can be found on page 15. Verbatim quotes appear in *italics*.

#### 3.1 As you think about your community, what are the advantages or positive aspects of living here?

This question was met by silence and then laughter in almost every group. Participants cited environmental and community characteristics as being the most positive aspects of living in the area. The Eastern Townships is *safe, has clean air, nice scenery and close-knit communities*.

Participants spoke of the area in a positive manner in contrast to negative aspects of city life – *not as many crazy people as in the city, no homeless (people), less crime, no pollution, no rush hour*.

*I've lived here and I couldn't live in the city. I didn't sleep one night.*

*I think if I moved to Montreal, I wouldn't sleep at night.*

*I live on the mountain so there are trees. I like it, always quiet, relaxed, not like the city with bright lights and noise all the time.*

Participants noted the Eastern Townships is *quiet, relaxed, a nice place to raise a family, peaceful, calm and it's cheaper to live here*. Five groups responded that *everybody knows everybody* was a positive aspect.

*... a lot of people here are mostly family and we're really close. So everybody knows everyone. If you're going through something terrible, there are always people to help you.*

In Questionnaire I, 34% of participants Love It, while another 55% Like It Somewhat (total 89%). In Questionnaire II, this number dropped slightly to a combined 88% who Love It (27%) or Like it Somewhat (61%).

*I like this area. I don't know. I can think about all the bad stuff of where I live but I still don't want to move.*

*I honestly love it here.*

*I love it here, honestly, Ayer's Cliff.*

*Where the fairs are is where it's at.*

*We say all this negative stuff but we cope with it. It's a lot of small things but the big thing is we all know each other and their parents. The community feel is important.*

### **3.2 As you think about your community what are the disadvantages or negative aspects about living here?**

This question was never met with silence and most participants had something to offer about the challenges of being a youth in a rural community. Participants cited *a lack of transportation to school and entertainment, the lack of entertainment in English, and a lack of educational opportunities near home* as some of the disadvantages of living in the Eastern Townships. As well there was a lot of discussion about the availability of career opportunities. These comments will be included in the discussion **3.4**.

Many participants felt there was *nothing to do* and it was difficult to get to more urban areas (Sherbrooke or Drummondville) unless one had a car. Most participants relied on family members to get them to and from work or to visits with friends. Transportation to high schools on buses often took up to or over an hour, allowing no opportunity to stay past the school day to socialize or participate in after-school activities unless you organize alternate transportation. As a result, it was also noted that there was a shortage of after-school programs for the youth.

*There are no public buses, you can't get anywhere.*

*Not that there is anywhere to go.*

*The closest movie is in Granby or Sherbrooke.*

*The first time I came here (from Montreal) I asked if there was any metro and they said, "Yes, in Magog." It was a grocery store.*

*If I walked to my friend's house, it would take me all day.*

All groups cited language issues as a strongly negative aspect of living in the region. *You have to speak French and jobs are only in French* was frequently recorded. Politically some felt an anti-Canadian sentiment in the area, and felt that the strong French culture in the region limited options for English speakers.

*Almost all the services are offered only in French.*

*There is a lack of therapists and counselors who speak English.*

*Yeah. And not enough doctors.*

*There is always too much of one thing, there are six thousand hairdressers but no (English-speaking) psychologists.*

A lack of opportunities for education in English was listed as a negative with many participants noting an increased amount of French language in English high schools and also the lack of Vocational Education programs in English in the area.

*This (voc ed) program was advertised to be in English but most of the students are French, the teachers all speak French unless you ask them to speak English and the tests are translated from English to French and then back to English.*

*You have to leave to study or do things career wise.*

*There are not many opportunities here because so many people move away. I don't think it's a bad thing because we like it small.*

*Yeah, I wouldn't want it to be huge but the job opportunities are low.*

Two groups responded that *everybody knows everybody* was a negative aspect.

*There is no diversity. I am related to everyone.*

*I can't take a piss at McDonald's without somebody calling my mother.*

*Everyone knows each other, which can be a good thing and a bad thing. But there is so much gossip. You can't do anything without hearing about it the next day from 100 people.*

Even though there were a greater number of negative aspects brought up in focus group discussion, only 11% of Questionnaire I respondents said they Disliked or Disliked Somewhat living in the area. In Questionnaire II this number rose slightly to 12%.

### **3.3 About five years from now where do you see yourself? Where will you be living and what will you be doing?**

In Questionnaire I, 67% of participants stated they were Very Likely or Somewhat Likely to stay in the area for studies. The number dropped to 61% in Questionnaire II.

Some participants remaining in the area said they were enrolling or enrolled in vocational education courses in Lennoxville or Cowansville. The vocational education participants were most often in welding and mechanics (males) and hairdressing, secretarial studies or health care (females). Most of these participants planned to stay in the area but acknowledged they would have to go *where the jobs are*.

*I want to go into acting or racehorse training so none of them are a sure thing here.*

*I'll stay unless Quebec separates, then I'm going to Ontario.*

*It's cheaper and easier to stay in Quebec.*

*I'll stay but not in a small town, maybe Sherbrooke because I am afraid of Montreal.*

*I'll go wherever I can find a job.*

*Why waste all the French you learned living somewhere else? You'll lose it.*

*Most likely (I'll) still (be) here working, a house, steady job and good income. I've got no real plans to move away. I'm used to it here. I like the calmness.*

*I have no idea if the Eastern Townships has what I need. If it does, I'll stay.*

*I think for everybody we all look for a job we can do well in so we can have a great life. I think we all leave because if we want to make something of ourselves we have to leave, but we come back because we love it.*

*I should be around the Eastern Townships. If I'm not a farmer, I'll be a truck driver. May be go to agriculture school in Coaticook.*

Participants not planning to stay in the area to study planned to go to Montreal, Ontario (Ottawa or Toronto), Alberta, Maritimes, British Columbia, or the U.S. However, those thinking of going to the U.S. did not know about SATs or other admission requirements for U.S. schools. Some of the male participants were interested in joining the military or RCMP in Ontario or Saskatchewan.

*I'm not going to stay. I want a big city. There are lots more opportunities in a large city, job-wise and everything.*

*I'm probably going to leave for sure. I don't like the country. I want to go to B.C. or Toronto. The separation idea is very disturbing.*

In Questionnaire I, 61% of participants Will or Likely Will settle and raise a family in the Eastern Townships. This grew to 69% in Questionnaire II. The reasons for returning to raise families were related to the positive aspects of the area, clean air, safety, family ties and a more relaxed atmosphere to raise children. Concerns about language were not a deterrent to returning.

The participants who said they would be leaving the area for education, but planning to return to the area afterwards, were mostly going to Montreal. Those who were leaving the province for education and heading to Ontario (Ottawa or Toronto) or to the U.S. were

less sure of their plans to return to the Eastern Townships. Many participants who wished to return acknowledged that they would need to *go where the jobs are*.

*I'm not moving. If I do I'll come back and live in Knowlton because memories and stupid stuff like that is important. I want my kids to have what I had.*

*I want to go to school in the city, Montreal, and experience it but I would like to come back here to teach and have a family.*

*I'm going to study in Montreal and hopefully come back because my family is here and I'm used to it.*

*If I went away for college, I would definitely come back. I think it's a better place to bring up your children. It's definitely more dangerous in the city and this is home. I'm going to drive trucks but then come back here.*

*I'll go away to study but come back to have my kids here.*

Participants not returning cited family living outside of the area and better job opportunities elsewhere as reasons for not returning.

*I would like to go to the States because they pay their nurses better.*

*I want to leave, go to Eastern Europe and I'll wear a Canadian thing on my backpack but I'm going for good.*

*I'm not going to stay. I want a big city with lots more opportunities.*

*There are more options outside of Quebec.*

*I'm going to BC because I have family there and it's boring here.*

*Alberta, because I have a lot of family there.*

*West Palm Beach, Florida because I lived there for a while. I'm just going to move there because I love boys, beaches and palm trees.*

*Ontario, because most of my family is there.*

*I just like Montreal more. People are nicer there.*

*I want to go meet my dad's family in Romania because I don't like it here.*

### 3.4 What do you think about career opportunities in the Eastern Townships?

In Questionnaire I, only 14% of participants reported feeling there were no job opportunities in the Eastern Townships. This number dropped to 12% in Questionnaire II.

*There is not (sic) really any jobs for architects here. I don't see making that much if I'm an architect here and I don't want to be a bum on the street.*

*There are lots of low paying jobs. Everything is minimum wage.*

*People get over educated so they have to work for people who don't have a high school education.*

*You can't buy a farm here, damn straight, millions of dollars. You won't find a good farm for under 1.5 million.*

*There are a lot of jobs but not a lot of opportunities.*

*It's hard because the way things are going. A company in Cowansville is moving to China. Companies are closing down so you can't really plan.*

*Bombardier is closing. All the jobs are moving to China. Pretty soon they'll be moving their cows over to China.*

*They're closing down mining. Domtar is losing employment. Everything is shutting down and it's killing the little towns.*

It is of note that 86% of participants reported they speak French, 85% said they read French and 78% said they write French. However, during the focus group discussions, participants said they felt there was more opportunity for bilingual French- or English-speaking persons outside of the province than within. During the focus group discussion, those leaving said they felt that they did not have enough French to stay; some said they felt that there was discrimination in the workplace against English speakers, and others noted a lack of inclusion of English speakers in a French workplace even if they spoke French.

The participants who felt optimistic about career opportunities in the area said they felt they were bilingual enough to remain, and felt that the region was growing.

*There's a lot of businesses here.*

*There is beginning to be more job opportunities than before.*

*I'll admit I don't know much about statistics but I think there are more job opportunities because they are building a huge shopping centre (in Sherbrooke).*

*I'm sure there's like things out there. It's not like we're ready to go out and look. Right now it feels like there is nothing because we're working at Subway or Loblaws. Maybe we're just unaware of the job opportunities.*

### **3.5 How have you gone about researching career options? What is the best way for youth to find out about career options?**

In Questionnaire I, 97% of participants responded that they were thinking about career choices Somewhat and Very Much. Focus group participants said the best way to find out about careers and a job was using the internet (6 groups), word of mouth (5 groups), career counselors in school and the newspaper (3 groups). Most felt that the chance of getting any job in the area was directly related to *who you know*.

*You have to know people.*

*It's all about connections.*

*I feel that to be English and to get hired and work in English, you have to have connections with other English business owners.*

*My dad will hook me up in Montreal at Pratt and Whitney.*

*I can help my family member who does accounting.*

*My father owns a business so I'll probably work for him. My dad is ready to pass along the business.*

### **3.6 Where are the good jobs in the Eastern Townships?**

Without having defined directly the terms *career* and *job*, many participants responded that the only way to have a career (and not a job) in the area would be to start one's own company or to move into a family operation, but language laws, sign laws and a lack of government documentation in English would make this a challenge.

*To get far you have to start your own business.*

*I've seen a lot fail.*

*Anything is possible, it is just harder, more challenging and some people don't like challenges.*

*Businesses need to be in French or at the very least bilingual.*

*My dad owns a business but just to get paperwork in English is impossible. The government doesn't want anything to do with English.*

*You can take hairdressing anywhere.*

*Yeah, all the hairdressers got jobs when they got out. Salons call straight to the school.*

*There are accounting and secretarial, lots of places want that but there is lots of competition and you have to have French.*

Companies such as ETFS in Lennoxville, ACI Télécentrics in Sherbrooke and CCH Canadian in Sherbrooke, Nordia and Propar were said to have hired English speakers. Participants noted that call centres provided jobs for English speakers but that one call centre, ACI Télécentrics Incorporated, (ACI) had laid off employees.

*There are two things you can do to be successful as Anglophones, work at ETFS or join Hell's Angels.*

*Or Nordia.*

Manual labour on farms or in industry, menial or service jobs in retail or fast food outlets and seasonal tourism jobs were mentioned as opportunities to make money but not as careers.

*There are not a lot of options for the educated other than teaching.*

*We're such a rural community. We have farming and trucking and they'll hire you but once you reach a certain salary you're laid off so they can hire someone at a lower rate or they hire you back after the layoff but at the lower rate.*

For long-term employment, mechanics, nurses, health care workers, and teachers were known to have jobs in the area. Some considered these vocations to be jobs while others referred to them as careers. All agreed that any job that deals with the public in this area requires English speakers to be fluently bilingual but often as the lone English speaker in a workplace, bilingual employees were relied upon to deal with the English customers.

*My boss didn't know how to speak English so I had to talk to this guy to arrange the interview but he wouldn't get hired.*

*If you're bilingual, they love that but if you are only English your chance is shot.*

### **3.7 Do you feel that as an Anglophone you have as much access to the good jobs as a Francophone in the Eastern Townships?**

This question was met with a resounding No for unilingual English speakers and frequently a No even for those who were bilingual. This question generated the liveliest

conversation.

*You have to look harder. You have to put more effort in to finding work because a truly fluent Francophone will find it easier to find work.*

*If I make a mistake in French, they know that.*

*An English person doesn't get any credit for learning French, the masculine and feminine are hard and some people take offence.*

*I think the government is so concerned about losing their French that they don't notice they are losing their English. They (the French) are trying to eliminate us.*

*What is Quebec going to be like without English? Even if Quebec does separate, where is that going to get them?*

*Some kids would speak French because they think I don't understand them and they are surprised when I speak French.*

*But French complain (sic) they speak only French but their slang is all English.*

*We're losing the talented French people too.*

*We don't consider ourselves Quebecers, we consider ourselves Canadians first and Quebecers second.*

*We're the dregs.*

*It's a generational thing. The old people are more French French, but also the old English don't want to learn French.*

Many participants pointed out that even with the ability to speak, read and write French, they still did not feel there were "career opportunities" here for them, only jobs. It was frequently noted that French speakers are not required to have the same level of bilingualism that English speakers are required to have to work in the province. In many cases, French speakers will be hired regardless of their ability to speak English. Participants noted that resumes and interviews are all in French and one must be prepared for that.

*If an English and French guy go in with a resume, even if the English guy has better skills, the French guy will get hired. Even if the French guy doesn't have any English but the English guy has some French.*

*Don't even bother if you can't speak French. First of all, the bosses are all French.*

*I'm worried about being fired because I don't speak enough French.*

*The customer has the right to be spoken to in the language they speak clearly. Canada needs Quebec and Quebec needs Canada. People know it's a French province, if I'm going to Spain I know I have to speak some Spanish, I'm going to have to speak their language. I'm not racist, coming here you have to expect to speak French, but people are just so cranked up.*

*Discrimination. I have gone in and tried to speak French but they still complain they can't understand you. You're trying but you might say le instead of la. I play hockey in Shebrooke and every time I make a mistake they laugh, and I say, why aren't you trying to speak English?*

Those in vocational training as health care workers, hairdressers or secretaries expected their work language to be French most of the time, while those in industrial arts – mechanics and welders – felt they could work in English because they were not dealing directly with the public.

In the one vocational education group, the facilitator spontaneously asked what percentage of the participants' work week they felt would be conducted in French. Most said up to 75% of the week would be in French, while socially they would speak anywhere from 0 – 60% French during the week.

*I got fed up with people looking at me funny when I spoke English so I just speak French.*

Tourism was cited as an area where bilingual English speakers had a better advantage over unilingual French speakers. Among co-workers, French is the predominant language socially in the workplace, so many English speakers felt left out of the workplace social activities.

A few participants said they were planning to get teacher training outside the area and would like to return here to teach, but they voiced concern that the opportunity to teach in English in the Eastern Townships would not be available to them in the next 5 to 10 years.

### **3.8 Canada Census 2001 data show that English-speaking youth in the Townships are 27% less likely to graduate from high school than French-speaking youth. Why do you think that is?**

This question created some confusion among participants. Most did not feel that this statistic was true although many felt that English school was harder than French school. The addition of more French to the English school curriculum was considered a possible

reason for the statistic if it was so.

*They want to add history in French but 84 of 160 (students) failed when it was in English.*

*It is harder for an English person; we do come out with more French than they (French students) do English.*

*We're graduating more bilingual people. If a person graduates from English school with mother tongue French they will be better than (those graduating) from French school.*

*French-school English is easier than English-school French.*

Others mentioned they knew of people who had left high school but only because they were switching to French school or going into vocational education. Others suggested that students were leaving school because they were leaving the area bound for provinces where English is spoken more widely.

A lack of school support was suggested as a possible reason for the statistic.  
*I live in Sherbrooke and I find French schools are a lot more strict and like the teachers in the classrooms don't even think about dropping out, you have to finish, dropping out isn't an option but it crosses English people's minds more often.*

Also, some suggested that teachers in the English schools were not as *good* as teachers in the French school, and that French schools were better funded than English schools.

### **3.9 Have you visited the Toppportunity website?**

In Questionnaire I, only 6% of participants said they had visited the Toppportunity website. This number increased, in Questionnaire II, with 64% of participants having visited the website one or more times. After visiting the website, the number of respondents to Questionnaire II who reported feeling that there were career opportunities in the Eastern Townships increased by 2%.

Participants who viewed the website before the focus groups took place commented that the website had a mixed impact on them (Appendix IV).

*I didn't find it as educational as it could have been.*

*It wasn't boring but (there was) unrealistic information.*

*I found it pretty helpful. I felt there was some good things, like the top 40 jobs, there were things I would never have thought of. Unfortunately, my job wasn't on there.*

After the focus groups, Questionnaire II showed that more participants found the site

useful and the information sufficient.

*The top 40 jobs were excellent.*

*It was very informative and it gave me an idea on the jobs offered elsewhere.*

*Gives us more insights into what the ET has to offer and it gave me answers to a French project.*

One participant felt that the website had too much information about opportunities in Montreal. Others made suggestions on improving the website:

*Needs job postings and needs more information on where to find the jobs.*

The layout of the site was Liked by most of the participants: *very nice layout, it looked good, it looked professional and it is very well organized.* Someone noted that it was *easy to understand; it was clear and well set up.* However others indicated that they thought it was a *bad layout* and that they found the *pull down menus odd, too many things to pull down or click down.*

**Participants' Responses  
Quick Look**

	<b>All Participant s</b>	<b>Questionnaire I</b>	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Questionnaire II</b>
Number of participants		116	110	94
Males	49			
Females	67			
Currently living in the Eastern Townships	100 %	100%	100%	100%
Percentage who consider themselves bilingual.	NA	83%	76%	NA
What do you think about the Eastern Townships?	NA	Love It and Like It 89%	NA	Love It and Like It 88%
Do you feel there are career opportunities in the Eastern Townships?	NA	No 14%	NA	No 12%
How likely is it that you will stay to complete your studies?	NA	Somewhat Likely and Very Likely 67%	NA	Somewhat Likely and Very Likely 61%
How likely are you to settle or raise your family here?	NA	Likely Will and Will 61%		Likely Will and Will 69%
Aware of Top Jobs	NA	43%		52%
Visited Topportunity Website	NA	NA	5.5%	64%
Found the Topportunity Website useful.	NA	NA	NA	69%

#### 4. Discussion:

Should I Stay or Should I Go?: The conundrum of rural youth.

**To stay or to go.** Many participants reported feeling they would find opportunity, contentment and meaning by staying in the same town with the same people for their whole lives. Others reported hoping to leave to get an education but felt they were not financially able. Some depart and come back while others go and never return.

And no matter what your choice, it appears that you can be damned if you leave or damned if you don't. Discussion groups illustrated time and again that there is no right or wrong or good or bad choices. All viable options and success are based on finding meaning in one's life, whether that is personal, financial or otherwise. For some it might mean raising a family, owning your own business or working for a company with benefits and a pension. The seems that one of the biggest challenges rural youth face is the narrow definition of success that has been cultivated by the society around them and the expectation that everyone should achieve it.

The concern ... by some community leaders regarding the kind of youth they would want living in their towns. They wished to see more "good" youth; that is youth with an education, ambition, drive and a good work ethic. Related to such concerns is the perception that youth who return to small towns are those who could not make it in the big city. One community leader stated that the perception of "returning equaling failure" should be actively combated. (Government of Canada, Rural Youth Survey, 2002, p. 26)

**Likelihood of staying.** The number of participants reporting they were likely to stay in the Eastern Townships for studies went down 6%, from 67% in Questionnaire I to 61% in Questionnaire II. However, those planning on settling or raising their families in the Eastern Townships increased 8%, from 61% in Questionnaire I to 69% in Questionnaire II.

We attribute the 6% decrease in those planning to stay for studies to the fact that, during and following the focus groups, as the participants explored their career options and the training programs available to prepare them for their preferred careers, they may have found that they would have to leave the Townships in order to obtain their desired training. However, the fact that 8% more (69%) reported in Questionnaire II that they would plan to settle or raise their families in the Townships seems to reflect increased optimism among participants about being able to gain employment in the Eastern Townships after they complete their training or studies.

**The Present.** The eleven focus groups provided insight into the daily life of English-speaking youth in the Eastern Townships. Much of their day is spent like any other rural youth, shuffling (or busing) between home, school and part-time jobs. It was evident in each group that participants were willing, if not delighted to share their thoughts on education, careers, community life, and plans for families, hopes and dreams.

Much of the research seems to emphasize the negative aspects of life in rural areas, despite the fact that rural residents themselves more often emphasize the benefits of living where they do, and other research confirms that rural residents often report that they have a high quality of life. (Looker, 2001, p. iii)

Participants were enthusiastic about the quality of life in the Eastern Townships. According to the questionnaires, supported by focus group discussion, 88% of participants “love or like” the area. This finding concurs with other studies focusing on rural youth. But enthusiasm is not enough to combat the isolation and frustration that many participants feel. Participants were almost unanimous in their feeling that there are no or limited opportunities for success for English-speaking Townshippers unless one is fluently bilingual.

Overall, the negative outlook of participants was most often related to language issues. Most participants said they felt there were no opportunities for them because they did not speak enough French. Studies such as the Rural Youth Study, Phase II (Government of Canada, 2002) suggest that youth leave rural areas because they feel there is a general lack of opportunity. This raises the question: If the language issue were removed, would English-speaking youth in the Eastern Townships still feel that there was a lack of opportunity for them? Further research would be needed to ascertain this.

Based on focus group discussion, clearly the divide between French culture and English culture in the Eastern Townships is not being filled by bilingualism. Some participants reported having families who have lived in the Eastern Townships for generations and yet they did not feel welcome in many areas. Participants frequently used the word *assimilate* or *eliminate* in conversation. *They (the French) are trying to assimilate/eliminate us.* And yet, as reported in the Questionnaire results, 87% of participants considered themselves bilingual.

Participants, though happy to have the advantage of being bilingual, were dismayed that they were required to be so while French speakers were not. The two-tiered language requirements they experience seem to alienate and demoralize many English-speaking youth in the area. Socially, there seems to be little interchange of language between English and French youth. You either speak French with your French friends (if you have any) or English with your English friends, but there is little commingling of the two languages in social circles.

The challenges facing the English-speaking community that elicit strong concern in surveys are not limited to numbers or access to services, but also relate to issues of inclusion and belonging. It is likely the reason that many Anglophones evoke equality as a major concern. Neither the growing diversity nor **metissage** (mixing of languages) in the Quebec English-speaking population has modified this view. (Jedwab, 2004, p. 5).

Most participants leave their communities daily to attend school, which they bemoan is increasing its French content each year. While this is true, the requirement for graduation from the Eastern Townships School Board remains at achieving Level 5 French as a Second Language. Some parents feel that their children are not learning enough French to remain living and working in Quebec, while others feel that the increase in French language classes is a loss for English-speakers. Many of the participants held part-time jobs where they spoke only French and many students speak some French in their homes (with a French-speaking parent or other family members) or socially in their communities.

Day-to-day opportunities to hang out with English-speaking peers outside of school seem to be impaired by a lack of transportation to and from homes that are spread far apart, creating further isolation. English movies and entertainment where peer groups can congregate are nonexistent outside of more urban areas such as Sherbrooke or Granby. (Richmond is currently raising funds for a local movie theatre, which would show English and French movies).

### **The Future.**

A number of community leaders stated that youth leaving the rural communities was a positive event, perhaps inevitable but arguably necessary. Community leaders seemed to feel that rural youth need to leave their community to gain new experiences and broaden their horizons. If a youth wishes to pursue postsecondary education, then in most cases leaving the small town is the only way to accomplish that. Often, parents actively push their children “out of the nest,” citing the lack of opportunities in the small town and its insular nature as reasons why youth should leave. Leaving in order to broaden horizons was, therefore, viewed positively by many community leaders. (Government of Canada, Rural Youth Survey, 2002, p. 18)

In Questionnaire I, 97% of participants reported they had considered their career choices. Most participants said they had made plans to attend a certain CEGEP, university or to start a specific vocational program. Others, who were less sure of the details of their future, had a game plan in place and felt confident that their lives would work out. A very few participants were totally unsure of what they would do or where they would be in the next five years. Over 50% of participants planned to stay in the area for their studies and

to settle and raise their families.

Participants who planned to stay in the area reported either going into vocational training, finding jobs or going to CEGEP in Lennoxville and then to Bishop's University after. An April 2004 Analysis of the Student Survey done for the Dobson-Lagassé Entrepreneurship Centre at Bishop's showed that 36% of students leaving the area after graduation were from the Eastern Townships, while another 38% were unsure if they would stay after graduation. This survey polled 140 students in various disciplines. Of students polled, 60.9% intended to leave the Eastern Townships after graduation and 18.8% were undecided. Remaining in the area for studies does not guarantee that a person will remain in the area long-term (Aljane, 2004).

While other studies have shown that rural youth generally do not have any trepidation about moving to a large city (Government of Canada, Rural Youth Study, Phase II, 2002), participants often voiced concern about leaving the area (see 3.3) and felt that the quality of life and safety was compromised in the cities. It must be noted that some younger participants felt that just moving to Sherbrooke was leaving the Eastern Townships and that Montreal was practically another country.

While most of the participants might be considered completely bilingual outside of Quebec, some were unsure that they had enough French to stay in the province. For those who leave the province and spend the next years studying and socializing in English, will they manage to maintain an adequate level of French to return to Quebec to work after their education is complete? Further research into the feelings of youth about their status as Anglophones or Francophones would be valuable. Many of these youth have a mix of Francophone, Anglophone or Allophone parentage and have spoken two or more languages from birth.

Many participants agreed that while there were *jobs* in the area for bilingual English-speakers, successful careers, perhaps as defined by the media or career counselors, were seen as non-existent. Although vocational training in mechanics, welding, hairdressing, health care or secretarial studies guaranteed jobs, these were not necessarily considered careers. Words like "making a good living" were related to jobs, while the word "career" instantly suggested immeasurable success. Perhaps it is time to rethink what success means?

According to the Rural Youth Survey, Phase II, youth mobility plans appear to be age-dependent, as significantly more youth (75%) aged 15-19 plan to reside in an urban centre than do those in other age categories (20 to 24 years or 25 to 29 years old) (Government of Canada, p. 22). The study goes on to say that most of those leaving do so for post-secondary education. Discussions in the *Opportunity Talks* focus groups support this observation. While youth retention is seen as desirable in rural areas, does the area really benefit from having a majority of its population only educated to the high school or CEGEP level, especially if the level of education achieved gauges success?

## **The Website.**

Rural youth have considerably less access to post-secondary education and training programs than urban dwellers. Consequently, many youth leave rural communities to pursue education in larger centres. However, there are financial implications that can deter youth from pursuing post-secondary education. By migrating to urban centres, rural youth are unable to remain in the family home and, therefore, must incur additional expenses for food and accommodation. Additionally, there are social, cultural and psychological implications involved in moving from rural communities to urban centres. (Government of Canada, Rural Youth Survey, 2002, p. 34)

Feedback about the current [www.topportunity.ca](http://www.topportunity.ca) website is informative and useful but it can be improved to be more alluring and relevant to a young Townshipper. While the site lists possible education options for each of the Top 40 Job Prospects, many of these options direct youth outside of the Eastern Townships for schooling. The financial burden of pursuing a university education away from home may be too great to bear for rural families and the reality is that there are limited post-secondary options for English-speaking Townshipers.

With online training and distance education becoming more refined, popular and reputable, links to online education programs such as university distance education courses or certification programs should be highlighted. Not only could distance education keep youth in the Eastern Townships, but it might also be a less expensive way for students to continue their studies while remaining at home and working full- or part-time.

In focus groups, participants were asked to express their opinions regarding life, careers and politics in the Eastern Townships and then they were told about the website and how it might relate to them. While the website offered information that would be of interest to them, trying to explain the site without their having seen it was difficult.

A small number of the participants visited the site prior to the focus groups; discussion about the website and its contents was limited. Participants were handed information cards listing the Top 40 Jobs at the focus groups and encouraged to check them out before Questionnaire II was presented. This meant that there was limited opportunity for a personal “sell” of the website.

During one of the focus groups, a guidance counselor requested that Dann return to do a Topportunity website presentation to a larger group of students. This hour-long presentation exclusively about the website offered some of the focus group participants (and other students in the school) a chance to take a more detailed look at the site. As a result of this presentation, participants were able to gain a better grasp on the website and its usefulness to

them. One participant said *I believe it's a good idea and a very good source of information. I plan on taking a longer look in the near future.*

It is difficult to know the true value the website might have had for the participants of the focus groups. Although many indicated in Questionnaire II that they liked the site and found the information useful, this information seems to have only led to a 2% increase in the belief that there are career opportunities in the Eastern Townships.

Nor does it seem to have markedly changed the number of participants who were going to leave the area to pursue their education, or those who might return to settle or raise their family here. And there was no evidence that the overall feelings about the quality of life in the area had changed to any notable degree.

Comments made during focus groups pointed out that the website does not offer solutions to such issues as the lack of transportation, English entertainment, or career opportunities for non-bilingual or only marginally bilingual English speakers. It does not offer a solution to the sense of isolation that participants felt in their communities. Nor does it list specific job openings.

It is of note that the [www.topportunity.ca](http://www.topportunity.ca) website does not purport to fill any of these above roles. Other sites play the role of “job bank,” listing specific job openings. Such community-wide issues as transportation, entertainment or isolation are inherent to rural living as well as living in a linguistic minority situation. And as a linguistic minority comprising only 6% of the total Townships population, the need for bilingualism in the job market is a fact of life.

However, the participants’ comments point to the need for a more global understanding of the factors that influence a person’s life choices, and perhaps a broadened role for the Topportunity website.

## 5. Recommendations

**1. Enhanced opportunity.** With limited energy and resources available, convincing youth to stay and trying to provide support and resources to those who remain may be too ambitious a goal. Historically, it is the role of youth to leave, to explore, to experience and perhaps to return to the communities they leave behind.

The limited resources available should be used to enhance the opportunities of those who remain by, for example, providing partnership opportunities with Francophone businesses, establishing entrepreneurial networks for business start-ups and encouraging life long learning among residents through continued education or online distance learning venues. Strengthening the lives and opportunities for those who choose to stay will increase the likelihood that those who leave will return. A long-term communications plan surrounding [www.topportunity.ca](http://www.topportunity.ca) is recommended, focusing on the

issues raised in this report as well as follow-up with already established partnerships in education and business.

- 2. Continued contact.** Focus group participants should be offered the opportunity to stay in touch with Townshippers' Association. A follow-up email advising participants that this report is available on the Toppportunity website and asking them to give us feedback about the report would be an ideal way to continue the dialogue. Future and regular contact can be made via email, online discussion groups and contact within schools and the community. Encouraging participants to update us on their decisions and progress would allow them to feel part of the greater community. (Because the focus group participation was confidential, we will have to ask permission from each participant to continue contact with them.)
- 3. Group sessions.** Holding leadership training sessions, confidence-building sessions, and cultural exchanges with English, French and other immigrant students in the area would create a larger sense of community for the English-speaking youth and would help allay their sense of isolation. Ideally these sessions would be offered to students in their first or second year of high school to better prepare them for their future life and career decisions.
- 4. Transportation.** Offer transportation to English movies, social nights, tournaments and activities for youth. Explore the possibility of arranging with the Eastern Townships School Board to have buses available for weekend outings to dances, movies, the shopping centres for a small fee.
- 5. Toppportunity community.** Expanding the Toppportunity website to create more sense of community for youth. This might include discussion boards, free Toppportunity email addresses, special offers, as well as tips on good study habits, creative games and trends in education and employment. Students who do not have computer access at home but are part of the ETSB laptop program do not have access to their computers during summer holidays. Finding ways for these students to remain connected during the summer would be helpful.
- 6. How to get jobs.** Within the website expansion, there should be more information in baby-steps about how to get to ideal jobs. Many participants from this study requested that job listings from the area be included (not just links to other job listing sites).
- 7. Business connections.** While more job listings would be useful, studies show that most job openings are not advertised. Participants suggested that one of the best ways to get a job was by word of mouth and having connections. Building networks between local youth and local business owners is strongly suggested. This could be done by including business owners in leadership development activities and including personal stories from local entrepreneurs or successful business people from the area online.

- 8. Life-long learning.** The website should include more information about life-long learning opportunities, more college planning information beyond where to go and links to existing online communities for each area of interest. A further study on the interest of English-speaking residents in distance education should be considered.

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# Appendices