



# pathways report

*Updating school professionals about the challenges and solutions for students struggling with school avoidance.*

## *Pathways Expands to Meet the Growing Problem of School Avoidance*

Pathways, a highly unique school within a school for students struggling with school avoidance, was formally created when Cornerstone Day School moved to its new building in May 2019. Pathways offers a warm, relaxed, and stress-free environment with highly specialized academic and clinical services that serves as an ideal vehicle for school avoidant students to begin the road back to attending school. Pathways, of course, incorporated the highly effective education and treatment methods developed by Cornerstone for school avoidant students since its founding in 2006.

Pathways was and remains housed in a spacious and secluded suite adjacent to the mainstream setting and looks and feels more like a living room with learning, eating, and counseling areas rather than a standard school setting. The furniture is conducive to conversation and relaxation while at the same time therapy and education can take place.

Prior to the pandemic, Pathways was highly in demand for many students. However, as school professionals very



much know, Covid has further exacerbated the frequency of school avoidance in school districts everywhere. Children who were already experiencing school anxiety before pandemic-imposed school closures found the school setting even more frightening after so long a

period of academic and social isolation. In addition, that challenging time coupled with the disruption and chaos created by the on-going variants is affecting so many more students struggling with anxiety in general and school avoidance in particular. *continued on page 2*

## *Family Systems: Key to Treating the School Avoidant Student*

One of the essential elements to successfully treat students with school avoidance in Pathways is an emphasis on family therapy and parent support. School avoidance is an extremely challenging issue facing many families and parents often feel overwhelmed, isolated, and frustrated on how to help their child.

When a student first starts in Pathways, the clinician completes comprehensive assessments to not only identify the

form and function of the school avoidant behavior but to also assess the family relationships and routines that might be contributing to, or be a result of, the school avoidant behavior. Once these are determined the next steps consist of identifying interventions and developing an Individual School Avoidant Plan ("ISAP"). The ISAP provides guidance, support, and goals for both parent and student.

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## *Pathways Expands...*

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With increasing referrals to Pathways at Cornerstone, it became clear that an expansion of the program and facility was necessary to ensure that the unique setting that makes such a difference for these students could be available.

The physical space for the program has been increased significantly with the addition of more individual education study areas and another lounge and lunch area where students can relax and practice their self-regulation skills.

“Since this pandemic, the challenge of school avoidance is even greater for students and we are taking slower, smaller steps with many of them,” says program director, Gregory Levine. “We have always focused on the parents of our students but now, we have even increased the emphasis on working with parents, helping them see how they may inadvertently accommodate and thereby reinforce their children’s anxieties. In addition, for some newly enrolled students, we are doing more at home therapy visits than ever. We have also increased the frequency of after school socials to reinforce their feelings of connection to their friends and to the school community”.

The stay in Pathways can be short or long, depending on whatever makes the most sense for each student. All services are highly personalized with flexible scheduling to meet any late start/early dismissal/day off needs. The goal for all Pathways students is to successfully transition into the mainstream Cornerstone setting and then back to their home district.

## *Family Systems...*

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We have always found that when working with families we need to help parents to identify the ways their family system has changed to accommodate their child’s school avoidance. One such way is parents often find themselves operating from a perspective of being a protector of their child and may inadvertently be implementing strategies at home that are re-enforcing the avoidance behaviors. The clinician’s goal is to assist parents with identifying this and help them to shift their mindset from being a protector to a supporter. This is done through learning distress tolerance techniques that will allow a parent to be open to implementing different routines at home.

Once parents make this cognitive shift, then they can more easily implement some of the strategies that are more conducive to getting their child to attend school.

Key to the success of Pathways working with parents is our specialized bi-weekly Parent Support Group, led by Cornerstone’s Director of School Avoidance. This group is designed to provide a supportive network for parents while simultaneously providing an opportunity for them to learn effective interventions they can utilize at home that can help with increasing school attendance. Parents also find that they receive support from other parents who are experiencing similar struggles and this support helps encourage them to make changes at home.

Providing family therapy and the parent support group are clinically effective interventions for addressing the many challenges of school avoidance. The key element to remember is that treating school avoidance is a multifaceted family systems issue that requires a commitment to the treatment journey. This long-term model of treatment is essential for sustaining progress.



[www.pathways-cornerstonedayschool.com](http://www.pathways-cornerstonedayschool.com)

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Cornerstone Day School is the only therapeutic school in NJ that is licensed by the State Division of Mental Health to provide treatment. Cornerstone is also a Chapter of the National Honor Society and accredited as a school by MSA, AdvancedED and NIPSA.