



pathways report

WINTER 2022

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

Academic Support for Anxious, Avoidant Students



Students who struggle with School Avoidance are not truant, and in most cases, they are not seeking to avoid schoolwork per se. Many care deeply about their academic performance and are not deficient in any way from an intellectual or learning perspective. And yet, of course, schoolwork suffers when a student is chronically absent from school.

The impact of prolonged separation from school routines was brought sharply into focus by pandemic-related school closures. Many students are still struggling to “catch up” educationally, socially, and emotionally. The disengagement from school and teachers was profound and challenged schools all over the country to seek new ways to re-connect with students, even those who previously did not have issues with regular school attendance.

As part of its efforts to ease students back to school when in-person classes resumed, Cornerstone expanded the role of its Academic Support Coordinators. There is a dedicated

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Building Self-Efficacy in Students and Their Families

All newly enrolled Cornerstone students, including those in our Pathways program, are met with an individually customized plan of expectation and support. Based on thorough clinical and educational evaluations, CDS staff strive to balance our expectations for change and forward movement with both understanding and support for how difficult it is to move through severe mental health symptoms and to change long-established habits.

Students with all kinds of disabilities – physical challenges, mental health disorders, neuro-developmental differences, educational limitations – to some degree struggle with self-concept. From a very early age they have learned that they are different from other kids and that they cannot readily do what other students their age seem to do with ease. This experience erodes self-esteem and its close

cousin, self-efficacy, the belief that one has the capacity to effectively handle life’s challenges. Individuals with low self-efficacy assume that everything that goes wrong is because of their deficiencies or faulty behaviors, while things that go right are not due to their efforts but rather are attributable to external circumstances.

With this in mind, CDS staff target low self-efficacy as a primary barrier for all Pathways students regardless of what factors contribute to a specific student’s school avoidance. A daily schedule and activity plan is created for each student and adherence to this plan is tracked in detail. An educational aide documents what the student did for each scheduled activity: did the student fully participate, did she sleep for part of the time, did he procrastinate and avoid, etc. At the end of each day, the student has a

compliance score and very specific information about when and how she functioned in school. This becomes the basis for extensive problem-solving discussions with both teachers/aides and clinicians. “You stayed completely on task for the first two periods. What were you doing to manage your anxiety and maintain focus during that time? What happened after that? What was different from yesterday when you slept through your entire first period?”.

Pathways tracking grids are not unlike DBT Diary Cards. They support behavioral analysis/problem-solving discussions to bring cognitive awareness to the student about triggers, coping skills, self-defeating thoughts and behaviors, environmental aspects that make it easier or harder to stay on task, etc. These discussions

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Academic Support...

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support person for the high school and one for the middle school, and it is the high school coordinator, Ms. Ashley Vaughn, who oversees all the students in Pathways as well. Pathways students receive the same support as mainstreamed students, but also have more specialized attention within the Pathways suite.

All new Pathways students are greeted on their first day by Ms. Vaughn who presents them with a goodie bag of snacks and water, as well as notebooks, folders, a daily planner, and other supplies (e.g., a color-coded accordion file) to help them organize their schoolwork. She meets daily with mainstreamed students during 10th period for their first two weeks to help them acclimate to Cornerstone and their individual schedules, but she is present every day in Pathways during 9th period to meet with all students no matter how long they've been enrolled.

During 9th period in Pathways Ms. Vaughn checks in with each student to answer questions, to coach them on executive function skills, to ensure that they are aware of missing assignments, and to help them stay on task with that day's homework. Throughout the day she collaborates with content teachers to gather assignments for Pathways students and/or to coordinate when a content teacher will meet with a student in the Pathways suite.

Academic support also includes the monitoring of data charts for each Pathways student. These data are reviewed every two weeks in collaboration with administration, teachers, and each student's clinician to review progress, identify patterns, and recommend changes in a student's plan if goals are not being met. "These data charts are giving us so much information," said Ms. Vaughn, "and are helping to ensure that students transition smoothly and successfully to regular classrooms." The data charts also allow clinicians and teachers to provide much more specific information to parents about their child's strengths and challenges, and to make recommendations about how they can support their child's academic success.

Building Self-Efficacy...

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provide plenty of opportunities for showing students the number of times each day that they are succeeding, as well as what they were specifically doing to achieve that success. Self-efficacy!

Once a student has an 80% adherence rate for two weeks, he can move to the next level of academic and behavioral expectations. If the student falls below 80%, discussions of barriers are revisited as well as possibilities for altering the plan and/or modifying expectations.

Another specific example of self-efficacy building is the coaching and skill development that teachers provide related to test-taking. Executive Function (EF) strategies are used to teach students how to implement and evaluate their approach to test taking. Four days before a scheduled test the teacher asks each student to identify a specific test preparation strategy (e.g., review the study guide, re-read the assigned chapters, review highlighted sections and classroom notes, create flash cards, etc.). Teachers continue to check in with students each day before the test to review adherence to and effectiveness of study plans. After the test, with test scores in hand, students are asked to self-evaluate their methods based on their individual results. This process helps students tie their outcomes to their actions and effort, and in doing so builds both technical knowledge and a sense of self-efficacy.

CDS's elaborate tracking system is being rolled out and implemented now with data being taken and interpreted every two weeks. This valuable feedback builds self-efficacy in the students themselves, of course, but also reassures anxious parents that their youngsters can indeed function effectively at school. The data also helps CDS staff keep up gentle but persistent pressure on students to move forward, and to avoid the tendency to over-accommodate vulnerable students.



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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.