



pathways report

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

School Avoidance Intervention Strategies – A Closer Look

By now, most New Jersey-based child study team professionals know that Cornerstone Day School (CDS) continues to set the standard for treating school avoidant students. Over the years, our *Pathways* program has expanded and evolved to meet the growing population of students who struggle with regular school attendance due to severe anxiety, depression, or other serious mental health problems.

Those familiar with this premier CDS program know that the basic *Pathways* protocol includes a “school within a school” physical environment that offers a private, protected space away from the bustle of school classrooms and hallways. The basic intervention components include:

- A full and ongoing assessment of the factors that maintain school avoidant behavior.

- Ongoing collaboration with parents/caregivers to create incentives for school attendance while removing or minimizing rewards available within the home.
- Individualized and group support (the “PASS” group) to help parents learn to tolerate their children’s discomfort, and to provide encouragement without enabling or inadvertently reinforcing avoidance behaviors.
- A pairing of independent study/1-1 instruction within the *Pathways* suite and mainstream, classroom-based instruction.
- An individualized gradual exposure method of introducing students to participation in the regular classroom experience that involves modified schedules (customizing days and hours per day that the students are expected to be in

- school, as well as time in-suite versus in-classroom schedule).
- As with all CDS students, *Pathways* students work with the same primary clinician for both individual and family therapy and participate as they are able with daily process and psychoeducational groups.
- Home visits by clinical and administrative staff are common, especially in the early phases of treatment, along with morning phone calls and access to the school’s 24/7 telephone consultation line.
- Intensive psychiatric management to provide students with the medication support that can help them manage anxiety and depression symptoms.

continued on page 2

In Their Own Words: Pathways Parents Speak Out About the Challenge of School Avoidance

Three parents with children currently enrolled in the *Pathways* program shared their experiences so far:

CDS: How long has your child been struggling with school avoidance?

Parent 1: Really always - literally from kindergarten. But it really ramped up in the 4th grade.

Parent 2: For about 5 years.

Parent 3: My child has been struggling with avoidance for years. *Pathways* has the resources and solutions to help. We went from not being able to get out of the car, to now he’s up to 1.5 hours in school each day.

CDS: Has the *Pathways* program changed the way that your child thinks about school? Has it changed how you view school?

Parent 1: Although still avoiding, I do

think it has changed the way my kid thinks about school. She seems to be less intimidated and overwhelmed. It has changed the way I view school in that I had no idea that there would be systems within an out of district placement that could accommodate her needs, understand the situation, and coach us as parents on how to help.

Parent 2: I believe that *Pathways* has tentatively convinced my child that there is a less painful and more personalized way to go to school and that his anxiety does not mean he cannot get an education. As parents, it provides hope that our son can learn while he develops his ability to handle the school environment.

Parent 3: Yes, *Pathways* is a more relaxed and caring environment. The staff really thinks about you and your child’s mental capacity. The “I can’t do it” turns into “I can, if I try”.

CDS: How has *Pathways* been successful where previous schools/programs have not?

Parent 1: The compassion shown while still driving towards goals has made a big difference. I think that for the first time, my kid actually does want to try to get to school (at Cornerstone, not anywhere else!) and does have slivers of hope for a productive future.

Parent 2: Cornerstone in general has been more attentive to our child’s specific profile, needs, and limitations than other programs. Not simply accepting said limitations, but also not pushing blindly or generically is a significant difference.

Parent 3: *Pathways* allows my child to slowly reintegrate back to a social environment. The laid-back environment helps my child to not feel so restricted.

continued on page 2

School Avoidance...

continued from page 1

But, as always, both the devil and the answers reside in the details. As *Pathways* has grown and evolved over the years our professional staff have explored a variety of strategies to continue to improve attendance and at the same time to decrease students' school-related anxieties. One newly instituted intervention that appears to be having a positive impact is that the *Pathways* director, Jeff Steigman, LCSW, calls parents as soon as a student misses more than one day per week. These calls from the program director elevate for parents the importance of daily attendance and engage them in more immediate problem solving.

Another recently added strategy is that both the program director and the *Pathways*-based educational aide have been joining family sessions at times to increase communication and collaboration across educational and clinical goals. Their involvement in family sessions also helps the family remain focused on the priority of getting the child back to school regularly and lowers the chance of sessions becoming derailed by other family complaints.

Additional strategies for motivating students to attend school are also being employed. These include the ability to participate in *Pathways*-only field trips and participation in recreational school electives such as the Dungeons and Dragons elective. *Pathways* has also started a "Student of the Week" program to recognize the efforts of students who have shown improvement or reached certain milestones.

The *Pathways* team has also put considerable effort into creating and cultivating opportunities for social interactions within *Pathways* to increase social skills and self-confidence and decrease social anxiety. For those students who are the most anxious and reluctant to engage with peers, group activities that require less social interaction, such as playing Bingo, have been found to be helpful.

Just as there is no pre-determined length of stay, and no cookie-cutter *Pathways* schedule, so too there are no pre-determined limits on opportunities to create incentives to motivate a student to cross the school threshold each morning. Parents, teachers, clinicians, and students themselves are all encouraged to throw ideas into the hat!

In Their Own Words...

continued from page 1

CDS: Has *Pathways* changed your hopes/ expectations in terms of whether your child will graduate?

Parent 1: Definitely. Although it will not be in the traditional 4-year timeframe, I have more optimism than I've had before.

Parent 2: Not as of yet.

Parent 3: Yes! *Pathways* is where my child needs to be. The therapeutic environment along with academics will allow my child to be able to finish high school and be successful.

CDS: How has *Pathways* helped you as a parent?

Parent 1: The advice and the support are extremely valuable and appreciated. It is helpful to get the perspective of the *Pathways* team as well as other parents.

Parent 2: The support group (PASS) of other *Pathways* parents offers not only the fellowship of others in similar situations, but tangible examples of students further along on their journeys, as well as the opportunity to pause and appreciate the distance we have covered.

Parent 3: The support from the staff is phenomenal. *Pathways* is always there to help me encourage my child to keep pushing and make small steps. When I think we hit a wall, the staff always has a solution or a suggestion to try. The staff members not only support the child but also the parent. I don't feel as alone anymore.



www.pathways-cornerstonedayschool.com

www.cornerstonedayschool.com

10-12 Commerce Drive, Cranford, NJ 07016 • Phone: 908-543-0220 • Fax: 908-543-0222

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.

