

Learning from Youth Experts

Using a Strengths-based Approach

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Pathways
to Education

Preface

Pathways to Education is a national charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Its award-winning program, which provides students with a holistic combination of financial, social, and one-on-one supports is proven to promote positive youth development by meeting the needs of students living in low-income communities during the critical years of high school.

In close partnership with local organizations, schools, and volunteers, Pathways Program staff identify priority barriers youth face and help them map out a tailored plan to achieve their goals. With this support, many Pathways alumni pursue post-secondary education or training or gain meaningful apprenticeships, internships, and employment opportunities.

This series aims to highlight the expertise among Pathways staff who work directly with youth at program locations across the country.

Through these conversations, we hope to develop recommendations that can be shared with youth workers, policymakers, youth organizations, youth leaders, and educators.

All names and personal identifiers have been changed to protect the anonymity of the young people portrayed in this article.

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Learning from Youth Experts: Using a Strengths-based Approach

Introduction

Follow the journey of Judson, a Pathways student, from Grade 9 to 11 through the perspective of his Pathways mentor. Highlighting a popular **strengths-based approach** used by Pathways staff, this glimpse into a mentor-mentee relationship reflects how encouraging young people to focus on their strengths rather than their perceived deficits can foster trust and encourage the self-advocacy skills that young people need as they navigate their path to a successful future.

Judson's journey represents just one of many possible trajectories, sets of challenges, and outcomes commonly seen in adolescents who attend programs built on principles of Positive Youth Development and designed to support young people living in contexts of disadvantage.

Youth Mentoring in Practice: Case Study

Judson's journey in the Pathways Program from Grade 9 to 11

I genuinely believe that youth are the future, and each young person has inherent potential. As a youth worker with Pathways to Education, it is my job to find and nurture young people's strengths.

Communities that the Pathways Program serves are selected based on their level of need, and this usually includes interest from community members, the proportion of residents living in low-income households, and the number of young people living in the community. Before enrolling young people in the Pathways Program, **frontline staff engage the local community** to introduce ourselves and the program.

I met Judson during one of our outreach sessions. He was in Grade 8, transitioning into high school. Judson was a shy and quiet student, and an English Language Learner who struggled with communication.

Starting high school is a major transition in a young person's life and poses both opportunities and challenges. Navigating this new environment can be a time of increased social and academic pressures, with a level of autonomy that many young people have not yet experienced. It can also be a sensitive period, especially for a student who faces language barriers and the additional stress can negatively impact their mental health and academic achievement.

For Judson, the transition to high school was overwhelming. His high school had a diverse population and not much support for English Language Learners. In the beginning, Judson did not share the challenges he was facing at school. This was not surprising. Given how reserved Judson was and the language barriers he faced, I knew it would be a lot of work to help him feel comfortable enough to confide in somebody. I saw the potential in Judson and a great future for him, but without effective communication, it would be very challenging to support him.

Understanding youth needs starts by **understanding family needs.** I met with his mother to learn more about him and his family background. His mother did not speak English and was studying the language while staying home to care for Judson and his younger siblings. Judson's father was busy working two minimum-wage jobs to support his wife and four children. With this context, I was able to understand the level of support Judson had at home and learn more about him through the lens of his parents.

Transition supports are most effective when directed to the right place at the right time¹. This is best accomplished when focused on the **needs of individual families and communities.**

The ripple effect of early challenges in high school can be detrimental to academic achievement, and lead to **increased early school leaving and low occupational achievement rates**².

Parental involvement in youth programs contributes to the positive development and academic success of adolescents living in contexts of disadvantage³.

Developing trust in mentoring relationships has numerous benefits: **increased competencies, such as self-regulation, and increased confidence**⁴.

By doing this, Judson's mentor exhibits **genuine interest** in her mentee's life and challenges.

Supporting Judson to advocate for himself teaches him **cognitive, social, and emotional skills** that will enable him to successfully navigate his environment now and in the future⁵.

Identifying Judson's strengths and using it to build skills that will help him succeed in other areas of his life demonstrates how his mentor utilizes a **strengths-based approach**.

I believe that helping youth also starts with **building trust**. This is often challenging and takes time and creative ways to connect. I quickly learned that Judson had a small group of friends from elementary school who spoke the same language as him. They often hung out after school and did everything together. Unfortunately, when Judson arrived in high school, he was not put in the same classes as his friends, and he felt overwhelmed and anxious without them. Due to limited classroom spaces at the school, he was also placed in challenging classes that were not appropriate for his level without language support. Feeling disheartened, he grew hesitant to attend his classes.

After my second meeting with Judson, I knew his low self-confidence and sudden isolation from not being around his friends would make it very difficult for a shy student like him to navigate high school.

His group of friends were eligible to join Pathways, so I invited them to learn about the program and sign up. Suddenly, instead of being a new environment, the Pathways space became a safe and comfortable place for Judson to meet his friends. This step demonstrated that I cared about Judson and helped to further build trust.

Secondly, because I understood that he didn't have help at home to navigate his coursework or talk to the school, I **supported him in advocating for himself** to change a few of his high-level academic courses that weren't appropriate for him without language supports. I also encouraged him to attend tutoring with his friends so that he could receive **academic support** and **access an inclusive space where he could feel safety, belonging, and connection**.

By the end of Grade 9, we were starting to establish our mentoring relationship, but he still needed to build his confidence. I invested time in getting to know him, his strengths, and his interests. Through this, I discovered his passion for playing baseball.

It is important to understand **success in high school can happen in more than one way**. Success is not solely measured by grades on a report card. He was in the correct classes at school, attending tutoring with his friends, and becoming more comfortable in the Pathways Program, so I started encouraging his interest in playing baseball. By focusing on this aspect of his life where he did not face language barriers, I knew it could scaffold his development and build his self-esteem.

To overcome financial barriers that prevented Judson from joining a baseball league, Pathways Program staff applied for sports grants to cover the expense and helped him register with the league.

While some students may be acknowledging feedback out of politeness, ongoing conversations about goals and contexts will, over time, become absorbed as actionable advice and **lead to behavioural change**⁶.

Taking initiative to organize baseball games outside of school demonstrates how using a strengths-based approach **led to Judson developing leadership skills**.

Prioritizing responsibilities, including non-academic ones, **demonstrates self-regulation and goal-setting skills** in adolescents.

In addition to financial support, part-time employment during high school is beneficial for senior students by **fostering time management and organization skills, and has been shown to increase earnings after graduation** compared to students who did not work⁷.

Supporting him to play a sport he enjoyed helped me further build trust with Judson. He started to feel more comfortable around me and share his **passion and dreams**.

When Judson turned 15, I encouraged him to volunteer as an Assistant Coach in his baseball league. He was still very shy, so I contacted his coach to ask about available opportunities. With **constant encouragement and positive feedback**, Judson was ready to start volunteering as an Assistant Coach.

This was a turning point in Judson's life. He started **believing in himself and gaining confidence in his skills and abilities**. In Grade 10, he sought additional volunteer opportunities to lead various sports activities at school. **He started making new friends and attending his classes**.

Then came the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Activities were limited and indoor sports were banned completely. But Judson's passion for baseball did not stop. Once social distancing measures allowed, he **took initiative** to organize baseball games with his original group of friends, his new school friends, and his friends from the baseball league he had joined. Playing sports was Judson's **form of self-care** during the pandemic and online learning.

The pandemic created additional obstacles to Judson's education, where he struggled with accessing technology and navigating online learning as an English Language Learner. Due to the trust we had fostered, Pathways was able to help him **overcome his barriers** by lending him a laptop and teaching him how to use the online platforms necessary to access virtual school and tutoring.

At that point, Judson was successfully passing all his classes, actively participating in sports, and had built a stronger social network. His **next goal** was to find a steady job to support himself financially.

I connected him with a youth employment training program, where he was guaranteed a job placement at a retail store. With the experience gained upon completing that placement, Judson applied to a different store with a **better wage that aligned more with his interests**. At the same time, the baseball league offered him a part-time job as an Assistant Coach.

Supporting Judson taught me a lot about youth work. Judson's disengagement from school was a symptom of a larger problem, as it often is for young people. External factors can heavily affect a young person. I quickly understood that if I could align the resources in Judson's environment with his strengths, it could change his perspective and help him thrive.

It was important to not only address Judson's academic needs but to engage his social network and support him to explore his passions. This way, rather than just moving Judson to the correct classes and ensuring he attended tutoring, focusing on his strengths led to him developing a sense of belonging in his school and community. Through that process, he developed leadership and coping skills, and other competencies to build upon his success.

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