

# Long Term Outcomes of The Boundless School

Laura Heinz-Ziliotto, May 2021

*"Boundless changed my life completely and is currently part of the foundation of what makes me who I am today."*

*"This program is amazing. It made me able to finish high school and put me on a path of success."*

*"My son is the young man he is today thanks to Boundless! He found that interpersonal relationships in themselves can be fulfilling without drugs or alcohol! Boundless changed his pattern of destructive behavior while also continuing his education. The immersion into nature really opened his eyes to new experience and increased his appreciation of nature. He thrived in the community living environment and stills seeks out those experiences."*

## Executive Summary

The results of this evaluation study show that the Boundless School is very successful at helping struggling youth graduate from high school. The youth who attend the Boundless School have coexisting and diverse risk factors associated with dropping out of school and subsequently suffering many negative consequences. Mental health issues are the most prevalent risk factors among the students. The study also found that the Boundless School was successful at helping the youth gain valuable and lasting social, personal and educational skills and strategies needed to successfully navigate their futures.

## Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to explore the long-term impacts of the Boundless School. The immediate outcomes are known to be outstanding, and it is clear many students benefit immensely from their time at the Boundless School. What remained unknown was the long-term impacts on participants after returning home. This research report identifies the objectives and goals of the Boundless School, looks at whether those objectives are being met, explores short-term impacts on its students, and provides a detailed description of the youth that attend. Ultimately, the report describes the long-term impacts of the Boundless School on its students and their lives.

Since the research project began in May 2018, the structure and objectives of the Boundless School have remained constant. However, because the Boundless School strives to best meet the needs of its students, new initiatives and services have continually been planned and introduced over the years. The outcomes described in this report focus primarily on the Boundless School participants who attended the school between 2013 and 2019. Any new improvements or initiatives that have been introduced since then will not be addressed. It should also be noted that all the statistics and literature referenced in this report were published prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The statistics and literature do not reflect any changes caused by the pandemic.

## **The Boundless School**

The Boundless School is an accredited high school offered to youth who are struggling in the mainstream education system. Students live and work together as a group and are supported, taught and mentored by Boundless School staff. The school consists of two modern teaching and sleeping facilities and 600 acres of wilderness in the Ottawa Valley. The program offers students a blend of nature therapy, education and mental health support.

The Boundless School is the most recent initiative coming out of Boundless Adventures which started in 1984 as an outdoor adventure centre. Over the years Boundless Adventures has successfully offered programs to many different groups of disadvantaged children, youth, and adults. In 2004, Boundless officially became an accredited private high school, and began offering summer school programs for struggling youth. In the Fall of 2012, the Boundless Boarding School pilot project was launched offering two 6-week Fall sessions. In the 2013/2014 school year, the school was expanded to include a winter session as well. By the Fall of 2014, the Boundless School was operating from September to March, offering 4 sessions throughout the year. This has remained the current structure along with the continuation of the shorter Summer School programs. The four Boundless School sessions offered each year range from 30 to 40 days each. Students may attend more than one session, going home for a few days or weeks in between. In total, there are 150 school days offered each year. During each session a student can earn two or three high school credits, for a maximum of 11 credits a year. Each session can accommodate up to 30 students.

The short-term success of the Boundless School has been profound since it's inception. It has an annual capacity of 120 students and can grant these students with approximately 330 high school credits in total each year. Past feedback from students and parents has been positive and strong relationships have been built between the Boundless School and many youth agencies and organizations, school boards, individual schools and individual youth workers and teachers.

## **Literature Review<sup>1</sup>**

### **The importance of graduating from high school**

The primary objective of the Boundless School is to help struggling students earn high school credits so they can complete their high school diploma. Some students complete their diploma at the Boundless School while others leave still needing additional credits. The goal is that youth will be inspired and motivated by their Boundless School experience resulting in re-engagement in their education when they are back home.

The population of youth that attend the Boundless School are a heterogeneous group with a multitude of risk factors and a variety of reasons why they are struggling in the mainstream school system. For many students, coming to the Boundless School is a last attempt at high school success before they drop out of school.

Dropping out of high school is a well documented social problem that has several negative consequences to both the youth dropping out and their communities. Canadians who drop out of high school face a future of serious social and economic difficulties (1). Not graduating, severely limits career options and obtaining and maintaining employment becomes an ongoing struggle (2). Students who do not graduate from high school

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that much of the research done on this topic is descriptive. The research documents associations between certain behaviors and dropping out but does not necessarily support conclusions that these characteristics cause students to drop out. This is the nature of social research and is also the case with this research study.

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are less likely to attain higher education, earn liveable wages or access social capital (3). It is well known that high school dropouts have a harder time finding work compared to high school graduates and those who attend post secondary education. The Canadian unemployment rate among high school dropouts is more than double that of other 20–24-year-olds who have the school diploma or higher (4). While young adults without a high school diploma have always had a harder time getting a job, the employment rate for this group is at its lowest point in more than 20 years (1).

Not graduating from high school also puts the dropouts' health at risk, as high school graduation is the social determinant that most strongly predicts long-term health and premature death (3, 5). Individuals who do not graduate from high school are more likely to self-report overall poor health and also more frequently report suffering from at least one chronic health condition (6). There is also plenty of evidence that less educated individuals tend to make poorer choices about factors that affect their quality of life such as diet, smoking, being overweight and exercise (7, 8).

High school dropouts also have economic and social consequences for a country. Dropouts are much more likely to receive government social assistance, have a higher probability of involvement with the criminal justice system and require more health care. These realities cost the country billions of dollars annually (1, 27). Dropouts are also less likely to make important contributions to business innovation, productivity and national economic performance (8). High school dropouts have reduced social participation in society, face social stigma and have reduced intergenerational mobility (1).

The aforementioned consequences of dropping out of high school are often long-term, resulting in negative effects on relationships and family functioning that can perpetuate inequalities across generations (9).

### **Risk Factors**

The youth that attend the Boundless School come from many different family structures, neighbourhoods, schools, and socioeconomic situations. Many also have diverse, complex and coexisting risk factors that make it challenging for them to complete their high school credits. One commonality is that the participants are struggling in school and in most cases have a credit count much below other students their age.

It is well known that numerous students struggle in the mainstream educational system for many different reasons. These youth fall behind in their credit count and many get to a point where there is little hope of them succeeding. Many of these students do not have the support they need from their families and schools and they end up dropping out. While there is an abundance of literature on the topic of high school dropouts and their characteristics, researchers have only recently begun to look at the correlation and interrelatedness of high school drop out and underlying problems such as mental health issues. Early research suggested that certain socioeconomic factors were associated with an increased risk of dropping out, such as being poor, being a minority, from a single parent home or from a family with low educational attainment (10, 11, 13). In the 1980's researchers began to question the role of individual factors being the sole cause of dropping out and started looking at school related factors and students' educational experiences. They found that students who dropped out reported that they disliked school, found it boring, and had low achievement and grades, compared to those who stayed in school (12, 13). Next researchers looked at deviant peers, school disengagement, absenteeism, and low educational performance as precursors to dropping out. While all these factors were found to be associated with high school drop out to some degree, there was still an identified gap in the research (12,13).

More recently, researchers have started to look more closely at the multifaceted group of youth who struggle to complete high school and have begun to look at the complex and underlying problems that may contribute

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to it. While the studies are limited, there is initial evidence that mental health issues<sup>2</sup> have a large impact on students' success in school (16). According to a preliminary Canadian study in Montreal, older teens struggling with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school compared peers without depression or those who recovered from a bout of depression earlier in life (17). A recent Australian study also found that youth with depression and anxiety symptoms in early adolescence had significantly higher drop out rates than their peers without (18).

Another study researching mental health and academic achievement in the U.S. found that chronic stress can be a significant barrier to high school graduation (3). By definition, chronic or toxic stress is a response to persistent social, physical and emotional pressures over an extended period of time. In childhood and adolescence, chronic stressors may include extreme experiences, such as abuse or neglect, as well as more prevalent stressors such as exposure to parental mental illness, parental divorce, poverty, food insecurity, interpersonal violence, racism, discrimination, changing schools, loss of a loved one, unstable foster care placement, or living in an unsafe home or neighborhood (19, 3). Signs and symptoms of chronic stress include anxiety attacks, lack of sleep and poor focus or concentration. If left untreated chronic stress can contribute to fear, anxiety, depression, attention and concentration problems, an increase in impulsive or risk-taking behaviour and particularly among boys, hostility, aggression, and violence (3). Each of these factors alone can hinder educational success and contribute to high school drop out. Multiple factors combined exacerbate their cumulative effect and can be a key barrier to high school graduation.

While researchers know that in most cases high school drop out is the end result of years of struggling and cumulative risk factors, a Canadian study recently looked at the role acute stressful events during high school can have on dropping out. The study found that in a sample of youth living in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods, recent stressful life event such as youth arrest, parental imprisonment, school mobility or health problems precipitated high school drop out over and above, or in interaction with, pre-existing vulnerabilities (20).

Additionally, addictions and drug use, often associated with mental health, have been found to be associated with high school drop out. Drug use during adolescence can cause irreparable damage to the still developing brain leading to permanent impairment (2). This damage will affect academic performance, lead to frequent absences from school, and an increased risk of not graduating (2). It is a vicious cycle as factors such as depression, anxiety and drug use can make an individual susceptible to dropping out of high school but can also become more prevalent after dropping out due to lack of resources and a poorer quality of life (1, 2).

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity disorder), another mental illness, has also been linked to a higher risk of dropping out of high school. Research has found that students with ADHD are three times more likely to drop out of school than students without ADHD (21). Unfortunately, ADHD is often seen as an attention or behavioural issue and therefore is not treated as a serious mental illness that has a large impact on a student's future. ADHD is also the most common disorder that coexists with learning disabilities (22, 23). The literature on learning disabilities<sup>3</sup> and high school graduation is scarce. Furthermore, there is disagreement on learning

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<sup>2</sup> Mental illness is a broad term. It refers to any type of condition that affects a person's behavior, mood, or thinking. That can cover everything from mild anxiety to severe depression or bipolar disorder. It also includes ADHD (14, 15).

<sup>3</sup> Learning disabilities affect one or more of the ways that a person takes in, stores, or uses information. Learning Disabilities come in many forms and affect people with varying levels of severity. They are a life-long condition and do not go away but can be coped with successfully by using areas of strength to compensate and accommodations such as technology. A learning disability is not an intellectual disability as you must have an IQ over 85 to be diagnosed with a learning disability (24).

disability definitions and terms (10). However, one recent review of the existing literature reported that in Canada students with learning disabilities were 2.5 times less likely to graduate from high school than students with no learning disability (10). Many supports are already in place to help students with learning disabilities, but the graduation rates are still much lower (10).

Other factors that make youth more vulnerable to dropping out are health problems such as chronic pain or chronic illnesses. These illnesses can cause absenteeism from school due to poor health, treatment or recovery resulting in lost credits, disengagement from school, social isolation, and even anxiety and depression (6, 7, 3).

## **Interventions – What is being done**

In the past two decades school districts and departments of education across Canada have placed increased focus on meeting the needs of youth in high schools who are “at risk” for experiencing negative academic outcomes and dropping out (25). There has been an overall push to keep youth in school and Canadians have made high-school graduation a priority (8). Provinces have introduced programs that are hands on, skill, and interest based to support learners in different ways (8). In addition to increased programming and services, Ontario, Manitoba and New Brunswick have raised the age of compulsory school attendance from 16 to 18 years (26). Research has found that these new programs are achieving the intended goals and high school drop out rates across the country have been declining drastically (4, 28). According to Statistics Canada, in 1990 22% of men and 19% of women aged 25-34 had not finished high school. In 2016<sup>4</sup>, 8.5% of men and 5.4% of women aged 25-34 had less than a high school diploma (1). Between 2000 and 2018, the graduation rates for the Toronto District School board increased from 69% in year 2000, to 86% in 2018 (29). Although the high school drop out rates have lowered significantly, and graduation rates are at an all time high, there are still hundreds of thousands of young adults in Canada without a high school diploma (1).

The multiple factors associated with dropping out of high school suggest that no single type of intervention can end the drop out crisis and there is not one perfect solution. However, attention to the issue is encouraging and more and more supports are being introduced. A review of Canadian efforts has found that certain components can be particularly helpful for re-engaging youth who are not thriving in traditional high school classrooms (25). These components include motivating students through goal setting, providing positive and caring environments for students with mental health issues, and focusing on school-to-work transitions such as co-op programs (25). A focus on social and emotional learning has also been found to be particularly promising as a proactive approach to health promotion (16).

The Boundless School is one such program that is helping struggling youth complete high school and is contributing to lowering the national drop out rates. It encompasses many of the approaches and strategies found in the literature to be particularly effective and continues to evolve to best meet the needs of its students. This is promising for the long-term impact on its students and its sustainability.

## **The Research Project**

Beginning in 2018, Boundless embarked on a multi-year research project to discover how the Boundless School impacts its students one to three years after they finish at the Boundless School. Of specific interest was knowing whether the youth continued their schooling, how well they were navigating their mental health issues, whether they had made a motivational transition, and whether they were successful in the workforce.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of this study, the 2016 Statistics Canada data was the latest data available. The next census is to be collected during 2021.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

The research project consisted of three parts, an Evaluability Assessment, a Process Evaluation and an Outcome Evaluation.

### **Evaluability Assessment**

Before conducting an outcome evaluation of a program, it is critical to ensure the program has clearly defined objectives, and that the program is offering activities or inputs that are directly linked to obtaining those objectives. An Evaluability assessment is a method which is used to ensure a program or intervention is ready for an outcome evaluation. For this study, a brief evaluability assessment was conducted to ensure the program objectives were clear, understood, and linked to the activities and programming provided to the students each session.

### **Method**

The first step of the Evaluability assessment was to gather information about the program activities, objectives and goals in order to develop a Program Logic Model. Five members of the Boundless School management team were contacted and asked three open-ended questions in order to gather the necessary information. The team members that provided feedback were the Clinical Director, Director of Operations, Boundless School Principal, Program Manager and Deputy Director. The team members were first asked to describe what they believed to be the primary long-term goal or goals of the Boundless School. Secondly, they were asked to describe, in their opinion, the primary short-term goals of the school. Thirdly, they were asked to describe the main program activities or inputs that the school provides that are directly linked to the objectives they reported. After the responses were collected, clarifications were requested and provided where needed. The managers also had the opportunity to review and comment on the compiled responses.

### **Evaluability Assessment Results: Program Model**

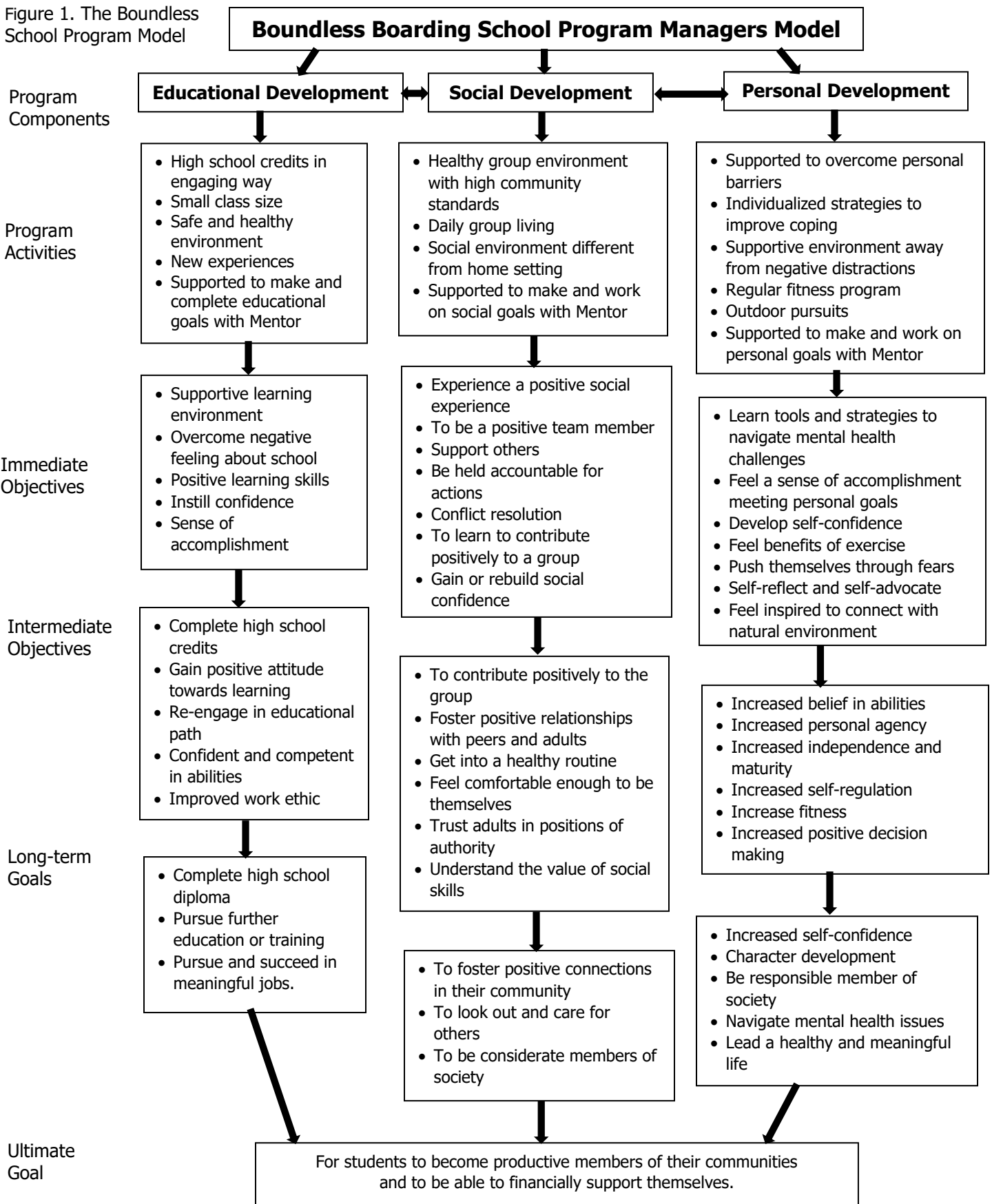
The feedback collected from the program managers was compiled and developed into a Program Manager's Model. While the feedback varied from each individual, there was significant overlap between the managers. The various responses fell naturally into three broad program components. The fact that the responses were similar proves that the program has clearly defined goals and objectives.

The three program components that emerged out of the program managers descriptions are three interrelated developmental necessities crucial for a healthy and successful transition into adulthood and life. The three areas of development that emerged are Educational Development, Social Development, and Personal Development.

The developmental components of the Boundless School are illustrated in the Boundless School Program Model presented in Figure 1. More detailed accounts of each component are illustrated separately in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

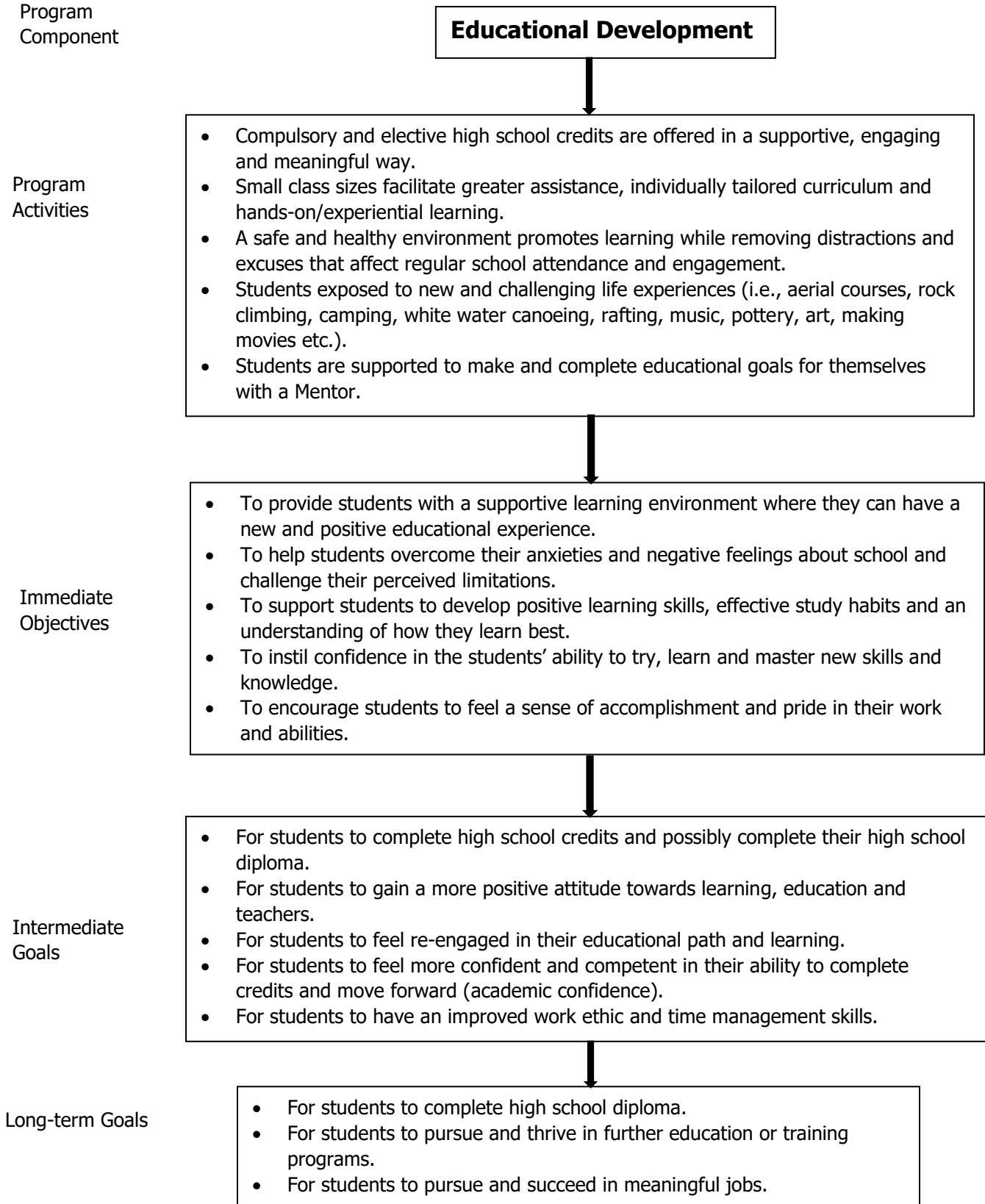
# Outcomes of the Boundless School

Figure 1. The Boundless School Program Model



## Outcomes of the Boundless School

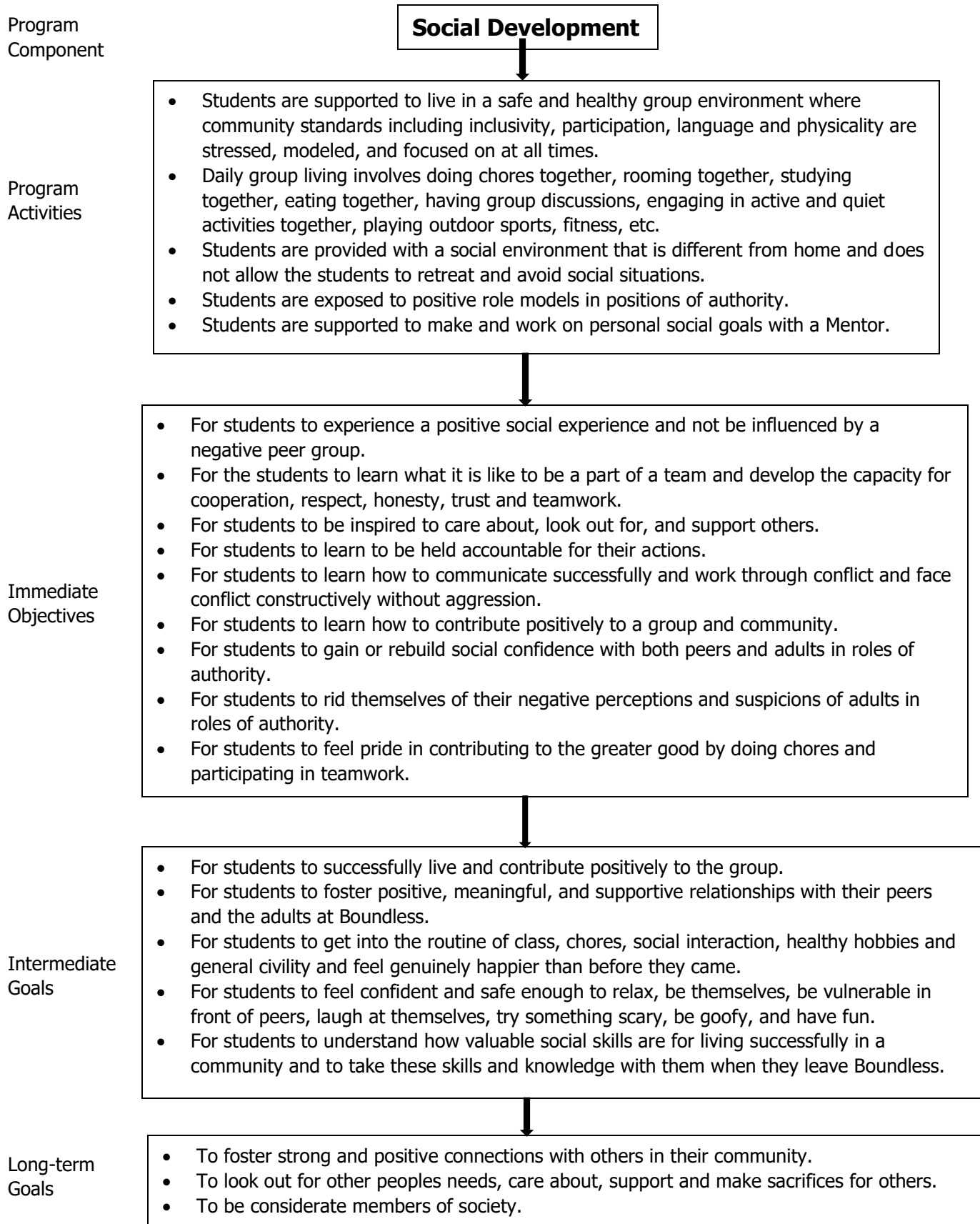
Figure 2: Educational Development Component





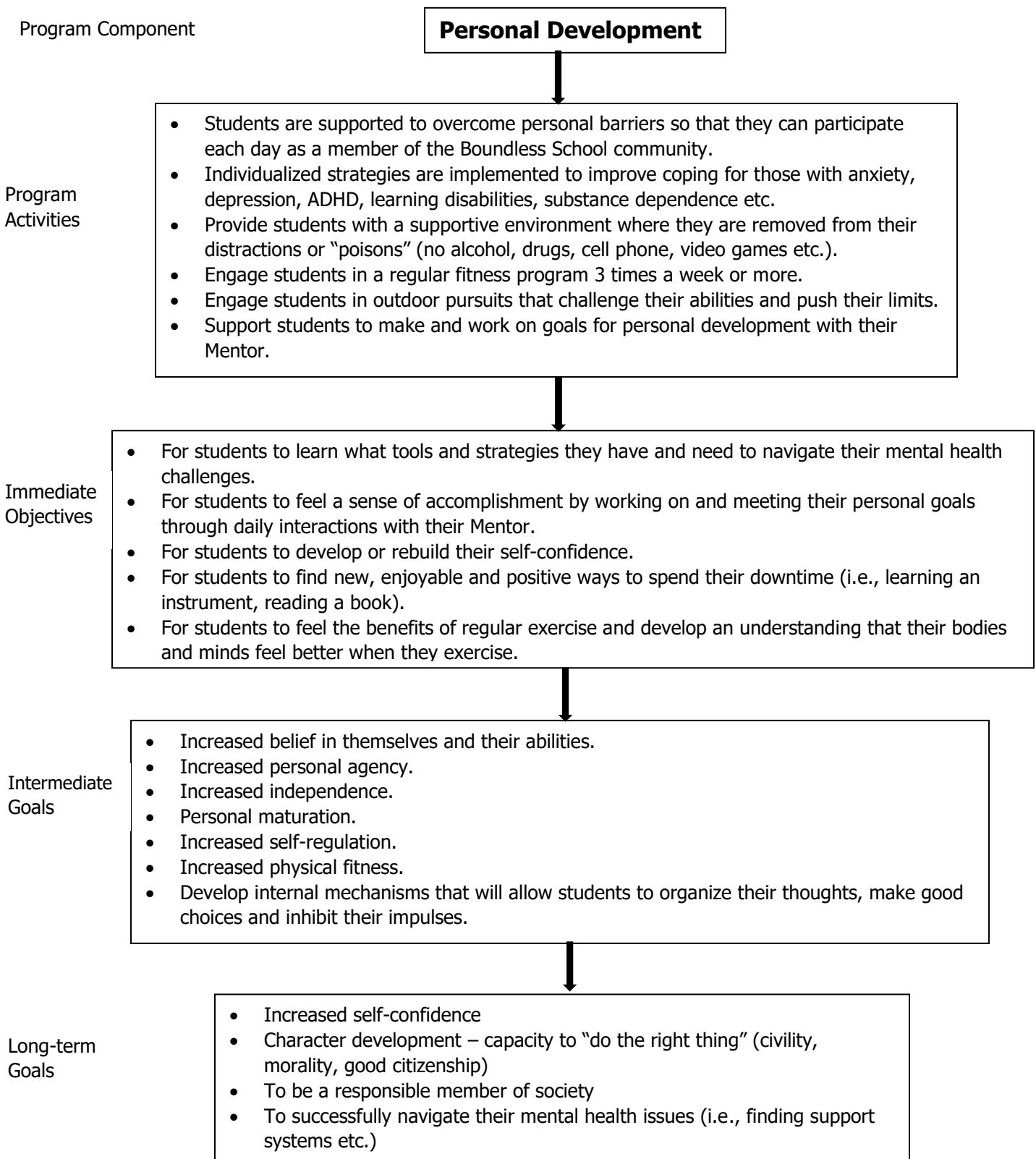
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Figure 3. Social Development Component



## Outcomes of the Boundless School

Figure 4. Personal Development Component



## **Summary**

The program model is based on agreed upon activities and objectives at the management level. The program model is logical, and the components and activities are related to the objectives. This shows that the program is evaluable. The Evaluability assessment helped identify the areas of focus for the rest of the evaluation. Evaluation measures for the process and outcome evaluations were developed based on the Evaluability assessment findings.

## **Process Evaluation**

Process evaluations determine whether program activities have been implemented as intended and whether initial program objectives are being met. Process evaluations precede outcome evaluations to ensure the program is running as planned.

## **Method**

Process evaluation data was collected through staff feedback forms, youth feedback forms, and by reviewing program records.

## **Measures<sup>5</sup>**

### Program Records

Program process data was gathered by communicating with the Program Manager and reviewing different program materials such as mentor goal setting forms, report cards, daily schedules, and session planning documents. The details of the program records are not described in this report but were reviewed to ensure the program was being implemented as planned.

### Staff Feedback Form

A staff feedback form was developed to be completed online and returned to the researcher at the end of each programming year. On the feedback form, staff members were asked a series of questions focusing predominantly on the three program components identified in the Evaluability assessment. The staff were asked to describe what they felt the programs objectives were for each component, how they felt the Boundless School strived to achieve each objective with its programming activities, and how they felt the students benefitted from the school. They were also asked to describe the school's biggest strengths and how they felt the Boundless School could further impact the students.

### Student Feedback Form

The student feedback form was developed to be completed by the students at the end of each Boundless School session. The form was completed using pen and paper while they were still at the Boundless School. The purpose of the student feedback form was to gather details from the students about their experiences and perceptions of the Boundless School. Many questions included in the feedback form were to be used by the Boundless School staff for their own program planning and self-evaluation and their results are not included in this report. For the

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<sup>5</sup>Online copies of all measures can be provided upon request.

research project, a question was included that asked the students if they felt they had benefitted from their Boundless School session. If they felt they did, they were asked to describe how they felt they benefitted. Unlike the staff, the students were asked to describe *any* benefits they felt they gained from the Boundless School and were not constrained by the three developmental components in the Program Model.

### **Participants**

Responses from 12 staff members working at the Boundless School were collected in March 2019. The 2020 staff questionnaire was not completed due to Covid-19 abruptly ending the final session that year. In total, 107 student feedback forms were completed. This does not, however, mean that 107 different students completed the feedback forms, as many students attended more than one session. Instead, they represent 107 individual Boundless School session experiences. The feedback forms were completed over five different sessions between September 2018 and March 2020.

## **Process Evaluation Results – Short-term outcomes**

### **Program Documents**

A review of the program documents clearly indicated that the program is being run as intended and as illustrated in the Program Model. The program documents included schedules, logs, and mentor goal setting forms. The documents were clear and provided evidence of the many details of the program.

### **Staff Feedback: Objectives and Activities**

The staff provided detailed information about their perception of the Boundless School's objectives and the activities or inputs that were provided to reach these objectives. This information was reviewed to ensure that there was agreement amongst the staff and that their descriptions were similar or the same as the objectives and activities outlined in the Program Model. The review concluded that the staff's perceptions of the program and its objectives aligned with each other and with those of the program managers. No discrepancies were identified indicating that the program has a clear structure and well-defined objectives.

### **Staff Feedback: Perceived Benefits to the Youth**

With the three identified program components in mind, the staff were asked to describe the benefits they felt the youth gained from the Boundless School sessions. The responses from the 12 staff were compiled and sorted into similar groups or themes. The responses are presented in the tables below. In each table the number of descriptions does not equal 12 due to most staff reporting more than one benefit per component. However, if a staff reported several similar benefits, they were only counted once. A sample of quotes from the staff feedback forms follow each table.

### **Educational Development**

Staff reported several educational benefits that they felt the students gained at the Boundless School in addition to earning high school credits. The responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Educational Benefits Reported by the Boundless School Staff

<b>Educational Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=12</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They gained a sense of accomplishment; Felt successful and proud that they reached educational goals they never thought they could.</li> </ul>	n=7
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They gained a sense of enjoyment of learning; they became excited and engaged.</li> </ul>	n=6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learned to have an open mind and learned new concepts and strategies of how to approach school.</li> </ul>	n=5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefitted from the small student : teacher ratio.</li> </ul>	n=1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gained a real understanding of the course content.</li> </ul>	n=1

*"Students engage in novel activities that feel meaningful to their lives and get them excited about learning.*

*"Students leave with a rejuvenated enjoyment for learning and new concepts of how to approach it with an open mind and creativity."*

*"Students benefit by leaving with a sense of accomplishment, a higher confidence in their learning abilities and a better idea of their own personal learning strategies."*

### **Social Development**

The perceived social benefits, reported by the staff, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Social Benefits Reported by the Boundless School Staff

<b>Social Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=12</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learned to successfully participate, live and work in a group setting.</li> <li>• Students learned to feel comfortable in a group, learned about respect, inclusivity, accountability, empathy and group awareness.</li> <li>• They learned how to work with people of different backgrounds and different interests.</li> </ul>	n=12
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students learned how to successfully approach and resolve conflict.</li> </ul>	n=5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They made strong and supportive friendships.</li> </ul>	n=4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They improved their communication skills with peers and adults.</li> </ul>	n=3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefitted by being in a safe environment where they could have healthy, trusting, and positive relationships with adults.</li> </ul>	n=2

*"Students develop strategies to deal with conflict and have more group awareness."*

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*"Students benefit from making friends, working through conflict and fostering respect."*

*"They benefit from feelings of inclusion, friendships with peers, and healthy and trusting relationships with caring adults."*

*"Students benefit from learning how to work with people of all different backgrounds and interests. They learn to jump into new social environments with ease, and to communicate with others better."*

### Personal Development

The personal development benefits reported by the staff are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Personal Benefits Reported by the Boundless School Staff

<b>Personal Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=12</b>
• They learned to take care of themselves and gained an understanding of living a clean and active lifestyle.	n=7
• They gained a stronger sense of self-worth, feelings of empowerment, positive self-affirmation, heightened self-efficacy, increased self-confidence and pride in themselves.	n=6
• They had a chance to work on and learn how to set goals for themselves, challenge themselves to work through their struggles and reflect on their progress in a safe environment.	n=4
• Benefitted by feeling supported by caring adults.	n=2
• Became comfortable thinking and talking about their feelings.	n=1
• They felt safe.	n=1

*"Students gain a stronger sense of self-worth and feel empowered."*

*"The students benefit from the time away from toxins, the uplifting connections with community and environment and positive support in developing healthy habits."*

*"They benefit by holding themselves accountable for their actions, managing their time wisely, setting a schedule that works for them and acknowledging the care they need for themselves."*

### Student feedback: Perceived Benefits

When students were asked if they felt they had benefitted from their Boundless School session, the large majority of students reported that they had benefitted. On 85% (n=91) of the feedback forms, it was reported that the students felt they had benefitted from their Boundless School session, in ways other than earning credits. On 10% of the forms (n=11) the students reported that they were "not sure" if they had benefitted. One feedback form (1%) reported

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that they did not feel they had benefitted and the question was left blank on the remaining four forms (4%). If they felt they had benefitted (n=91), they were asked to describe how they felt they had benefitted most. The descriptive benefits were compiled and sorted into themes. Once again, most of the responses fell into the same three developmental components illustrated in the program model and were supported by the staff feedback. In total, 124 perceived benefits were described on the 91 completed feedback forms. Nineteen were related to educational development, 55 described social development benefits and 50 were personal development benefits.

### Educational Benefits

Table 4 lists the educational benefits described by the youth. A sample of direct quotes from the student feedback forms follows Table 4.

Table 4. Perceived Educational Benefits Reported by the Students

<b>Educational Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=19</b>
• Gained better work ethic, time management skills and discipline.	n=7
• Became more comfortable and confident in my writing.	n=4
• Learned more; finally understood course content.	n=5
• Learned that I can push myself to get the marks I want.	n=1
• Discovered things I excel at.	n=1
• Felt comfortable and not forced into doing schoolwork.	n=1

*"I definitely learned more than in normal school."*

*"It's hard for me to complete assignments on my own in the city but Boundless has gotten me into the habit of doing my work."*

*"It helped me with my work skills, and organization and essay writing skills."*

### Social Benefits

The social benefits that the students felt they had gained during their Boundless School session are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Perceived Social Benefits Reported by the Students

<b>Social Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=55</b>
• Made new friends and got closer to peers.	n=12
• Benefitted by being part of a positive group experience; felt a sense of community; gained positive energy from the group.	n=11
• Gained social skills and skills to help me get along with others.	n=11

Table 5. Perceived Social Benefits Reported by the Students (continued)

• Benefitted from increased communication skills and becoming more comfortable speaking with, or in front of, others.	n=8
• Gained leadership skills <sup>6</sup> .	n=4
• Learned to work effectively and successfully in a group.	n=3
• Learned to be more patient with others, to be more flexible, understanding, and open-minded.	n=3
• Gained conflict resolution skills.	n=2
• Learned how to connect with people different from me.	n=1

*"I made great friends and broke out of my shell a little bit."*

*"I gained some amazing friends and I think a bit of patience too."*

*"I learned to solve conflicts instead of push them away."*

### Personal Benefits

Table 6 presents the reported personal benefits the students felt they gained during their Boundless School session.

Table 6. Perceived Personal Benefits Reported by the Students

<b>Personal Development Benefits</b>	<b>N=50</b>
• Learned about myself; learned how to be a better person; how to challenge myself; how to set goals; to have faith in myself; to be comfortable being my authentic self.	n=15
• Learned how to control my temper better; became less impulsive; learned to better understand my emotions.	n=8
• Increased confidence in myself and my values.	n=5
• Increased health and self-care; physical fitness and strength; being active.	n=5
• Increased positivity towards self and life; positive energy; purpose.	n=4
• Being away from bad habits.	n=4
• Became more independent; responsible; mature.	n=4
• Felt a new appreciation for the outdoors and nature.	n=2
• Learned to be vulnerable and face discomfort.	n=2
• Learned that there is more to life than myself.	n=1

<sup>6</sup> Leadership skills can be considered a social or personal development benefit. They are reported as social skills in the current report.



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*"I am now a more responsible and independent human being."*

*"I used to have no confidence and being here with people that support and care about me helped me increase it."*

*"Time away from a toxic environment gave me perspective on a lot of things."*

*"I discovered how transformative nature is."*

### **Process Evaluation Summary**

The review of the program process documents support and conclude that the program is being delivered as intended. The staff's descriptions of the activities and objectives support this conclusion as they are in agreement with the program managers and the program documents. The staff and student feedback immediately following the school sessions provides strong evidence that the students are benefitting from the program, and in particular, benefitting in ways directly linked to the objectives of the program.

It is clear from all the information gathered during the process evaluation that the Boundless School is a comprehensive program with clearly identified objectives and goals. The relationship between the program activities and the objectives is logical and the program's structure and design ensure that the outlined activities are effectively provided to the students and that appropriate supports are in place. The results of the process evaluation were essential for the development and implementation of the outcome evaluation that followed. Without ensuring that the program has clear objectives that are being attained, a valid outcome evaluation could not be completed.

### **Outcome Evaluation**

The original motivation for conducting this research study was to see how the past Boundless School students were doing a year or more after leaving the Boundless School. Once the objectives and goals of the program were made clear, the purpose was to determine how well the program was achieving its long-term goals. The outcome evaluation looked at past students' educational achievements, experience in the workforce, how well they felt they were doing in their current schooling or job, their confidence in a successful future, how they were coping, how the Boundless School had impacted their social relationships once they returned home, and how the Boundless School could have helped or impacted them more.

### **Method**

The method of data collection used in the outcome evaluation was online questionnaires sent to past Boundless School students and their parents or guardians. The questionnaire were developed specifically for the current study and were based on the results of the Evaluability assessment and the majority of the Process evaluation. The format of the questions varied throughout the questionnaire. Many items were opened-ended qualitative questions while others were check boxes or 5-point Likert scales followed by qualitative open-ended questions.

## **Measures and Data sources**

### Youth Questionnaire

The online youth questionnaire was developed for the current research project using Google Forms to be completed by youth who had participated in the Boundless School. The questionnaire was divided into four sections including, *Education, Employment, Activities and Volunteerism*, and *Well-Being*. Each section contained check box or Likert scale questions followed by qualitative opened-end questions. Participants were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were given a chance to reflect on how they felt the Boundless School could have impacted them more and to share any additional information.

### Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

The online parent/guardian questionnaire was very similar to the youth questionnaire but included fewer questions. It was also from the parent's or guardian's perspective of how they felt their child was doing and how they felt the Boundless School had impacted them. The parent/guardian questionnaire was developed to increase the chances of gathering information about the youth, and also to get another perspective on the impact of the Boundless School. Similar to the youth questionnaire, the parent/guardian questionnaire was divided into four sections including, *Education, Employment, Activities and Volunteerism*, and *Well-Being*. Each section contained check box or Likert scale questions followed by qualitative open-ended questions. At the end of the questionnaire, the parents and guardians were given a chance to reflect on how they felt the Boundless School could have impacted their child more and to share any additional information.

### Demographic Details

Demographic data used to describe the participants of the Boundless School and the research sample was gathered from the Clinical Director's initial intake form and files. This information was retrospective, already existing, data that was collected and recorded for reasons other than the research project. Demographic data was gathered for 121 youth who had attended the Boundless School between 2013 and 2019. Since the demographic data was not collected for the purpose of the project, every detail is not available for each youth. While the information was not collected on a systematic check list, the data available provides a very detailed and rich description of the youth who attend the Boundless School.

## **Procedure and Participants**

### Procedure

The study aimed to get feedback from students who had participated in the Boundless School for 100 days or more and who had been out of the program for at least one year. Students who were asked to leave early from their final session were not included in the study. These parameters were set at the beginning of the study. When it was time to start the data collection, 45 youth had been identified as fitting the criteria. Only students who participated in the program since the Fall of 2013 were included, as this is when the structure of the school began to resemble what it is today.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

An initial email was sent to the 45 youth and their parents or guardians to introduce the study, to see if their email address was functioning and to find out if the youth had graduated from high school. This initial contact resulted in several responses, some bounced back emails, and a lot of non-responses. It is unknown whether the non-responses were emailed to unused accounts, whether the recipients chose not to respond, or whether the email was simply overlooked.

Starting in May 2019 the youth and parent/guardian online questionnaires were sent to all the email addresses that did not bounce back. The questionnaire was a Google Form prefaced with a letter and cover page that outlined the study. Ethical guidelines were included so that youth and parents/guardians were clear that their responses were confidential, that their identity would be protected and that their participation in the study was voluntary. Although it was voluntary, several reminders were sent with a link to the parent/guardian and youth questionnaire in hopes of getting as many responses as possible. In many cases, several different email addresses were attempted in hopes of eliciting a response. Completed forms were sent directly to the researcher.

Due to the small number of eligible youth (N=45) and the low number of initial responses, it became clear that the original criteria would have to change to include more potential participants. In an attempt to get more responses, youth and parents/guardians of youth who attended for shorter time periods, but who were still out of the program for at least a year, were also contacted. As time passed 15 additional students also met the original criteria of participating in the Boundless School for 100 days and being out of it for at least a year. These youth were also contacted and sent the questionnaire.

In total, between May 2019 and November 2020<sup>7</sup>, 84 youth and/or their parents were contacted and invited to complete the questionnaires. Multiple attempts and reminders were made to all available email addresses. When data collection halted in the Fall of 2020, 31 youth questionnaires and 37 parent/guardian questionnaires had been completed and returned<sup>8</sup>. An additional four youth or parents/guardians responded that they or their child did not want to be included in the study. Sixteen of the 31 youth who completed a questionnaire, had parents who completed the parent/guardian questionnaire as well. Therefore, while 68 questionnaires were returned (youth and parent/guardian combined), they represented only 52 different Boundless School students<sup>9</sup>. It should be noted that all parent/guardian respondents were *parents* of the youth. Calculating the response rate is difficult as an email address was not available for each youth and/or parent/guardian. It is also not clear how many emails reached their destination. Nonetheless, questionnaires were completed for 52 out of the possible 84 youth, which is a 62% response rate. While the literature says there is no official acceptable response rate needed to have a valid study, 62% is a strong response rate for this type of research.

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<sup>7</sup> The research study ceased data collection in the Fall of 2020 due to Covid-19. Data was also not collected between March 2020 and September 2020 due to Covid-19.

<sup>8</sup> In the end, questionnaires were returned for 25 out of the original 45 eligible youth.

<sup>9</sup> Youth and parent questionnaires were both completed and returned for 16 youth. The responses for these youth were only included once, as not to skew the data.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

### Participants

Table 7 presents demographic details and other information about the Boundless School students. This information was collected and recorded prior to the youth attending the Boundless School. The 52 respondents are described in column 1, and the participants that were contacted but did not respond, or chose not to respond, are described in column 2. Other students, who participated too recently, or for a very short time are described in column 3.

Demographic information is included for the non-respondents and other Boundless School students for comparison to the group of respondents. By comparing the samples of youth, it allows the results to be generalized to the whole sample of Boundless School participants, if there are no major differences between them. When looking at Table 7, it should be noted that all the information was not available or complete for all participants as it was not collected for the purpose of the research study. Missing values have been excluded from analysis and only valid percentages are included in the table.

Table 7. Demographic Descriptions and Risk Factors of Boundless School participants (N=121)

	<i>Column 1</i>	<i>Column 2</i>	<i>Column 3</i>
<b>Demographics and Details</b>	<b>Respondents (N=52)</b>	<b>Non-respondents (N=32)</b>	<b>Other students (N=37)</b>
Age at intake interview	Average: 16.66 years, Range: 15-19 years	Average: 17 years Range: 15-20 years	Average: 16.4 years Range: 15-18 years
Age at time of study	Average: 20.3 years Range: 18-23 years		
Gender	Male = 38 (73%) Female = 13 (25%) Other = 1 (2%)	Male = 23 (74%) Female = 6 (19%) Other = 2 (6%)	Male = 30 (81%) Female = 7 (19%)
Number of days spent at the Boundless School	Average: 143 days Range: 40-300 days	Average: 142 days Range: 80-340 days	Average: 57 days Range: 20-220 days
Number of credits earned at the Boundless School	Average: 9.5 credits Range: 3-21 credits	Average: 9.5 credits Range: 5-22 credits	Average: 4 credits Range: 2-16 credits
Boundless School graduates	19 (37%)	8 (25%)	Unknown
Scholarship student or Private student	Scholarship: 29 (56%) Private: 23 (44%)	Scholarship: 23 (72%) Private: 9 (28%)	Scholarship: 25 (68%) Private: 12 (32%)
<b>Living arrangements</b>	<b>N=36</b>	<b>N=24</b>	<b>N=27</b>
Single Parent or guardian	21 (58%)	18 (75%)	17 (63%)
Single mom	17 (47%)	15 (63%)	14 (52%)
Single dad	1 (3%)	2 (8%)	2 (7%)
Single relative (Grandparent or Aunt)	3 (8%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Two parents	13 (36%)	5 (21%)	10 (37%)
Lives on own with others or siblings	2 (6%)	1 (4%)	0

Table 7. Demographic Descriptions and Risk Factors of Boundless School participants (N=121) (continued)

	<i>Column 1</i>	<i>Column 2</i>	<i>Column 3</i>
	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Non-respondents</b>	<b>Other students</b>
<b>Risk Factors</b>	<b>N=41</b>	<b>N=28</b>	<b>N=37</b>
Mental Health Disorder <i>or</i> Learning Disability	37 (90%)	24 (86%)	32 (86%)
Learning Disability <i>and</i> Mental Health disorder	20 (49%)	11 (39%)	16 (43%)
<b>Mental Health specifics</b>			
Identified Mental Health Disorder (i.e., anxiety, depression, ADHD, self-harm, trauma)	31 (76%)	19 (68%)	29 (78%)
Anxiety	21 (51%)	12 (43%)	19 (51%)
Depression	14 (34%)	10 (36%)	16 (43%)
ADHD	14 (34%)	7 (25%)	9 (24%)
Multiple Mental Health disorders (more than one)	16 (39%)	11 (39%)	19 (51%)
<b>Learning Disabilities</b>	<b>N=41</b>	<b>N=33</b>	<b>N=37</b>
Learning Disability or IEP (i.e., Dyslexia, language-based processing)	26 (63%)	13 (46%)	19 (51%)

Other prevalent risk factors, not presented in Table 7, that were present in all three groups of Boundless School students were:

- Living in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods,
- Low academic achievement and behind many credits,
- Addictions (cigarettes, weed, alcohol),
- Attended multiple schools or educational programs (i.e., school interruptions),
- Ethnic minority, and
- Crime or police involvement (i.e., theft, fighting).

It should also be noted that the large majority of the youth are from the Greater Toronto Area and therefore live in a large urban centre.

To get a clear sense of how vulnerable or “at risk” the Boundless School students are in terms of mental health issues and learning disabilities, Table 8 shows the percentage of the Boundless School study participants compared to the general Canadian population.

Table 8. Mental Health and Learning Disabilities of Boundless School Youth compared to all Canadians.

<b>Risk Factor</b>	<b>Boundless School Research Respondents (N=52)</b>	<b>Canada</b>
Any Mental Health Illness	76%	8-20% of youth (30, 31, 33)
Depression	34%	5% (males) to 12% (females) aged 12-19 (30)
ADHD	34%	5% (32)
Learning Disability	63%	6% youth (33)
Single parent household	58%	20% (34)

## **Outcome Evaluation Results – Long-term outcomes**

Throughout the results section the data from the youth questionnaire and parent questionnaire are combined when appropriate. In cases where both youth and parent questionnaires were returned (N=16), the youth responses are reported for all quantitative questions. In all but one case the parent and youth rating scale responses were very similar, if not identical. This similarity between the two data sources provided confidence to the researcher in combining both sets of data for the results section.

### **High school diploma achievement**

One of the primary long-term goals of the Boundless School is for the students to complete high school credits so they can graduate from high school. As mentioned in the introduction, obtaining a high school diploma is critical to secure stable employment and earn adequate living wages. It is also important for long-term health and quality of life.

Of the 52 youth in the study, 49 had earned their high school diploma at the time the questionnaires were completed. Nineteen youth had completed their required credits while at the Boundless School, and 30 received it after returning home. Only 3 of the 52 respondents had not yet earned their high school diploma. One of these youth was still in high school completing their last credits at the time of the study. Two respondents reported not obtaining their high school diploma, not currently in an educational program, and not having any immediate plans of returning. These results show that 94% of the respondents earned their high school diploma either during their time at Boundless or after returning home. As mentioned, one additional student (2%) was currently completing the remaining credits for their diploma. This high school completion rate of at least 94% is higher than the 2016 national average of 89.7% for 20 – 24-year-olds (35) and the 2019 Ontario provincial average of 87.2% in five years (36). It is also higher than the average of the Toronto District School Board (86% in 2018) (29) and Toronto Catholic District School Board (90% in 2017) (37) where many of the youth attended before the Boundless School. It is noted that while 19 students (37%)

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

graduated directly from the Boundless school, another 30 out of 33 students continued their high school education after returning home and successfully completed their diploma.

Of the 30 youth who graduated from high school after leaving the Boundless School, fourteen reported completing their diploma at a public secondary school. It is unknown if they participated in a special support program within their school or if they completed their diploma in the mainstream program. Seven youth reported that they graduated from a public alternative school and another five reported completing their diploma at a public alternative learning centre for adults (aged 18 and older). Three youth reported completing it at a private online or in class school and one completed it at an outdoor program. All students reported graduating between 2013 and 2020.

### **Summary**

A high school graduation rate of 94% is extremely good for any school or program in the country. The fact that the students who attend the Boundless School have an elevated number of risk factors making it more challenging for them to succeed academically, makes these results even more positive. There are no official published graduation rates for youth with mental health issues or learning disabilities. There are also no statistics on how many youth graduate after being significantly behind in high school credits, come from single family households, are a visual minority or have the other risk factors that the Boundless School students present with. The limited research that does explore high school graduation and some of the risk factors mentioned, suggests that the population of the Boundless School students are at a huge disadvantage for graduating. As mentioned earlier, studies have found that high school students with depression or ADHD are twice as likely to drop out of school compared to their peers without (17, 21). It has also been found that students with learning disabilities are approximately 2.5 times more likely not to graduate compared to the general public (10). Almost 80% of the Boundless School respondent have at least one of the risk factors with reported graduation statistics (Depression, ADHD or Learning Disability). The majority of the additional youth present with other mental health illnesses and risk factors that have not yet been included in the literature on high school graduation.

Statistically, the youth that attend the Boundless School should have a much lower graduation rate than the general public based on their risk factors and the research that has been done. In other words, they should be at least 2 times more likely not to graduate. On the contrary, the high school graduation rate for students who attend the Boundless School is higher than average indicating that it has a very high success rate in achieving its objective of helping struggling youth obtain their high school diploma.

### **Further education**

It is well known that obtaining your high school diploma is almost critical for a high quality of life and it is becoming increasingly beneficial to have even higher levels of education or training. Education beyond high school typically leads to even greater job access, higher income potential, higher job satisfaction, better health and more positive social impact (1, 3). The labour market rewards higher education, and employment choices broaden as one receives higher levels of education.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

While the programming of the Boundless School ends when the youth complete their final session with the school, the goal is that youth will have been supported and motivated to continue to follow a positive educational path. While one of the main goals of the Boundless School is for all students to complete their high school diploma, it is hoped that they will strive to pursue higher education and training as well.

On the youth and parent questionnaire, one of the questions asked whether the youth had continued their education in any way after obtaining their high school diploma. Twenty-five of the 49 respondents who had graduated from high school reported that they had continued their education in some way (51%). The remaining 24 youth (49%) reported that they have not yet taken any further programs or courses after receiving their high school degree. The two youth who did not complete their high school diplomas also did not pursue further education. Table 9 lists the different ways the 25 youth continued their education. The numbers do not equal 25 as the youth could choose more than one option.

Table 9. Different Ways the Boundless School Youth Continued their Education

<b>Post High School Diploma Education</b>	<b>N= 25</b>
Completed more high school credits.	6 (all 6 went on to do more)
Completed a college diploma course.	2
Completed trade courses and apprenticeships.	4
Currently taking more high school credits (i.e., university stream math).	2
Currently in a college program.	7
Currently in a university program.	7
Started a program or course but never completed it.	6 (3 went on to another course or program)

Examples of courses completed or being taken include:

- College Culinary School,
- College Animal Care,
- College Electrical Engineering,
- College Outdoor Education,
- Trades courses (welding, carpentry, masonry, millwright, tiling),
- University Business School,
- University Cognitive Science,
- University Linguistics,
- University Psychology

Of the 25 youth who reported continuing with more schooling after they received their high school diploma, 16 were still enrolled in high school, college or university courses at the time they completed the questionnaires. Six youth had already completed a trades course or college diploma and three had left their course or program before completing it.



### **Summary**

Fifty-one percent (n=25) of the respondents reported continuing on to further education or training after completing their high school diploma. Only three of these youth reported not completing their course or program or enrolling in a new one. These are positive findings as it shows that many of youth were able to apply for and get accepted into post-secondary programs. The successful transition from high school to post-secondary education is challenging for all youth as it takes effort and organization, and in many cases, having acceptable high school marks. Most of the youth who attended the Boundless School have multiple risk factors that would make applying for and getting accepted into a post-secondary program even more challenging. Having a learning disability could make the process much more difficult and having a mental health issue could make the already overwhelming task even more challenging. Some of the youth may have had assistance from a youth worker or high school program but the fact that many successfully completed a program or were currently still in a program is impressive.

It is of some concern that twenty-four of the youth (49%) did not pursue any further education and may only have their high school diploma as their highest level of education for the rest of their lives. Research shows that men and women with apprentice certificates, college diplomas and university degrees earn considerably more money than Canadians with only a high school diploma. For example, in 2015, men with an apprentice certificate in the skilled trades earned 31% more than men with a high school diploma. Women with a bachelor's degree earned 60% more than women with a high school diploma (38). Due to the young age of the youth in this study (18-23 years), there is a possibility that some will pursue additional education and courses. The Canadian statistics show that for 25–34-year-olds, 8% have no diploma or degree and 22% have high school as their highest level of education (39). The other 70% pursued higher levels of education or training. It is important to note that these national statistics include all young adults and do not give separate statistics for those with disabilities or risk factors that could provide challenges to pursuing post-secondary education. Research studies have found that youth with mental health disorders and learning disabilities are at least twice as likely not to graduate from high school (10,17,18). It can be assumed, that these same youth will have difficulty pursuing and succeeding in post-secondary education, which may account for the larger percentage of Boundless School youth not yet enrolled in further education or training.

### **Labour Force and Employment**

The ultimate goal of the Boundless School is for students to become productive members of their communities and to be able to financially support themselves. On the research questionnaires, youth and parents were asked if the student had worked at any jobs (full time or part-time) after leaving the Boundless School. Of the 52 respondents, 50 reported having been employed or currently were employed either full-time or part-time at some time after leaving the Boundless School (96%). At the time the research questionnaires were completed, 33 of the 52 youth (63%) were currently employed. Twenty youth were working full-time, and 13 youth were working part-time. Nine of these employed youth were also currently enrolled in school.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

Looking more closely at the employed youth, it was reported that 13 of the 20 youth working full-time had not completed any additional education or training after high school. The jobs they held were:

- bartender,
- grill cook,
- restaurant worker,
- grocery store meat department,
- driver/fleet operations manager,
- construction worker,
- tiler,
- car detailer,
- health and safety officer at a construction firm,
- food service work,
- health care patient transporter,
- ski lift operator and events coordinator, and
- security guard.

Most reported that they had been promoted into their current positions.

Five of the youth who were working full time had completed a training or college course. Their jobs were:

- Animal care worker,
- warehouse freight worker,
- general warehouse staff,
- welder, and
- Naval electronic sensor operator.

The remaining two youth who were working full time were employed in summer jobs between their university terms. These youth were working as an assistant manager and supervisor at two restaurants, and in finance. Seven of the 13 youth working part-time jobs, were also in college or university. Five of them worked part-time in the food service industry, one worked at a hardware store and the other for the military. The other six youth with part-time jobs had not pursued any education beyond their high school diploma. Their part-time jobs included working as a page at the Toronto Public Library, renovations, warehouse, barista and as a dog walker and pet sitter. Eight employed youth reported that even though they were employed they were looking for a better job.

National unemployment rates do not include individuals who are currently in school. At the time of the research study 35 of the Boundless School respondents were not enrolled in school. Of these 35 youth, 24 reported being employed. This results in an unemployment rate of 31.4 % if indeed all the non-working youth were able to work and actively seeking employment. It is not clear whether all these youth were actively seeking employment, therefore they cannot be compared to the average 2019 unemployment rate of 10.8% for youth aged 15-24 years.

While the majority of the youth reported that they were working and/or in school (41 out of 52, 79%), 11 of the 52 youth (21%) reported that they were not in school or employed when they completed the research questionnaire. When youth or young adults are unemployment or not enrolled in school or training, they are classified by the government as being NEETs (Not in

employment, education or training) (39). This relatively new classification is used around the world by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and is reported by Statistics Canada. According to Statistics Canada in 2018/2019, 12% of Canadian youth and 13% of Ontarian youth (aged 20-24 years) were identified as NEET (39). Young people without their high school diploma are particularly at risk being classified as NEET, and more likely to be permanently unemployed than those with more schooling (39). The two Boundless School youth who did not complete their high school diploma were classified in the NEET category.

The NEET indicator is intended to quantify the proportion of young people who do not follow a traditional path (i.e., go to school, then get a job) and who find themselves outside of the educational system and without work. Although similar, it differs from the unemployment rate in that it includes all youth and not just those available and actively seeking employment. Of the 11 Boundless School youth who met the NEET criteria, only one had taken any further training or education after receiving their high school diploma. This training was only a 3-month program. Of the 11 Boundless School youth who classified as NEET youth, four reported that they were looking or hoping to find a job, one was a full-time mother and six were not looking for work or educational opportunities.

### **Summary**

The findings that 96% of the youth were employed at some point after leaving the Boundless School are very positive. This shows that the youth had enough confidence, communication skills and initiative to apply for and fulfil a job, at least for some time. It is unknown whether or not this motivation and ability came directly from skills they acquired at the Boundless School, however many of the educational, social and personal benefits gained from the Boundless School are related to improving employability skills (8). Many youth reported getting promoted in their jobs, which shows they were putting in the required effort and doing a good job. While the percentage of the Boundless School youth meeting the NEET criteria is much higher than that of the general population<sup>10</sup>, there is lack of research on the factors that may lead young adults to a situation where they are classified as NEET. While research shows that NEET individuals are more likely to report anxiety and depression disorders compared to other young adults, there is no indication of how many had mental health disorders prior to being labelled as NEET(40). No data was found on how many NEET youth have learning disabilities or other risk factors similar to the Boundless School research population. Statistics do show however, that Canadians with a mental health and/or learning disability are much less likely to be employed or in school compared to those without these disabilities (33). Further research into the details of the youth in the NEET classification is needed to gain insight into what can be done to help these young adults access post secondary programs and/or assist them to successfully enter and remain in the labour market. There needs to be more support for these youth in general so that they get assistance, training or job experience while they are still in their youth.

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<sup>10</sup> Please note that this research and the statistics cited are before the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the percentage of NEET youth has risen substantially (41).

## Volunteering or New Activities

Leading a healthy and meaningful life is another long-term goal of the Boundless School. Volunteerism, healthy routines and activities were explored to see if this goal was being met.

On the youth questionnaire, respondents were asked to report if they had any volunteer jobs after leaving the Boundless School. Ten of the 31 youth reported that they had volunteered. Examples of volunteer placements included:

- community centres,
- a shelter,
- a hospital,
- the evergreen brickworks,
- the fair,
- make a wish foundation, and
- a community garden.

Youth and parents were also asked if the youth had started any *new* activities or routines since returning home from the Boundless School. It was reported that 40 youth (77%) started a new activity or routine since returning from the Boundless School. The most reported new activities or routines are presented in Table 10. The numbers total more than 40 as more than one new activity was reported for several youth.

Table 10. Activities or Routines Started after Returning from the Boundless School

<b>Activity or Routine</b>	<b>N=40</b>
Working out	21
Healthy eating	9
Outdoor activities, hiking, kayaking, canoeing, camping, fishing, rock climbing, biking	7
Playing music/guitar	6
Cooking	4
Writing, journaling	2
Drawing, painting	2
Reading	2

## Summary

Volunteering and starting new positive activities or routines are promising accomplishments for the youth and may lay the foundation for them to lead healthy and meaningful lives. Many of the new routines are things that the Boundless School encouraged during the school sessions such as physical fitness, healthy eating, outdoor activities and finding a passion or skill. All new positive routines, activities and volunteer jobs take motivation, self-discipline and personal agency, which are all objectives of the Boundless School. While the research cannot prove that the youth's Boundless School experience caused the youth to make these positive changes, they are aligned with values that the Boundless School promotes and support the youth to acquire.

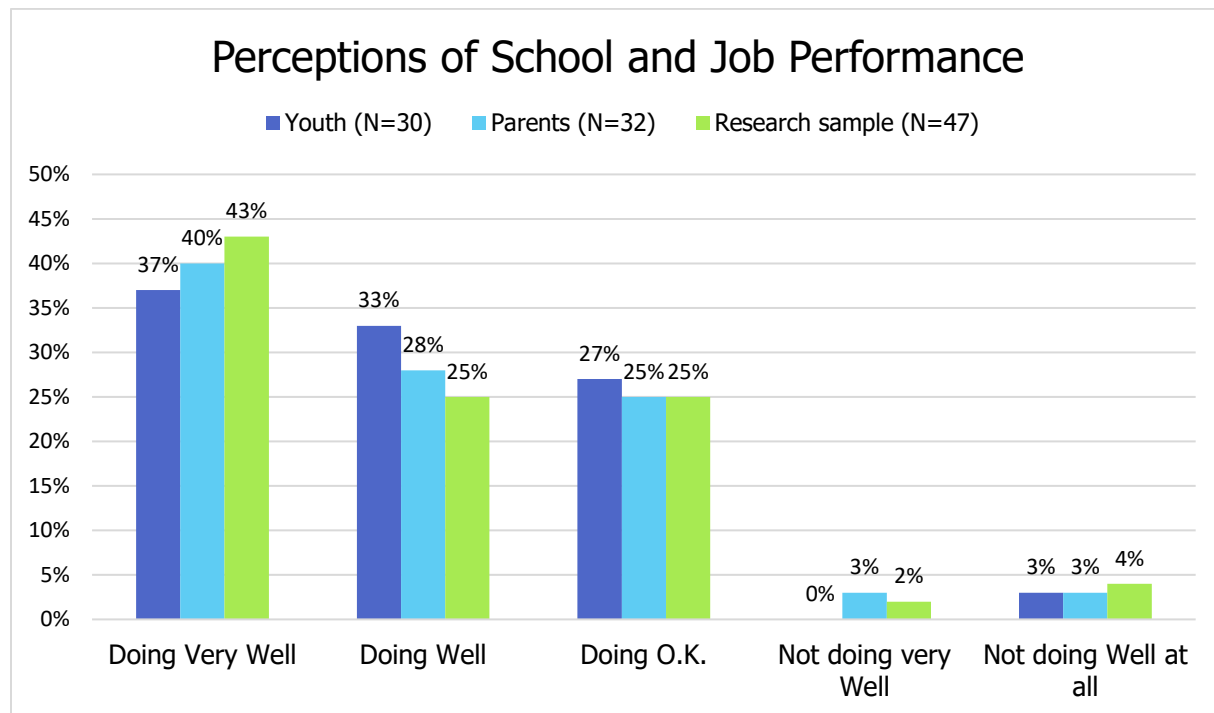
## Well-Being

Long-term goals of the Boundless School include increased self-confidence, navigating mental health issues, character development, fostering positive connections in their community and pursuing and succeeding in meaningful jobs. To explore whether the youth were achieving any of these goals, several questions were included in the questionnaires to get a sense of how the youth were feeling about themselves and their current situations, and how they were coping with stress.

### Perceived School or Job Performance

The youth who were in school, working, or volunteering were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how well they felt they were doing or performing at school or in their job. A similar question was included on the parent questionnaire. The respondents were then asked to describe why they felt they, or their child, were doing well, or not so well. Figure 5 presents the responses of the 30 youth respondents and the 32 parent respondents in percentages. A third bar indicates the data points for the 47 research study youth, counting the youth responses only once for the youth with both sets of questionnaires. As shown in Figure 5, the parent and youth responses follow a very similar trend with the youth responses being slightly more optimistic in terms of how well they are doing in school or in their job compared to the parent’s perceptions.

Figure 5. Youth and Parent Perceptions of the Youth’s School and Job Performance



The responses from the 47 respondents show that the majority of the youth and their parents felt they were performing “well” or “very well” at their job, or in school. Of 47 youth, it was perceived that 20 were “doing very well” (43%), and another 12 were “doing well” (25%). It was perceived that another 12 students were “doing o.k.” (25%), one was “not doing very well” (2%) and two were “not doing well at all” (4%).

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

Twenty-six youth provided descriptions about why they felt they were doing well or not so well in their schooling or job. Each description was a personal account that supported their rating scale choice and gave a little detail into their lives. One common theme that was repeated in the positive descriptions was that the youth were happy with what they were currently doing and felt good (n=7).

*"I went to school for the job I am doing so I feel I am doing well at work."*

*"I feel that I am doing well because I know I'm doing these things for my mom as well as myself in order to improve my quality of life from the rough family life I have at home."*

*"I feel I am doing well because I'm happy."*

*"I am doing well because I've worked for the same company since I graduated high school."*

Another common theme was that they were working hard, and it was paying off in terms of good grades and positive feedback from their workplace (n=5).

*"I feel I am doing very well because I get really high grades."*

*"My boss literally greets me in the morning by saying "the favourite is here" and most of my co-workers and bosses/supervisors view me as an exemplary worker and commend my work ethic/encourage the rest of the team to follow my example. I have made a lot of good friends at my current workplace."*

*"I am achieving the marks I aimed to in my University courses and I am enjoying the subjects that I enrolled in. As well I'm maintaining a balance between work and University without feeling overloaded."*

Youth had positive and negative things to say about their school and work performance. Youth that felt they were doing "ok" or "not so well" mentioned they had difficulty concentrating and studying (n=3), a lack of motivation (n=2), and felt overwhelmed (n=1).

*"I am doing very well with work but school has been hard in a regular school setting."*

*"I feel overwhelmed, and that I should be doing better in what I'm doing."*

*"I am ok, I do well because I go to school everyday and I do my work often but at times I lack some structure in my life and organization in my life, which bothers me."*

*"I am going to be honest I haven't been feeling that motivated lately. I have kind of given up but I can still feel a bit of motivation but only a little. I have went back to my usual self after Boundless."*

Eleven parents described why they felt their child was doing well or not so well in their job or schooling. The majority were positive comments that reported that they felt their child was doing well at their job (n=6) and had grown to be dependable, independent and responsible

individuals (n=4). Again, the nature of the descriptions corresponded with their choice on the rating scale. Below are direct quotes from the parents.

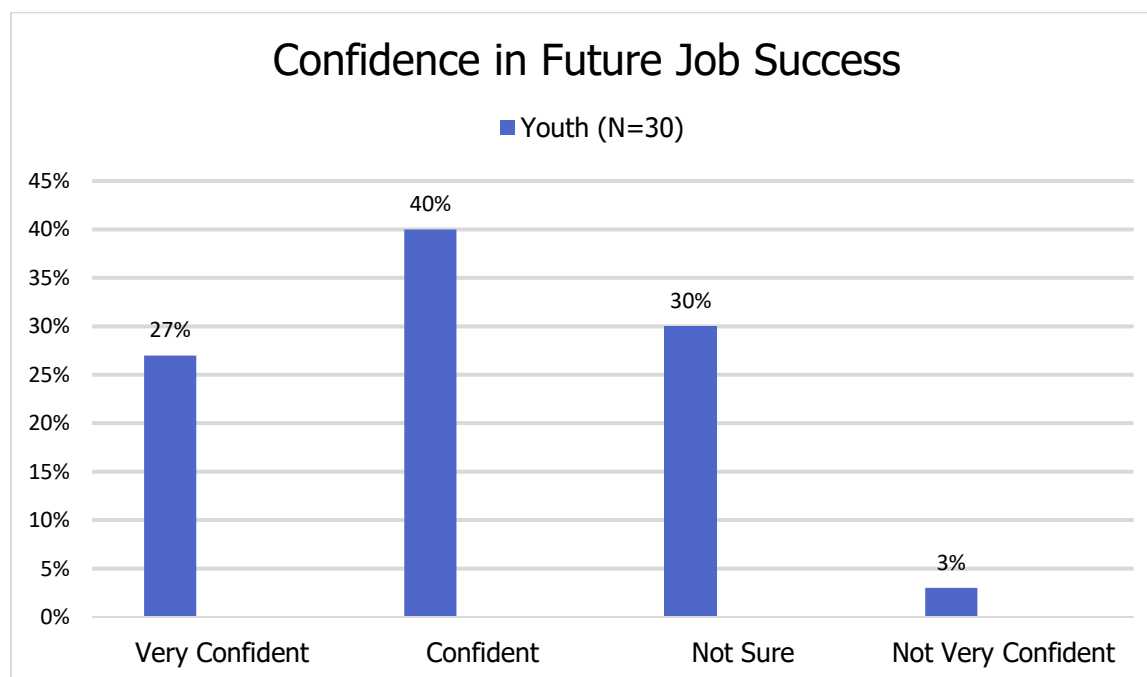
*"Since leaving Boundless he has confidence and a realization that he is capable of achieving when he applies himself."*

*"He has grown to be very responsible and respectful in the workplace."*

### Confidence in Future Employment Success

All the youth were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how confident they felt their education, training, or job would lead to a job that could support them in the future. Following the rating scale, they were asked to provide details about why they felt confident or not confident about their future job success. Figure 6 illustrates the responses of the youth. This question was not included in the parent questionnaire.

Figure 6. Confidence in their Future Employment Success



Of the 30 youth who responded, eight (27%) reported that they were "very confident" that their education, training or job would lead them to a job that could support them in the future. Twelve youth (40%) felt "confident" in their future employment success. Nine youth (30%) were "not sure" how confident they felt, and one youth (3%) "did not feel very confident" about their future job success.

The responses were explored to see if there was any pattern or trend as to who felt more confident in their future employment success than others. The results showed that the youth's current situation (i.e., in school, working, or NEET) did not directly relate to confidence in their

job success. For example, looking at the eight youth who felt *very confident* in their future, three were in university, two had completed a college or trades course and were now working, and three were working full-time jobs but had no post secondary education. This group of youth have current situations similar, though somewhat better than, the nine youth who felt *unsure* of their future. In this group, three were currently in university, two had completed a college or trades program and were now working, two were working full-time but had not pursued education after high school, and two were classified as NEET.

Twenty-three youth provided details about why they were confident or not confident in their future job success. Many of the youth who felt very confident or confident did not provide a comment. Eight youth reported that they felt confident because the field they were in was promising and growing.

*I'm confident because I know electricians make good money."*

*"The field I'm in is very large and growing at the moment."*

*"Everybody likes food and I make some darn good food."*

*"I feel confident because I know that jobs that require my qualifications will always be in demand."*

Ten youth reported that they were unsure of what they wanted to do, or what they would do, however, several felt confident or hopeful that things would work out.

*"I don't currently have a clear goal in mind that I'm working towards."*

*"I feel confident about the future because I'm slowly making my way towards it. Slowly but surely, everything will be alright in this life of mine."*

*"I have been all over the place with my jobs, and I'm not sure if my experience/education will give me the opportunity to make the money that I hope to one day. I'm not sure exactly what I want to do."*

*"I'm not sure if the job I currently have is the job I want to fully pursue. I am not pursuing any further education because I am not confident in what I fully want to accomplish with my life."*

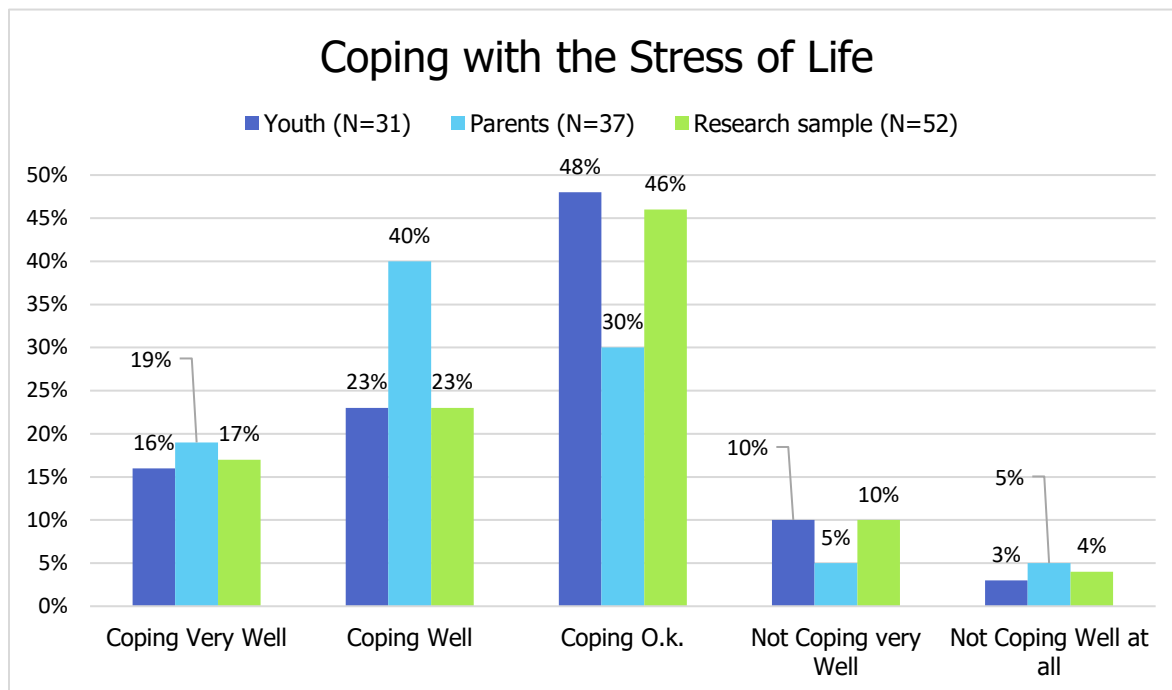
*"Not sure what I want to do but I think there'll be plenty of opportunities."*

## **Coping with Stress**

Youth and parents were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how well they felt they, or their child, was coping with the stressors of life. Figure 7 presents the responses of the 31 youth respondents and the 37 parent respondents in percentages. A third bar indicates the data points for the 52 youth in the study, counting only the youth responses for the 16 youth with both sets of questionnaires.



Figure 7. How Well the Youth are Coping



As shown in Figure 7, the parent and youth responses are similar but the parents felt more optimistic in terms of how well they felt the youth were coping with stress, compared to the youths' own perceptions.

The responses from the 52 youth and parent respondents show that the largest percentage of youth and parents felt they were coping "O.K." with the stressors of life (n=24, 46%). Nine youth (17%) were reported to be "coping very well" and 12 (23%) were reportedly "coping well". Only five youth (10%) were perceived as "not coping very well" and two (4%) were "not coping well at all". The responses were explored to see if there was any pattern or trend as to who felt they were coping better than others. Interestingly the youth's current situation (i.e., in school, working, or NEET) did not directly relate to how well they felt they were coping. For example, looking at the 12 youth who were reportedly coping well, six were working full or part-time jobs, three were still in school and three were NEET. The youth and parents were then asked to identify and describe anything they felt was helping them cope or interfering with their coping. Twenty-eight youth provided details about why they felt they were coping well or not. The youth who felt they were coping well described several things that were helping them cope. The most commonly reported coping strategies were walking, running, reading and being outside (n=6).

*"I handle stress by going for a run or by playing video games. I used to run towards smoking marijuana but that did not do me any good. I slipped out of that habit and turned it the other way around. I would always think to myself and be like "how would I handle this if I were at Boundless?"*

Others reported that their friends (n=5) and families (n=3) helped them cope.

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"Two things that has been helping me cope is my family and my best friend."*

*"It is difficult to find a stress-free environment where I can just relax unwind, as my home situation is also stressful. Going out with friends, having campfires and just generally being outside and with good people helps a ton."*

Two youth also reported that they have therapists or community workers that help them with stress.

*"I have a community worker that I talk to once a week/every two weeks. Whenever I have a stressful situation or family matter that I'm dealing with, talking to her and working through it helps a lot."*

Two youth reported that thinking positively helps them cope.

*"Thinking about good possibilities in the future encourages me to do better but my phone and computer can become a really big distraction when I'm trying to get things done."*

Reported interferences to their coping well with stress were mental health issues (n=5), and distractions such as negative people, old habits, and electronics (n=3).

*"I have coped okay because I have been seeing a therapist however self harm, depression, health and anxiety have worsened since leaving Boundless."*

*"I need to commit to doing the things I want to and not get sucked into old habits."*

Thirty parents provided descriptions about why they felt their child was coping well or not well with the stress of life. The parent respondents described similar coping strategies to the youth. Seven parents reported that their child had family support that helped them cope.

*"He doesn't share everything with me but does talk when things are bothering him."*

*"If he experiences any stresses in life, it is his custom to come and talk with me about it, or I will ask if there is anything that is bothering him and as he hasn't mentioned anything, that leaves me to believe he isn't in distress."*

Making healthy choices or engaging in healthy activities such as the gym or music were also reported by four parents.

*"Working out at the gym has helped to deal with his day-to-day stress."*

*"He plays the guitar a lot and is writing music. That helps him cope."*

*"He has taken some very definite and health related steps on his own behalf and has successfully achieved his personal health and wellness goals."*

Other things the parents felt were helping their child cope included having a therapist (n=2), good friends (n=2), a structured busy life (n=1), medication for mental illness (n=1) and positive thinking (n=1).

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

The factors that parents reported as interfering with their child's ability to cope differed from the youth. Eight parents reported that their child's addictions and denial of their addiction problems were holding them back and interfering with them coping with life.

*"I think it's likely the drugs, but he is in denial about that. Challenges with self regulation and the inability to take responsibility for anything that goes wrong for him."*

*"I would say marijuana has been interfering with my son's life. I would like to see it eliminated from his life - but don't think this will happen."*

Other reported interferences to coping included constant video games (n=3), a lack of motivation (n=2) negative friends (n=1) and having few friends (n=1).

### Well-Being Summary

Overall, the responses show that the majority of the youth and parents felt the youth were doing well in their jobs or at school. The majority of youth also reported feeling positive and confident about their futures. Feeling competent and confident in their abilities and in themselves are objectives of the Boundless School. If the youth feel they are doing well, or that they have the ability to do well, they are more likely to be productive and succeed (42). Regardless of whether others see the students' situations as hopeful, the fact that the majority of the youth feel confident in their future employment is very positive. If they are confident and feel good about themselves, they are more likely to be motivated to do well and be productive.

It is understandable that some youth felt unsure of their future job success. The respondents are still young (18-23 years) and many have not yet completed all of their education. Others are starting out in the workforce and may be employed in a job that was not necessarily of interest to them. Most youth in this age group are unsure of their futures as the transition from childhood to adulthood is challenging and there are many issues and decisions to navigate. Youth with mental health issues, learning disabilities, or those who have little support or guidance from family will experience an even more challenging transition. The results from the study show that while many of the Boundless School youth have multiple risk factors, many are still feeling confident in their abilities and confident and hopeful for the future. It is too early to predict where the youth will be in five to ten years but the results from the study are encouraging.

According to the responses many of the youth are *coping very well* or *coping well* with the stress in their lives. As described by the youth and parents many have found positive ways to relieve their stress such as exercising, communicating, and engaging in positive activities. It cannot be confirmed that their experience at the Boundless School had a causal effect on their ability to cope in positive ways, however, exercising, communication skills and identifying personal interests are all focused on during the Boundless School sessions.

The largest proportion of youth were identified as *coping O.K.* While this is not overly positive, it shows that the youth are coping and not succumbing to a downward spiral during this difficult transition period. It is a difficult age and due to their many risk factors it is understandable that they would feel like they were only *coping O.K.*

Overall, the results show that the youth appear to be managing their lives in a positive way. The results are by far more positive than negative and the written comments give light to their situations and successes. As mentioned, the youth are still young, mostly living with their parents and still in a transitional period. It is hoped that they continue on a positive trajectory and continue to be confident in themselves and their futures.

### **Social Impact of the Boundless School**

The Boundless School puts a lot of emphasis and effort into supporting and encouraging the students to create positive relationships with peers, teachers, and staff. Community standards including inclusivity, participation, language and physicality are stressed, modeled and focused on at all times. The student and staff feedback presented in the process evaluation results shows that the students and staff both felt that the students received many immediate social benefits from their Boundless School sessions. It is well known that having social skills and the ability to have positive social relationships are crucial for success in school, the labour force and in life. Due to this importance, the research study looked at how the youth and/or parents felt that their experience at the Boundless School had impacted their social relationships once they returned home.

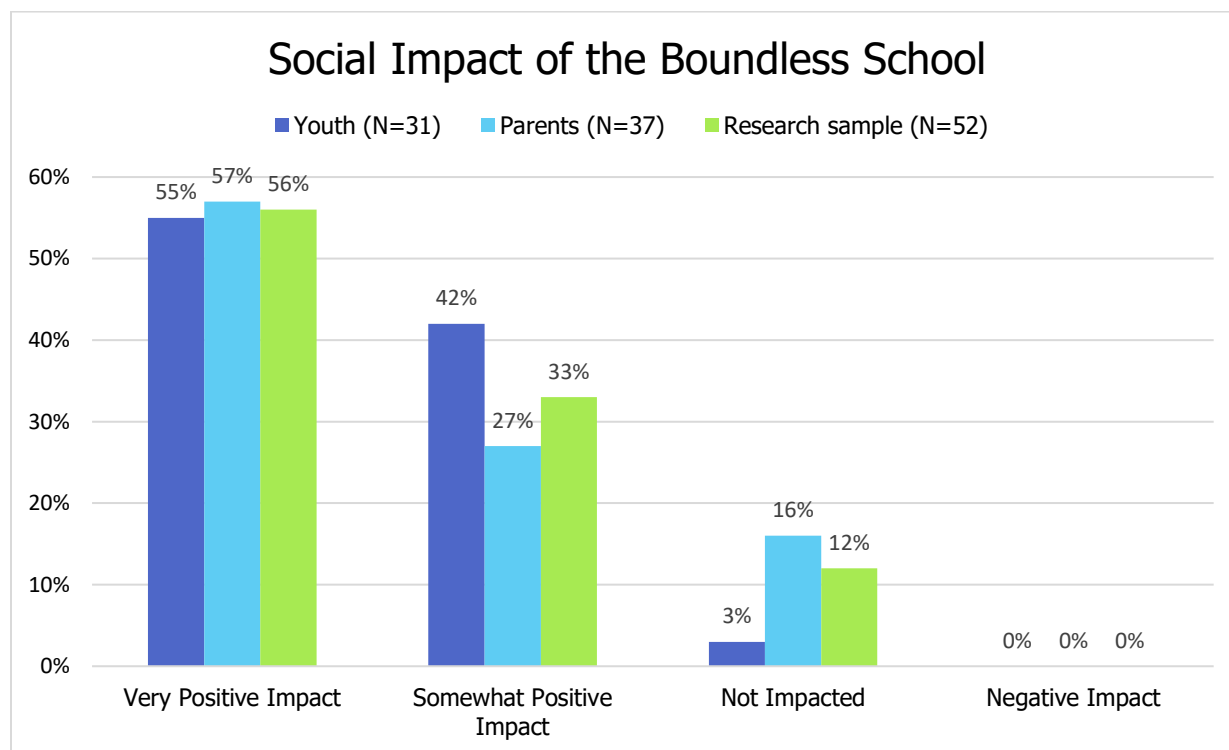
The youth and parents were asked to rate on a 4-point scale how much they felt the Boundless School experience had impacted the social relationships in their lives after Boundless. The scale ranged from a "*very positive impact*" to a "*negative impact*". Figure 7 shows the responses from the 31 youth and 37 parent respondents. A third bar indicates the data points for the 52 youth in the study, counting only the youth responses for the 16 youth with both sets of questionnaires.

The results show that the large majority of the respondents felt that the Boundless School had made a positive impact on their current social relationships. Twenty-nine (56%) reported that the Boundless School had made a "*very positive*" impact, and 17 (33%) reported it made a "*somewhat positive*" impact on the youth's social relationships. It was only reported by six respondents that their Boundless experience "*did not impact*" their social relationships<sup>11</sup>. It is unknown whether these six youth felt their social relationships were already positive enough and didn't need the Boundless School to impact them, or whether they genuinely felt their Boundless School experience did not impact their social relationships. There were no "*negative impact*" responses.

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<sup>11</sup> It is unknown if the youth felt the Boundless School made *no impact* on their social relationships because their social relationships were already positive or because they felt it didn't help them.

Figure 7. Social Impact of the Boundless School



Twenty-four youth provided descriptions of how their social relationships have been impacted by the Boundless School. Although many descriptions were provided, only the most commonly described ones are presented. The most common way that the youth felt the Boundless School had impacted their social relationships was that it had taught them to be more open and outgoing (n=7).

*"I am more open to people now, I can trust people more because Boundless provided me with people who care."*

*"I started living life more and Boundless really helped in pushing me to become a more outgoing person. Returning to the city I felt as if it was a lot easier to socialize with people."*

Five youth reported that they were impacted by learning how to make friends and build meaningful relationships (n=5).

*"Before Boundless, I was a very introverted kid that didn't maintain very many friendships in high school. When I went to Boundless it gave me confidence of feeling like I was part of something and had more to contribute. Since then I confide in others and enjoy having close friends and making new friends a lot more. I now enjoy leaving my comfort zone and introducing myself to more people. I think Boundless has a massive part to play in this as I never really had motivation to enjoy others company before then."*

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"Boundless really helped teach me to form close bonds with friends and how to distribute life stresses among a support group as well as how to support my friends in a similar fashion."*

Five youth reported that they gained social confidence from the Boundless School and that it had impacted their current relationships.

*"Before Boundless, I was not a social person at all, and part of my anxiety's was largely affected by social interactions. While those anxieties are still there, I feel 100% more confident in social settings, and my job even relies on me being able to be social with complete strangers."*

*"Made me more confident in the workplace as a leader and boss."*

*"I am a lot more confident and open with my friends, which helps me to build stronger relationships with them. I'm not as scared to talk about my issues and just be myself."*

Four youth reported that the Boundless School had helped them by encouraging them to get out of their comfort zone and to approach people in a positive way.

*"When I first started at Boundless I was very quiet and shy. Over the course of being there I was able to open up and connect with many people which I used to find very difficult. There were many situations that they enforced that pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me be more social. They helped me thrive there and I was able to accomplish a lot. Now whenever I'm in a social situation, it's still hard and I still have social anxiety but Boundless has helped me learn how to cope better with those situations."*

The parents reported similar ways they felt the Boundless School had impacted their child's social relationships. It was most commonly reported that the youth had gained social confidence that continued to impact their social relationships (n=6).

*"He had SO much more confidence after Boundless. He had much more confidence talking to others, adults and new people he has met. He communicates better and isn't nearly as shy as he once was. He also has more confidence discussing current affairs. He becomes more involved."*

*"Boundless gave my son the confidence he needed and indirectly that affected his ability to foster positive relationships."*

Five parents reported that the Boundless School had impacted their child's social relationships by making them more communicative or more positive communicators.

*"My son is wayyyy more communicative and affectionate than he was before he went there. He spoke about feeling like he was living in a cooperative village at Boundless and I think that he felt very supported there. He is less critical of others now and more centred within himself."*

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"He learned to communicate better. He learned to listen to others, to not always jump to conclusions. He learned to stop and think about things more effectively so that his impulse control is better."*

Other ways the parents felt the Boundless School had impacted their child's social relationships included that they learned to appreciate other people, learned to listen, made better friend choices, became more outgoing, and generally improved their interpersonal skills.

*"He learned to appreciate the people in his life and his self esteem improved. This really mattered because he used to take out his own feelings of inadequacy on his younger sister. He has much better relationships with his siblings now."*

*"The "son" that I dropped off at Boundless was a different person from the "son" I picked up later and the "old" son has never returned. When he was small, he was an extremely outgoing and a happy child but the anxiety and depression took that away from him. He's been much more outgoing since he got back from Boundless. He is a lovely personable young man."*

*"Boundless was a very positive experience. He has grown to believe in himself and his goals and is always helpful and considerate of others."*

*"Boundless definitely influenced my daughter... post Boundless she made better choices in her friendships, and activities."*

### **Summary**

The majority of respondents felt that the Boundless School had a positive impact on their own or their child's social relationships following their time at the Boundless School. It is known from feedback forms directly following the Boundless School sessions that the youth feel they have benefitted socially from the Boundless School. These findings indicate that the Boundless School has made an impression and impact on their social relationships that extends at least a year after leaving Boundless. Positive social relationships are strongly linked to one's well-being and are known to make one feel happier, to help limit stress, influence long-term health, and to promote academic and job success (43, 44).

The Boundless School puts effort into building the social skills, group skills and social relationships of its students. The findings from this question, focusing on social relationships, and other comments made throughout the questionnaire make it clear that the Boundless School has a positive long-lasting impact on the social skills and relationships of the youth that attend.

### **How the Boundless School could have impacted them more**

At the end of the questionnaire youth and parents were given the opportunity to think back and describe how they felt the Boundless School could have helped them more or what could have been different that may have made a more lasting impact on their life.

Before presenting the feedback, it should be noted that in the years since the youth in this study participated in the Boundless School many new initiatives have been planned and/or

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

implemented into the school. While the objectives and overall structure of the Boundless School has remained stable, improvements are constantly evolving. Several of these new initiatives or improvements may have already addressed or touched on the suggestions made by the youth, parents and staff.

Twelve of the 31 youth provided comments about how they felt the Boundless School could have helped them more. Some youth left the section blank, while others reported that it could not have been any better. Of the 12 youth that provided comments, six reported that they thought they could have been helped more by having some support after they left the Boundless School. They reported needing support with job placement, school placement and general help transitioning back to their home life.

*"I think Boundless could have prepared me more to go back home. I had spent a year and half at Boundless and felt incredibly lost then found myself in a deep depression and barely got out of bed for a few months."*

*"Better preparation for post secondary and better way of transitioning from Boundless back to real life."*

*"I think that they could have helped me figure out what I was going to do after Boundless. They could have helped me find a high school to get in to."*

*"Wish they had job placement opportunities beyond high school."*

Other comments were more specific to their actual experience at the Boundless School. These included them wanting the following:

- More post-secondary school preparation (n=2),
- A trained professional counsellor was needed to give individual counselling and support on a regular basis (n=2),
- Structured time to use internet to communicate with friends or family back home (n=1),
- More diverse courses or course work for long-term students (n=1), and
- First-aid or CPR certificates (n=1).

Fifteen of the 37 parents provided comments about how they felt that the Boundless School could have impacted their child more. Many left this section blank and others reported that there was nothing to change.

Of the 15 respondents, 13 reported they felt their child could have benefitted from some type of transitional program or support after they left the Boundless School. Some of the suggestions included:

- Bi-annual reunions or re-visits at Boundless to keep the youth on tract,
- Linking the students to trade institutions,
- One, three and six month check-ins for first two years,
- Personalized transition plans and meetings that were followed up with correspondence,
- An alumni communication system to help students stay in touch - newsletters, social media, and actual reunions.
- A Facebook group.



## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"There should be some post-school program to keep them on the same path. My son flourished at Boundless and it was a shame that all that momentum was lost when he got back home after graduating."*

*"His time at Boundless was amazing, but every time he returned he really struggled. Some kind of support during the reintegration period would have been helpful".*

*"Something like a 2 week annual check-in programme could really help with keeping that sense of engagement with life that Boundless fosters".*

*"Feedback, correspondence and follow up while back at home to foster continue change and parent support. Student was finished Boundless 5 months before next public school year started and student floundered".*

Other more specific suggestions included:

- More addiction education,
- A wider range of courses,
- A link to trade schools, and
- More communication between the Boundless School and the home during the Boundless School session.

On the staff feedback form, completed in the spring of 2019, staff were asked how they felt the Boundless School could impact the students more. The staff comments were remarkably similar to the youth and parent comments made more than a year after their Boundless School participation. Six of the 12 staff members reported that they felt a transitional program or bridging program would be helpful to the youth after they leave the Boundless School.

*"A transitional program out of Boundless would be helpful. Boundless is a bubble and entering the 'real' world can be overwhelming.*

*"Follow up programs to help students transition from the highly structured routine of Boundless back to their much less structured city lives".*

Three staff suggested that they felt it would be beneficial to challenge some of the students more and prepare them for university or higher education.

*"I think we could better prepare our students who want to pursue higher education... offer more challenging courses and have them eventually take on the challenge of being responsible for their routine (i.e. waking themselves up)".*

Other suggestions reported by more than one staff member included having more individual counselling (n=2) and more diverse staff (n=2).

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"Students could benefit from more individual counselling opportunities. Many students are coming with a need for mental health support. In order for education to happen, mental health needs to be addressed first. This will allow students to focus more clearly and gain a better understanding of their emotions and thought patterns".*

### Summary

Forty percent of the youth and parent respondents offered comments about how the Boundless School experience could have impacted them more. This shows that the majority of youth and parents were satisfied with their experience or could not think of ways it could be better. For those who did comment, there was an overall agreement that a follow-up or transitional support program would have been helpful. These comments show that there is a need for support after attending the Boundless School during the transition to homelife, work or further schooling. While a comprehensive follow-up program is perhaps beyond the scope or focus of the Boundless School, it appears to be an important need that could be beneficial to a large number of youth, in addition to the Boundless School students.

### General Feedback

The final question on the questionnaire gave youth and parents the opportunity to provide general feedback or any other comments they wanted to share about the Boundless School. All comments were positive and clearly show that the Boundless School has made a long-term impression on the youth and their families. Common themes that arose from the comments included an increase in self-confidence, enlightenment, and shift in their mindset. Many spoke of the experience being life changing. Below are a sample of the comments from the youth and their parents.

*"This program saved me from my own self-doubt and inadequacy along with allowing me to find my own distinct path that I somehow strayed off from for a long time. I often say I'm glad that I fell down because without that miserable experience, I wouldn't have found my way to this gem of a school at all nor would I be the individual I am today to create a better life, not just for me, but for my mother and the entire world that exists today."*

*"Boundless inspired me in so many ways where I still think back to this day and how different my life would be had I not gone. The teachers not only taught me subjects but life lessons which broadened my horizons. I wouldn't have thought of going to University at all had they not talked so highly of their experiences in the first place. The whole experience taught me that I had so much more to give and it taught me a true work ethic."*

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

*"The Boundless school is and will always be the best thing that has happened to me."*

*"Boundless has had a great impact on my life and it's helped me change the way I live my current life."*

*"My son was shy, withdrawn, depressed, dealing with a range of health issues, had little interest in friends, socializing or school. Boundless changed all of that. He made a lot of friends at Boundless and built up his confidence in himself, his social skills, life skills and earned many credits he needed to get him much closer to graduating. I doubt he would have been able to accomplish what he has if it were not for Boundless. I even wonder if he would have ever been able to graduate if he had to do it by another route."*

*"I think Boundless played its part with shifting my son's mindset and skillset to prepare himself for where he is now."*

*"I have only positive things to say about Boundless. I feel strongly that all kids would benefit from the program but specifically kids who struggle in any capacity! A big thank you to them, my son came out with confidence, self awareness and understood he had to take responsibility for his choices good or bad."*

*"Boundless has left a lasting impact, not just on my child that attended but with our whole family. A lifetime experience that will never be forgotten."*

*"I think Boundless helped my son see that he was capable of doing more than he thought he was. He was quite self-limiting before he went and he gained confidence in tackling difficult situations or situations where he would be out of his comfort zone."*

## **Discussion and implications for future research, policy and practice**

The Boundless School's solid reputation and strong relationship with many youth agencies and school boards has allowed for very vulnerable youth to be referred to the school at crucial times in their lives. With youth mental health disorders on the rise and inadequate access to appropriate services, many youth with multiple coexisting disorders and risk factors are being left behind to devastating outcomes (45, 46). The youth that attend the Boundless School are fortunate to have been referred and accepted to the Boundless School. Its unique wilderness setting, multifaceted programming and caring staff make it an ideal place for struggling youth to receive educational, personal and social support. The Boundless School has managed to work successfully with the heterogeneous youth that attend and in diverse

## Outcomes of the Boundless School

ways have helped them obtain their high school diplomas and gain useful skills and strategies to assist them in life. Unfortunately, programs like the Boundless School are not in abundance and further research and program development is needed to help the large number of struggling youth in Canada. Practitioners and researchers are now aware however, of the heterogeneity of the youth who drop out, and the pathways leading to it. Approaches and programs are starting to cover a wider range of social and academic needs and more diverse programs are being offered. While programs are succeeding in lowering the drop out rates, more research is needed that looks at the role mental health plays in the path to graduation and its coexistence with learning disabilities and other risk factors. While it is known that many underlying risk-factors accumulate to make certain youth more vulnerable to dropping out of high school more attention needs to be paid to mental issues and stressful events that have their onset *during* the high school years (20, 46). Research has found that recent mental health episodes or stressors play a role in precipitating high school drop out over and above, or in interaction with, pre-existing vulnerabilities (20, 46). These are important findings and more research in the area could help identify youth in these situations. School personnel, parents and professionals need to become aware of and improve the detection of fluctuating risk that will allow for “just in time” interventions and appropriate supports that are sensitive to mental health. Additional research and resulting initiatives and programs could also help reduce the chance of youth developing mental health issues and coping with stressful events in more effective ways.

*"Boundless was a life changer for my son. He was feeling angry and hopeless before he went. He came home feeling positive and engaged with the real world."*

*"The Boundless School was the most awesome experience for my daughter. You helped to save her when she was on a downward spiral."*

*"Boundless saved his life!"*

Feedback from the Boundless School past students, parents and staff in the current study indicated a need for support beyond the Boundless School. Many suggested a transitional program to help the youth once they returned home, ongoing contact to help them maintain the benefits they received from the school, or concrete help making the transition to the labour force or more schooling. While the Boundless School may have some capacity to support the youth remotely when they leave the Boundless School, an actual program would be logistically difficult to provide. This feedback however, sheds light on a greater issue that needs to be addressed. The issue is that many youth who graduate from high school still need support and guidance to help them make a successful transition to adulthood. High school graduation rates are at their highest level ever, in part due to the increased focus and funding directed towards helping youth attain their diplomas (8). While this can be seen as a success there is now an increased number of youth with a high school diploma but with no clear plans for their future. In today's society obtaining a high school diploma should be seen

as an important stepping stone rather than an end goal and the funding and resources should not stop once a student receives their diploma. While it is still an important accomplishment, a high school diploma has lost its value in the labour force over several decades (8). It no longer guarantees career success and higher levels of education or training are becoming essential for complex and well paying jobs (38). The large number of high school graduates who took advantage of the recent funding and focused programming to help them graduate from high school will need continued support. These youth need targeted assistance accessing and financing trade apprenticeship programs, college and university programs, and other essential education and training. Attention needs to be directed to young adults who not only are classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), but also those who are in the labour force with low paying jobs that have limited upward mobility. The transition from high school to post-secondary school or training is daunting and costly for everyone. Those with mental health issues, learning disabilities and lower socioeconomic status are particularly vulnerable to the stress of the transition (47). Although some programs and supports may already exist, research and subsequent initiatives must focus at the role mental health plays in the transition and the challenges young adults with mental health issues face. It must also be acknowledged that more and more youth are receiving their high school diplomas through alternative programs and may not be adequately prepared for immediate success in all types of post secondary education.

## Conclusion

The results of this study show that the Boundless School is very successful at helping youth who are struggling in mainstream schools and are falling drastically behind in their credit count. The Boundless School serves youth who among other challenges and risk factors, have mental health issues (76%) and learning disabilities (63%). These factors are found to be associated with higher rates of high school drop out, which can lead to many negative consequences. Statistically, based on their risk factors, the majority of the youth that attend the Boundless School should not be graduating from high school. With the support, expertise and guidance of the Boundless School, the high school graduation rate for youth who attended is higher than the National, Provincial, and local averages (29, 35, 36, 37).

These are excellent findings alone but the fact that not all the students graduated directly from the Boundless School, but graduated after returning back home, is exceedingly positive. The majority of the youth came to the Boundless School because they were desperately struggling in their current or mainstream education system. After attending the Boundless School for between 40 and 300 days the majority of youth returned to school and were successful in completing their diplomas. This finding shows that the Boundless School is not just handing out credits and diplomas but are providing tools for their students to succeed in other educational settings beyond the Boundless School. It also shows that the Boundless School is having a long-term impact on their students beyond their time at the Boundless School.

In addition to obtaining their high school diplomas, many of the Boundless School students successfully pursued further education and employment after leaving the Boundless School. The

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majority felt they are performing well at school or work, felt confident in their futures and were adequately coping with stress. Furthermore, the majority felt the Boundless School had impacted their current social relationships in positive ways. While there is no way to prove that the causality of these positive outcomes is linked directly to the Boundless School, the skills and strategies needed to move forward in education and employment, cope with stress, and feel confident, are all objectives of the Boundless School, and fundamental in its programming.

Further research and resources aimed at helping struggling youth beyond attaining a high school diploma would be beneficial. All youth, including those who attended the Boundless School would benefit from supports and programming targeted at helping youth make a successful transition in the labour force and adulthood. These efforts should take into account the large number of youth with mental health issues and other disabilities and risk factors.

### **Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the study and on vulnerable youth**

The original timeline of this project was to collect data from the Spring of 2019 to the Spring of 2022. The goal was to get feedback from or about at least 100 students. Requests to complete the research questionnaire would roll out as individual youth met the criteria. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, data collection was stopped in March 2020, restarted in September 2020 for a short time before stopping completely. The researcher felt the responses would be greatly affected by the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and would not show a realistic view of their educational and employment accomplishments and particularly their well-being. In response, the study was completed early with a smaller sample size.

The Covid-19 pandemic will also affect the number of youth who are struggling to complete their high school diplomas over the next few years. The pandemic has had a devastating effect on families and youth with lower socioeconomic status, and all individuals with mental health issues. It has also seriously disrupted high school learning, support, and social interactions between students, and between students and teachers. The need for appropriate and accessible programs that can support youth educationally, social and emotionally will be essential and in high demand.

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