

# The Effectiveness of the Boundless School for Students with Severe and Comorbid Mental Health Disorders

Laura Ziliotto – May 2024

*“Boundless helps her. I didn’t know what to do. Alternative schools did not work.” - parent*

*“Boundless helps students focus. It motivates them and pushes them beyond what they thought they could do. It gives them space for self-discovery of all life skills and education.” - agency staff*

*“Boundless made me a better person overall. I know more about myself than I did before. Everyday I learn something new.” - student*

*“It makes them realize they have more to give, that they have potential to do things.” - staff*

## Executive Summary

This report is based on a qualitative study of students aged 15 to 20 years old attending the Boundless School during the 2023/2024 school year. The results of the study, based on feedback from students, parents, agency staff and Boundless Management Staff, show that the Boundless School was very effective in working with students with severe mental health disorders and providing them with an opportunity to earn high school credits and gain valuable social, personal, academic, and life skills. The comments from all sources were positive and described the many ways the school had benefitted its students.

Before attending the Boundless School, the students in the study were suffering from multiple comorbid mental health disorders, learning disabilities and experiencing interconnected maladaptive and unhealthy daily lifestyles. Very few of the students were attending school regularly, if at all, and were significantly behind in earning their high school credits. The majority of the students were not leaving their houses, sleeping in the day and were barely participating in life. Prior to the Boundless School, the students had all attended, or tried to attend, a combination of mainstream schools, alternative schools, in-patient treatment centres, community-based programs and individual therapy. While some experienced short-term or nominal success, they were all still in need of a program or school that could help them navigate their multiple challenges and behaviours, beyond what other programs could provide. The students had little hope in completing their high school degrees as their severe mental health disorders were preventing them from engaging in school, having positive social relationships and taking care of themselves.

The Boundless School provided these students with a comprehensive live-in educational experience that supported their many challenges and provided them with support, guidance and skills so they could improve their abilities to succeed socially, personally and academically. The Boundless School’s model was effective for the students as its rigorous and active routine challenged them to live healthier lives and motivated, supported and taught them the basics of how to be a friend, how to be a learner and how to feel more confident as a person. On top of these benefits, the students earned high school credits to help them graduate from high school. While the success stories and positive outcomes of the Boundless

School have been recorded and shared since its inception in 2012, its ability to continue to be effective for a student population with such debilitating mental health disorders is very promising. The uniqueness of the Boundless School's location, amenities, staffing model and educational framework has transformed the students by giving them hope for their futures and positive strategies and skills to move forward.

## **Introduction and Background**

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 the Boundless School staff. The school consists of two modern teaching and sleeping facilities on 600 acres of wilderness in the Ottawa Valley. The program offers students a blend of education, mental health support, outdoor adventure, and an intensive positive group experience. Three 40-day sessions and one 30-day session are offered per school year and the students live at the school for the entire session.

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 began offering 6-week sessions during the school year and by the Fall of 2014, the Boundless School was operating from September to March, offering four sessions throughout the year.

Since the Boundless School started offering year-round sessions, it has helped hundreds of struggling youth to complete enough high school credits to graduate from high school. In addition to providing an innovative and experiential educational program, the Boundless School also provides its students with valuable social, personal, and educational skills needed to navigate their lives and their futures. Years of feedback from Boundless School students, parents, community partners, and Boundless School staff have confirmed that the school is successful at helping struggling youth graduate from high school and gain valuable life skills and needed support.

When the Boundless School began, it accepted and worked with many youth who were struggling in school and presented with externalizing behaviours such as anger management problems, deviance, aggression, and defiance. While these youth did benefit from the school, their behaviours monopolized the staff's time and effort and students with more internalizing behaviours such as anxiety and depression were not receiving the attention and support they needed to truly succeed. At the same time that mental health disorders were rising dramatically in Canada and worldwide <sup>11,12</sup>, the Boundless School Management Team came to the decision that the community-based model of the school worked best for students with more internalizing behaviours. This decision came at a time when mental health services were overloaded and adolescents with mental health problems were struggling to find appropriate support. While the population of the Boundless School students started to change before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Boundless School sought out and accepted only students presenting with internalizing behaviours in the form of severe mental health disorders, after the pandemic. The Boundless School had zeroed in on who they felt they could help and inspire the most, and who worked best with its community-oriented programming model. <sup>34</sup>

The purpose of this research project was to explore the effectiveness of the Boundless School model on a population of students with increasingly higher levels of co-occurring mental health disorders than

students in the past. This report is based on qualitative self-report data collected from and about the students attending the Boundless School during the 2023/24 school year. The students suffered from multiple challenges including anxiety, depression, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), self-harm and learning disabilities, which resulted in the majority of them rarely attending school and therefore being at risk of not completing high school. A failure to complete high school is linked to several negative consequences and those who drop out of school face serious social, economic and health difficulties in their lives.<sup>13,14</sup>

## **Mental Health and School Success**

Mental health disorders have been on the rise since 2012 in Canada and around the world.<sup>11,12</sup> While they affect all ages and a diverse range of people, adolescents and younger adults have been the most affected.<sup>12,15</sup> Self-harm episodes, mental health hospitalizations, high psychological distress, and anxiety and depression diagnoses have all significantly increased and mental health services have been struggling to keep up.<sup>11,12,16</sup> During this time, the Covid-19 pandemic also ensued. While the pandemic did not start the mental health crisis, it definitely exacerbated it and had a catastrophic impact on students who already had poor mental health, were struggling in school or did not have stable or supportive home lives.<sup>28</sup> Smartphone use and social media use also soared during this time creating a challenging time for many adolescents.<sup>17</sup>

There is an abundance of research literature linking mental health disorders with poor academic achievement and the failure to succeed in school. Anxiety, depression, ADHD, and self-harm are some of the disorders that are linked to difficulties in school and the inability to graduate from high school.<sup>3,4,8,11,18,19,20,21,22,23</sup> Students with anxiety tend to withdraw from classroom and social participation which can lead to school refusal or complete school avoidance.<sup>24</sup> Having depression is associated with poor school performance and performing poorly at school is found to increase the risk of developing depression.<sup>25</sup> ADHD, one of the most common mental disorders affecting children, is also significantly related to problems achieving in school due to difficulty concentrating and focusing on schoolwork. Poor school performance has also been found to predict self-harming disorder.<sup>26</sup> Gaming addiction, a more recently identified mental health disorder is linked to school failure as gaming takes precedence over other activities to the degree that the gamer does not do schoolwork and eventually stops attending school.<sup>27</sup>

Not only are mental health disorders linked to failure to succeed in school but they are also linked to each other and often youth will suffer from more than one disorder. Anxiety and depression are commonly presented together and are reciprocal. ADHD is widely known to be associated with anxiety and depression with a potential causal effect,<sup>1,2</sup> and self-harm disorder is strongly associated with both depression and anxiety.<sup>26</sup> Gaming addiction is also found to be associated with anxiety and depression and in turn other disorders.<sup>5,29</sup> Having more than one mental health disorder puts youth at even great risk of not completing high school.<sup>1</sup>

Learning Disabilities, such as language processing disorder and dyslexia, are widely known to be associated with difficulties in school and if not properly supported can lead to depression and social anxiety disorder.<sup>20,30</sup>

## The Research Project

### Method

The method of data collection used in this study was semi-structured interviews conducted face to face or over the phone with individual respondents. Interviews were conducted with students, parents, agency staff<sup>1</sup> and Boundless School management staff<sup>2</sup>.

### Measures and Procedures

*Student interviews* were conducted face to face at the Boundless School. Each interview was completed individually in a safe and comfortable space. The interviews were semi-structured with little to no prompting to encourage the students to communicate in their own words about how they felt about themselves and their experiences at the Boundless School. The conversational interview style guided the students to speak about specific topics yet allowed them to elaborate where they felt comfortable or be brief when they wanted. The interviews were not recorded but transcribed by pen and paper. It was felt that this would be the least intrusive method and fit with the conversational and relaxed atmosphere. Interviews lasted 20 minutes to 60 minutes in length. In all cases, the students were comfortable being interviewed and forthcoming with a lot of detailed and personal information. It should be noted that the researcher did not review intake forms or talk to staff about the students before the interviews. Instead, they were conducted with no pre-existing knowledge or preconceptions of the students to ensure open and unbiased interviews. The student interviews were conducted before any other interviews.

The goal of the student interviews was to gather information from the students about the following topics; 1) life and school experiences before coming to the Boundless School, 2) perceptions and insights of the Boundless School in terms of its structure, social experiences, the educational component, and the physical and outdoor activities, 3) the perceived benefits of the Boundless School for themselves, and 4) suggestions on how the Boundless School could improved.

The students were asked to reflect on these topics in relation to their time spent at the Boundless School and their time spent back at home between their Boundless School sessions.

*Parent/Guardian interviews* were conducted over the phone and were also semi-structured in order to allow parents the opportunity to share their perspective and feelings in their own way. Parents were asked to comment on their children's life and routines before going to the Boundless School and to describe any changes they have observed in their children since they started to attend the Boundless School. The parents needed little encouragement to talk and interviews lasted between 15 to 60 minutes in length.

*Agency staff interviews* were also semi-structured interviews and were conducted over the phone. These conversational interviews focused on reasons why the agency staff referred the youth to the Boundless School, and descriptions of any positive impact they felt the school was having on their clients<sup>3</sup>.

*Boundless Staff interviews* were conducted individually over the phone. The staff were asked to describe how the Boundless School students have changed over the years and to describe the current student

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Agency Staff" is used to include school guidance counsellors, teachers, mental health professionals, social workers, therapists, community child and youth workers etc.

<sup>2</sup> The Boundless School management staff interviewed were the guidance counsellor/risk manager and the program director.

<sup>3</sup> The word client is interchangeable with student, youth participant, client, and patient.

population. They were also asked to describe the biggest changes they have seen in the students since they have been at the Boundless School. Finally, they were asked to suggest ways they felt the school could be even more impactful.

*Intake Interview documents and transcripts* were also reviewed to confirm mental health diagnoses, birth dates, previous school attendance and credit accumulation.

**Participants**

This report is based on qualitative data collected from 15 Boundless School students, 11 parents of the students (9 mothers, 1 stepmother, 2 fathers), three agency staff, and two members of the Boundless School management team. The 15 students attended the Boundless School during the 2023/2024 school year and all interviews were conducted during this time.

**Description of students**

The Boundless School students included in this research project were those who had attended the Boundless School for at least 65 days at the time of the interview and had returned home at least one time between school sessions. Some had attended the school for multiple sessions and others were only at the end of their second session. See Table 1 for demographic details of the students.

**Table 1: Demographics of the Boundless School Students in this Study**

General Demographic Details	Boundless School Students (N=15)
Age at interview	Range: 15 – 20 years Mean age: 18 years
Gender	Male: 9 Female: 5 Others: 1
Living Arrangements	Both parents = 2 Single parent = 10 (6 mothers, 4 fathers) One parent and stepparent = 2 Grandparents = 1
Scholarship or Private	Scholarship student (funded by donations) = 14 Private student (paid by family) = 1

Table 2 displays quantitative details about the number of credits the students had already earned and how many more they needed before coming to Boundless. It also shows the range and mean of how many days the students attended the Boundless School.

**Table 2: High School Credit Details and Number of Days at the Boundless School**

School related details	Boundless School Students in the study (N=15)
Number of credits achieved before coming to the Boundless School	0 – 19 of the 30 credits needed to graduate
Number of credits behind their classmates before coming to the Boundless School	Range: 3 – 27.5 credits behind their peers Average: 13 credits behind peers (equivalent to 1.5 school years)
Number of days/sessions at the Boundless School as of the end of March 2024	Range: 70 – 370 days, 2 -10 sessions Mean: 189 days, 5 sessions

Table 2 shows how diverse the group of students were in terms of how many credits the students had coming into the school, how many they were behind and the number of days they attended. Within a mainstream school all the students in a class would be relatively even in terms of their credit accumulation and how long they had been at the school. They would also be close in age.

According to the Clinical Director, the recent students at the Boundless School are the oldest student population in the school’s history and they came in the lowest number of credits.

## Results

### Who are the Boundless School Students?

A large part of this report focuses on describing the students’ challenges and lifestyles before attending the Boundless School. These details are significant as they show what types of students the Boundless School is trying to help and how the Boundless School impacts them.

### Mental Health and Learning Challenges/Disabilities

The Boundless School students in this study were challenged by multiple and severe co-occurring mental health and learning issues. While they were not all clinically diagnosed, the disorders and disabilities reported were recognized and agreed upon by multiple sources and considered to be severe. Table 3 shows the prevalence of the main mental health disorders and learning disabilities in the 15 students in this study before they attended the Boundless School.

**Table 3: The Presence of Mental Health Disorders and Learning Disabilities in the Students Before They Attended the Boundless School.**

Mental Health and Learning Challenges	Students 2023/2024 (N=15)
One or more Mental Health disorders	100%
Multiple Mental Health disorders	93%
Depression	93%
Anxiety/Social Anxiety	93%

**Table 3 con't:** *The Presence of Mental Health Disorders and Learning Disabilities in the Students Before They Attended the Boundless School.*

Mental Health and Learning Challenges	Students 2023/2024 (N=15)
Learning Disability	53%
Self-harm	47%
Suicidal thoughts	47%
ADHD	30%
Gaming Disorder	13% *

\* While only two students had been clinically diagnosed with a gaming disorder, it is thought that several more may have also met the diagnosis criteria before coming to the Boundless School.

As shown in Table 3, the prevalence of mental health disorders in the Boundless School students was extremely high. As a reference, by the age of 25 approximately 20% of Canadians have developed a mental health disorder,<sup>33</sup> compared to 100% of the Boundless School students. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the Boundless School students had both depression and anxiety, which is significantly higher than the 17% of Ontario youth who report feeling high levels of anxiety and depression.<sup>31,32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the students attending the Boundless School have changed over the years. In the past, the students often had mental health issues in addition to externalizing behaviours. The current population have more mental health issues but fewer externalizing behaviours. Table 4 shows a comparison of the 2023/24 school year students with those who attended the Boundless School between 2013 and 2019. It illustrates that while the frequency of ADHD and Learning Disabilities have remained the same, the prevalence of anxiety, depression and suffering from multiple mental health disorders has increased significantly.

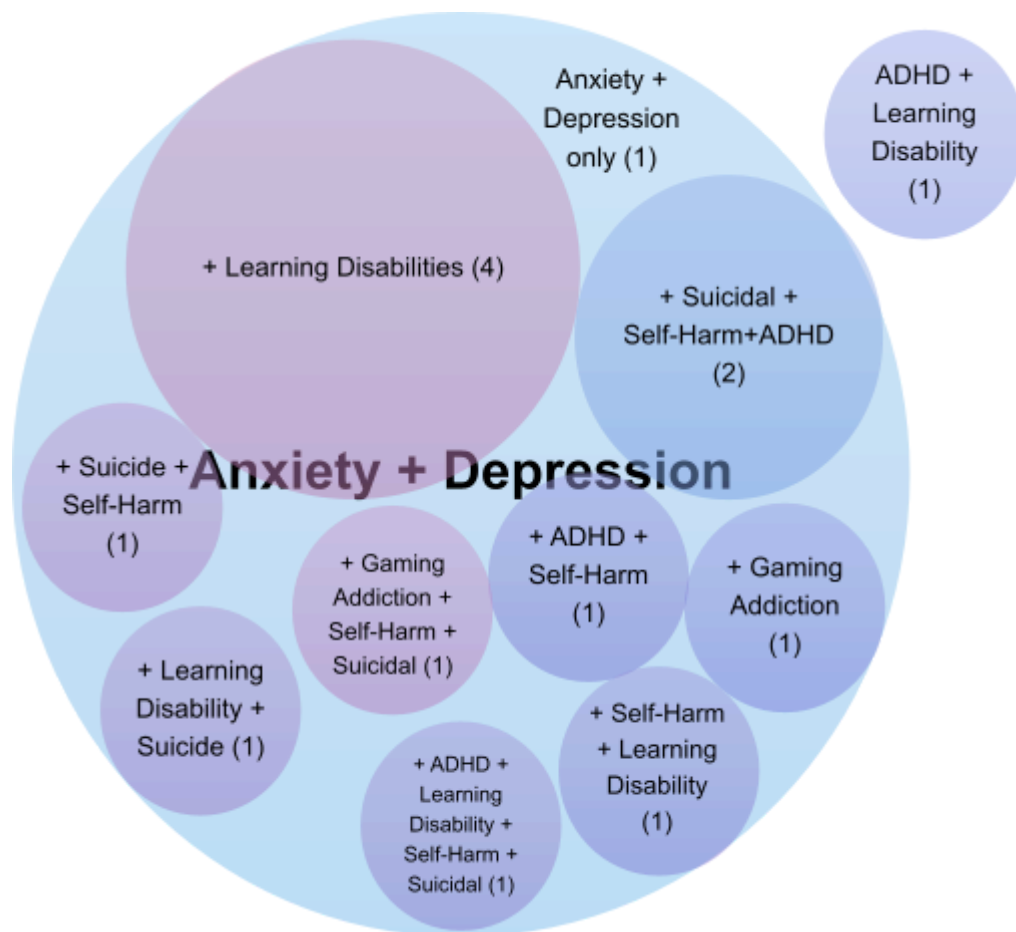
**Table 4:** *A Comparison of Mental Health Disorders and Learning Disabilities in the 2023/24 Students and Students that Attended the Boundless School Between 2013 and 2019*

Mental Health and Learning Challenges	Students 2023/2024 N=15	Students 2013-2019 N=106
One or more Mental Health disorders	100%	75%
Multiple Mental Health disorders	93%	43%
Depression	93%	38%
Anxiety/Social Anxiety	93%	49%
ADHD	30%	28%
Learning Disability	53%	52%

As shown in the tables 93% of the Boundless School students in this study suffered from more than one comorbid mental health disorder.

Figure 1 shows the comorbidity of the students' mental health disorders and learning disabilities. The largest circle represents the 14 students (93%) that suffered from both anxiety and depression before coming to the Boundless School. The smaller circles within the largest circle represent the 13 students (87%) who suffered from further mental health disorders or a learning disability. There are multiple circles within the large *Anxiety + Depression* circle because many students presented with their own unique combination of disorders. The one student that did not suffer from anxiety and depression had ADHD, learning disabilities and reported being very stressed by his family life. This student is represented in Figure 1 in the small circle outside of the large *Anxiety + Depression* circle.

**Figure 1:** *Comorbidity of Mental Health and Learning Disorders in the Boundless School Students*



It should be noted that in addition to these mental health and learning challenges, many students also lived through family trauma, lived with family members with mental health disorders, experienced multiple moves between parents, cities, schools and programs, and may not have experienced stable and supportive home lives.

On top of these disorders and challenges, the students in this study experienced the Covid-19 pandemic at a very influential time in their developing lives. When the pandemic began these youth were between the ages of 11 and 17 years and in grades 6 to 11. While many students suffered socially and



academically during the period of online school, adolescents with already existing challenges or risk factors were hit harder and suffered more from the social isolation, lack of structure and reduced academic and personal support.

## **Life Before the Boundless School**

The following section describes the students educational and social experiences before attending the Boundless School. It also describes their physical activity levels and how they were spending their time in general.

### **Educational experiences before the Boundless School**

All the students attended the Boundless School because they were struggling in the mainstream and alternative education systems and were behind in high school credits. The majority of the students had attended multiple schools and alternative education programs with little, short-term or no success.

While some students struggled in elementary school due to a learning disability or ADHD, the majority of the students, including those with ADHD and learning disabilities, reported a specific time or grade when they felt things decline or breakdown for them in terms of their mental health and academic education. This period could have been triggered by family trauma, a move, the Covid-19 pandemic, the transition to middle or high school, puberty, or the new freedoms of adolescence. Problems could also have been gradually increasing but the youth suddenly became aware of their struggles.

*“I used to go to school, then it all fell apart.”*

*“A certain video game came out when I was in grade 8 and I got addicted. Stopped going to school.”*

*“When he was young, he went to school, loved structure and was a straight A student. Then mental health problems came and he stopped going.” - parent*

As mentioned, the students in this study were in grades 6 to 11 when the Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020 and schooling went online. While only three students specifically reported that they felt online school was their downfall, many others mentioned that it certainly contributed to their struggles. When schooling went online and they were no longer expected to physically go to school, the students in this study suffered. They did not have the academic and emotional support and strategies needed to persevere through the difficulties of online learning. So instead, they just stopped doing it. When regular in-person school returned, these youth were far behind in knowledge and credits and most were socially and emotionally unable to jump back in successfully.

*“Before Covid I was in grade 10. I was going to school, playing sports and video games. Then Covid came and my routine was ruined so I just stopped going.”*

*“I was already struggling in school but when school went online, everything went downhill. Everything felt hopeless.”*

*“Online school did not happen because he already had a learning disability. I couldn’t monitor the online thing so he just didn’t do it. Once school started up again he was struggling and his grades were suffering. He couldn’t catch up.” – parent*

According to the students and their parents, 87% of the youth in this study were not attending or barely attending school before coming to the Boundless School.

## **Social Relationships and Social Interaction before coming to the Boundless School**

As mentioned in the previous section, most of the youth were barely attending school which would significantly decrease their opportunities for social interactions. When asked about their social interactions with friends or peers before coming to the Boundless School, the students reported the following:

- 1) No friends or social interactions. (n=6)
- 2) Had a couple of friends, communicated online but rarely or never saw them in person. (n=3)
- 3) Small number of friends, some interaction but bad influences, not positive. (n=3)
- 4) Virtual online friends only. (n=2)
- 5) Virtual gaming friends and one real life friend. (n=1)

*“I stayed in my house, avoided social interaction.”*

*“I had some friends, but we did not do good things together.”*

*“I stuck to myself a lot, didn’t connect with anyone.”*

*“I had lost my confidence with talking”*

The student responses corresponded to what the parents and agency staff reported about the youth’s social interactions, yet the student responses were more optimistic. It is clear that while some students did have some social interactions, the large majority were very socially isolated. On a more positive note, several students reported that they talked to a parent or family member.

*“Had no friends, only talked to mom, socially isolated.”*

*“I only socialized online in games but talked to my brothers.”*

While some would argue that online virtual friends are a means of social interaction and can have positive benefits for mental health, there is a limit to how much gaming is beneficial before it turns into an addiction and results in negative life consequences. Based on the reports from students, parents and agency staff, the Boundless School students were spending an extreme amount of time gaming or on their phones interfering with their lives and was having negative effects on their social relationships and mental health.

## **Physical Activity Level before coming to the Boundless School**

When asked about their physical activity level before coming to the Boundless School, several youth said they had been active and engaged in physical extracurricular activities in elementary school or even middle school. However, all but one youth reported that this earlier activity level had stopped, and they were now very inactive. The one youth who was still active played baseball and two other youth reported sometimes going for a walk. The remaining 12 reported they did no physical activity before coming to the Boundless School. While they were not active, several mentioned that they felt guilty about not exercising, indicating that they knew it was not a healthy way of life.

*“I was doing absolutely no physical activity and a lot of guilt around it. Wanted to do it but was self-conscious. Couldn’t bring myself to exercise or do any activity.”*

Parents also reported that their children were getting no physical exercise and were not active.

*“He didn’t go outside, no physical activity. Have a gym and basketball nets down the street but he never went”.*

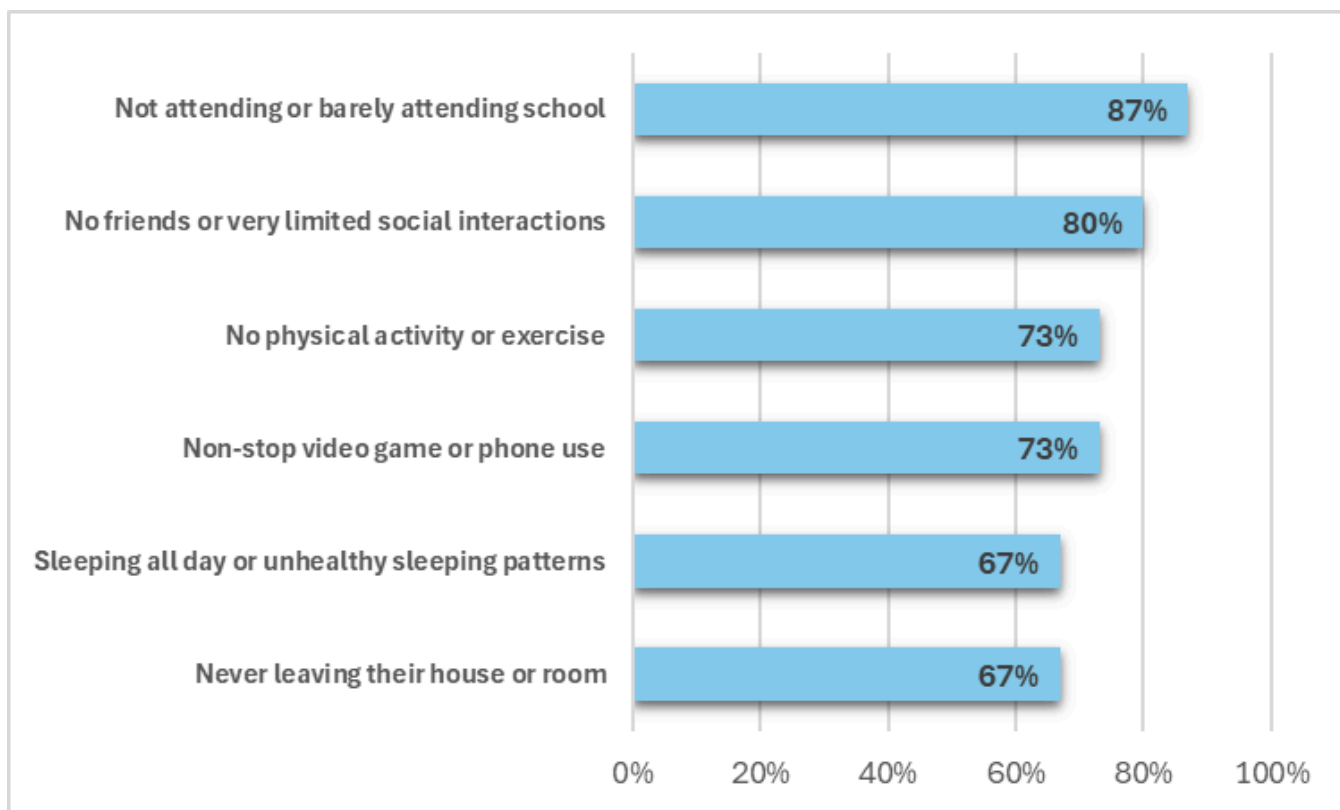
### Daily Life and Routine Before Attending the Boundless School

When asked to describe their lives and routines before coming to the Boundless School, nine students explicitly said they were doing “nothing” and had “no structure”. It was clear from the student and parent reports, however, that several others also had no routine and were not engaged with their families, schools, friends or their community.

It is important to note that problematic behaviours in this report are most likely under reported. This is because the interviews were not structured with closed-ended questions. The respondents were not asked to answer a series of questions or to check off a list of symptoms or behaviours they were experiencing or observing.

Figure 2 illustrates the top five behaviours reported by the students and confirmed by their parents about what they were doing before coming to the Boundless School. The data from both sources was compiled but each behaviour was counted once per student.

**Figure 2:** *How Students Were Spending Their Time Before Attending the Boundless School*

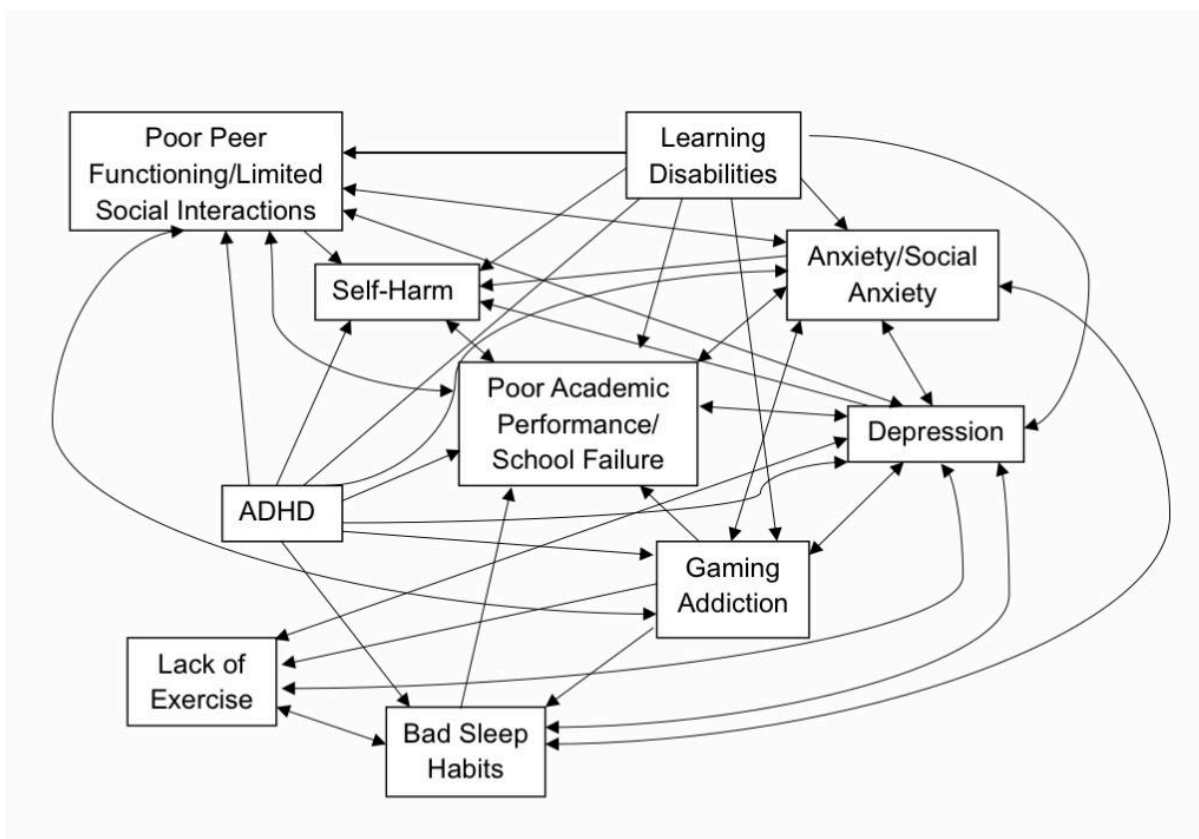


As illustrated in Figure 2, the majority of the youth were not attending school, had limited social interactions out of the home, slept in the daytime and were up at night gaming or online. They also rarely left their rooms or houses and were not physically active. These behaviours were intertwined with and possibly reciprocally associated with the comorbid mental health disorders they presented with before attending the Boundless School. While it is beyond the scope of this project to explore causal paths,

research has found associations between mental health disorders and all the behavioural pastimes and behaviours reported by the students and parents.

Figure 3 provides a visual illustration of how intricate and interconnected the students' disorders, challenges and behaviours were before attending the Boundless School. The multiple challenges and behaviours they experienced are all connected, reciprocal or causal providing a clear indication of how complicated and challenging their lives were and how difficult it would be for mainstream schools and community-based programs to help support them in a meaningful way. While there may be even more connections, the one's visible in Figure 3 have been backed by research studies.<sup>2,3,4,5,6,8,18,19,20,23,26,27,30,32,35,44,45,46,48,49,50,51</sup>

**Figure 3.** *The Interconnected Pathways Between the Students Disorders, Challenges and Behaviours*



The following quotes from the students and parents provide details into what they were experiencing before attending the Boundless School.

Students:

*"I had no structure, played video games. I was basically see-through."*

*"I only came out of my room when they knew everyone in my house was sleeping."*

*"Just lay in bed, played video games, never left the house."*

*"Not going to school, tried to have a routine but struggled. Felt stuck, not progressing."*

*"I did nothing. Stayed at home, went to bed at 4am and woke up at 2pm."*

*"I was trying to do online school, not the best mental state. Everything felt hopeless, I was sedentary, not taking care of myself. Slept from 6am to 3pm."*

Parents:

*"She had no plans for herself, no goals, no social connections, home problems rubbed off on her. Not going to school, no daily routine. Was asleep or awake whenever she wanted and was not active at all."*

*"Before Boundless he was all over the map. Couldn't get him out the door. Anxiety of big groups, mixed up sleeping patterns. He was all off."*

*Before Boundless, she was housebound, a recluse, a mess. Not learning."*

*"It was a fight to get him to go to school. Wouldn't get out of bed. Anxiety was so high and couldn't deal with the stress."*

*"For months before he went to Boundless, he just stayed home going into depression. No motivation, up all night and slept all day. He was non-stop gaming. It was wrong."*

The agency staff also reported similar behaviours of the youth they referred to the Boundless School. One reported that the three youth he referred were unable to come to school due to their mental health issues and couldn't leave their rooms. Another reported that his client had no structure or responsibilities at home and never went to school. The third worker reported that her clients were not going to school and just playing video games or on their phones all the time.

*"He came to school a few times but was not able to be a part of it. Anxiety was so high, he was so scared."*

*"Before Boundless, her anxiety was paralyzing. Couldn't speak, couldn't go to class."*

*"Before Boundless their only safe space was their bedroom."*

## Summary

It is clear that the Boundless students were not living typical adolescent lives before attending the Boundless School. These youth were not just falling through the cracks, failing at school or having depressive or anxious symptoms. These youth were experiencing severe mental health challenges that were preventing them from participating in life. Their mental health issues made it difficult or impossible for them to go to school and the co-occurring and reciprocal relationships between their behaviours, disorders and disabilities continuously fed into each other leading to more severe disorders, unhealthy living and possible negative outcomes in the future. The students were unable to take full advantage of the different schools, programs and services they attended and had little hope for their futures.

On a positive note, these suffering students somehow got to the Boundless School. Whether they were lucky enough to come across a teacher, social worker or therapist who was familiar with the school, or if they heard about it from another family, they all managed to get through the intake process, give up their phones, and get on the bus to take them to Boundless. For many of the youth this was a very big feat, but they were desperate enough to get out of their comfort zone and take the chance. These youth were aware of their struggles and recognized that they needed a big change in order to improve their lives. Youth were accepted to the Boundless School based on their psychological readiness to commit to their

education and growth, and willingness to be part of a school community where participation and cooperation is the code of conduct.

*"I was happy and content playing video games but I knew it was not good"*

*"I was in a bad place. Depressed and anxious about not doing school when I knew I could."*

*"I was disappointed I wasn't going. I just couldn't. I had feelings I shouldn't."*

*"I didn't believe it at the time. I didn't think I had social anxiety but I guess I knew I had a fear of people."*

*"I was content but wished I had a purpose in my life."*

*"I was hoping for a life changing thing to come along. Time was slowly ticking by like a time bomb."*

## **Outcomes – How the Boundless School Impacts its Students**

### **How the Boundless School Differs from Other Schools**

The Boundless School differs profoundly from mainstream schools in several ways. It has very small class sizes, a 3:1 teacher/student ratio, intensive 30 - 40 days sessions with no breaks, is located on 600 acres of forest on a river, has a no-phone or electronics policy, and the students live, eat, sleep, learn and experience new and novel outdoor experiences at the school. Students can earn three credits during a 40 - day session and two credits during a 30 - day session.

More recently the Boundless School has had to become more focused on how to help youth with little or no school success. Many of the more recent students are unschooled and a big emphasis and effort has been put on providing them with basic academic scaffolding. The students need to be taught basic learning skills and skills to be a learner.

While the tangible differences are clear, during their interviews the students were asked to describe how *they* felt the Boundless School differed from their past schools or past school experiences. Their responses are listed below and compiled into themes where possible. While it was not suggested, all students reported positive differences only.

Student feedback on how the Boundless School differs from their other schools:

- 1) It's more hands on. (n=5)
- 2) Staff are inspiring and motivating. (n=4)
- 3) Teachers interact with students more and give you explanations to make sure you understand. (n=3)
- 4) Everyone is together and students help each other out, lots of group work. (n=4)
- 5) There is a lot of time spent on things, repetition, opportunity to have extra time. (n=2)
- 6) Teachers have more soul, they laugh. (n=1)
- 7) They teach differently so it's more interesting. (n=1)
- 8) Teachers have a lot of patience. (n=1)
- 9) Teachers actually care. (n=1)
- 10) It's compressed so fast due dates. (n=1)
- 11) Living at the school makes it easier, no travel time. (n=1)
- 12) There is a good structure and routine. (n=1)

13) You get individual help. (n=1)

14) Smaller classes. (n=1)

*“It’s much more hands on, easier for me to learn. We spend time on things, go over it and over it so it sticks. A lot of repetition. It’s good.”*

*“The staff actually care, they try to get to know you, work with you and push you so you will grow.”*

*“They teach differently so it’s more interesting. I have a “child-like wonder” now and want to know more. I actually want to learn. I’m experiencing learning in a different way,”*

The Boundless School management staff members reported that one big difference is that the Boundless School has more flexibility to tailor the curriculum to the interests of the students and teachers. They teach to a group of three instead of 30 which makes a huge difference and allows teachers to be more creative and have the time to give individual attention. The teachers also get a lot of time with the students outside of class so they get to know them on a much deeper level.

Another difference reported by the management staff is that the Boundless School includes physical movement blocks throughout the day ensuring that the students are physically active for two hours a day and learn about the importance of exercise. Daily physical activity is worked into the daily schedule of the Boundless School through walking to classes, doing chores and participating in outdoor recreation activities such as cross-country skiing, trail maintenance, hiking and canoeing. Students also set fitness goals and chose one physical activity to focus on to ensure consistency and to have a routine.

The following quote offers a comprehensive view of one student’s perception of how the Boundless School differs from other schools.

*“It works better for me. The start of high school was Covid and it sucked. The Boundless School was a good change, I just wish it came earlier. It was a really good change. I had built a hatred for school and it clearly shows in my marks. Now I have a better outlook. We sit on couches, not desks, smaller classes. More hands on, which I like. In regular high school they taught the information but not the why or how. Here they teach you that and give you individual help. Group work is great and you really get to know each other so it’s easier to work together in groups. Do a lot of group work at Boundless, work as a team, it makes it easier.”*

## **How the Boundless School Benefitted and Impacted its Students**

Throughout the interviews, the youth, parents, agency staff and the Boundless School management staff provided hundreds of individual and diverse examples of how and why the Boundless School has been beneficial to its students. While the feedback varied, it was consistently positive.

The majority of the qualitative data is compiled for reporting purposes, however individual quotes are included to provide authenticity and richness about how impactful the Boundless School is for its students.

While the benefits reported by all sources were varied and individualized, they generally fit into three main categories; 1) educational benefits 2) social benefits, and 3) personal benefits.

## **Educational Benefits of the Boundless School**

The Boundless School was created to help struggling youth earn high school credits and to give them a better chance at graduating from high school. To graduate from high school in Ontario, each student

needs 30 credits (18 compulsory and 12 electives). In mainstream school, students can earn up to eight credits per school year. At the Boundless School, the students have the opportunity to earn 11 credits per year, if they attend all four sessions, equaling 150 days.

By the end of March 2024, the total number of days the students in this study had attended the Boundless School ranged from 70 to 370 days. During this time, the number of credits they earned ranged from 5 to 27 credits each, with several earning 11 credits during the 2023/2024 school year.

Earning high school credits at the Boundless School is a huge benefit to these students who were struggling to do so and had little hope of graduating from high school. Many had already exhausted multiple alternative educational pathways and available services, making the credits earned at the Boundless School even more significant. The Boundless School Management Staff said that credit accumulation gives the students a renewed sense of hope and this hope shows in their attitudes.

### **Student Feedback – Educational Benefits**

All 15 of the students reported educational benefits from attending the Boundless School. Interestingly all students went beyond mentioning earning credits as a benefit and instead reported other ways the school had benefitted them. Several students reported more than one educational benefit. Below the reported benefits are listed and compiled into themes where possible. Quotes are included to share what the students were really saying.

- 1) Motivated and inspired to do well in school and hope for an educational future. (n=8)

*“I now have hope. Haven’t had this much hope in a long time about my future. When I’m here I can see myself doing things as an adult, instead of just fading away.”*

*“I was never a good student but now I have motivation to finish my assignments and confidence to do it.”*

*“Motivated me to want to attend post-secondary education. I feel more capable to do it now.”*

- 2) Gained confidence in my ability to do schoolwork, academic confidence. (n=6)

*“I’m now more confident as a learner.”*

*“I’m a better student, I gained confidence.”*

- 3) Realized I enjoy school and learning. (n=3)

*“I’m a better student, made me more interested in getting back into another educational setting. Realized I want to be part of a place of learning.”*

*“I look forward to lessons.”*

*“I feel really confident in where I am going, I feel like I’m learning for the love of learning.”*

- 4) Benefitted by gaining knowledge and learning new things. (n=2)

*“Felt I really learned. Not just “doing” the work. Actually really learning.”*



Individual student responses also included that their work ethic improved, they learned how to complete school work independently and they learned how to work as a part of a group.

### **Parent Feedback – Educational Benefits**

Nine of the 11 parents provided examples of how the Boundless School positively impacted their child in an educational way beyond earning high school credits. Responses are listed below with parent quotes.

- 1) My child gained pride and confidence in their academic accomplishments. (n=5)

*“He is proud of his academic accomplishments. He talks about education now.”*

*“Gained academic self-esteem. He had to do the work and was proud of his accomplishments.”  
And It was beyond just getting credits. He wanted to go, he felt connected. He had positive feelings about school for the first time. He was so happy and proud about his school work.”*

*“His schooling is going well. Great grades which have skyrocketed his confidence. Now he has hope for the future.”*

- 2) My child has gained an interest in education or found it to be enjoyable. (n=4)

*“He actually enjoys school and reading books now.”*

*“Her grades improved, and she’s now interested in education.”*

In addition, six parents mentioned that one of the main benefits of the Boundless School for their child was the outdoor and physical aspect of the school.

*“She is doing more activities and is outdoors more now. Not on screen ALL the time.”*

*“Is in much better physical shape which boosted his confidence.”*

*“Without Boundless he never would have found out he has a passion for the outdoors and outdoor education.”*

*“Now that he has been exposed to outdoor activities in a positive way, he loves them, and realizes it.”*

### **Social Benefits of the Boundless School**

One of the main goals of the Boundless School is to support the students to gain the essential social and interpersonal skills needed to continue their education and engage positively in society. Past feedback has shown that the Boundless School has consistently met this goal and students have benefitted significantly in social and interpersonal ways.<sup>34</sup>

According to the Boundless Management Staff and the Clinical Director, the students attending the school during the 2023/24 school year were especially lacking in social skills and social training. They seemed to be behind in social development and needed a reframing or re-learning of very basic social skills. They needed to learn how to be in the world of people again and needed to learn basic skills like how to have a conversation with someone, how to ask questions, and how to make friends. Boundless School staff had to bring things back to the basics and teach and support the students in learning very elementary social and conversational skills.

### **Student Feedback – Social Benefits**

Consistent with past findings, 100% of the youth in this study reported that the Boundless School was a positive social experience for them and provided them new social skills, strategies, and experiences. Examples of how they benefitted socially were offered by the students throughout the interviews and every student mentioned multiple social gains.

The social benefits that the students reported are listed below. Similar responses given by the same student were only counted once. For reporting purposes, the responses are grouped into the common threads.

Student reported Social Benefits.

- 1) Successfully learned how to make friends and build relationships, learned how to meet people, enjoyed friendships with other Boundless School students. (n=12)

*“Learned what it feels like to have a friend”*

*“By the end of my first session I was making friends with people. Could talk about relatable things. I was not uplifting before but now I am.”*

*“I like everyone at Boundless. I like how the staff push you to talk to each other and to different people. They put you in different groups and teams and this was really good for me.”*

- 2) Gained social confidence and became more comfortable talking and being with others. (n=9)

*“At the beginning it was difficult being exposed to people everyday. Became more comfortable. Now it’s not a challenge, but it was.”*

*“Being at Boundless made me realize that I’m not useless. I couldn’t really speak to anyone before I came here. I was afraid of people and I didn’t want to be. Being pushed to talk to people at Boundless rekindled my extroverted self”*

*“Now I’m willing to join in and take part in conversations, more social confidence, more comfortable.”*

*“Really good opportunity to kind of improve yourself. Since I’ve come here, it’s easier to do things at home. Paying for stuff, ordering food. I’m feeling confident.”*

*“I feel defensive outside my house in Toronto. Here I don’t feel this way. I don’t feel scared, I can open up without judgement. I feel good when I’m here.”*

- 3) Became skilled and confident in speaking in front of people. (n=6)

*“I can talk to big groups now. Presentations and skits make you talk.”*

*“I’ve gotten better at public speaking, gotten better at leading a group. I can talk to people more easily in general.”*

- 4) Learned how to have a conversation, learned how to talk to people. (n=6)

- 5) Learned how to be a good team member, gained skills to work with people, learned to care about others and work in a group setting. (n=4)

- 6) Gained leadership skills. (n=3)

*“I benefitted by the social aspect. I was in such a bad spot before. Now I’m a leader of a group.”*

Other benefits mentioned included learning the importance of listening, learning not to overthink what others are thinking about oneself, and working on the tone of voice used in conversations.

### **Parent Feedback – Social Benefits**

All 11 of the responding parents reported that their child had benefitted in a social way from being at the Boundless School. While four of the parents mentioned that their child “*made friends*” at the Boundless School and had seen them during the school breaks, the other eight parents all reported a distinct way that the Boundless School benefitted their child. Comments such as “*comes downstairs now*”, “*no longer hiding*” and “*is more present and engaging*” show just how severely the youth were suffering socially before going to the Boundless School. While these may be little steps, they are positive observable changes noticed and acknowledged by the parents. Quotes below show other examples of social benefits reported by the parents.

*“She is chatting with us now. This is huge. Before she did or said nothing.”*

*“I noticed positive social changes. He is more eager to see people and he initiates family walks.”*

*“He is more socially confident with people he doesn’t know. He can talk to someone in a store now.”*

*“He had no friends before. Now he has made new friends at Boundless and they are the perfect match for him.”*

*“Now she is out there, doing her own things. Since going to Boundless she can leave the house on her own now. She has the ability to socialize with others.”*

The agency staff quotes included:

*“Before Boundless he was not speaking, his anxiety was paralyzing. After his first session at Boundless he told me he had made friends, loved all the people and he was popular.”*

*The Boundless School allowed her to navigate peer dynamics in a positive and supported way”.*

Boundless School Management staff reported:

*“They learned about healthy relationships through staff modelling.”*

*“I think for a lot of them belonging to a community is very different for them and it sparks something in them. They are proud to be part of something.”*

### **Personal Benefits of the Boundless School**

Another main goal of the Boundless School is to help the students learn tools and strategies to navigate their mental health challenges. The school aims to provide the students with a supportive environment away from negative distractions where they can develop self-confidence, work through personal goals and overcome personal barriers.

### **Student Feedback - Personal Benefits**

Thirteen of the fifteen Boundless School students (87%) reported that they benefitted in a personal way from attending the Boundless School. Many students reported multiple benefits and the examples of how they benefitted varied from student to student. Where possible, responses are grouped into common threads and quotes are provided for validity and richness.

Below is a list of the main ways the students felt the Boundless School benefitted them personally.

- 1) Allowed me to enjoy things, felt happiness, gained hope for the future, gained a positive attitude, increased motivation. (n=7)

*"I feel hopeful now. I feel like I can do more things. I feel like things are worth trying."*

*"I feel happy here, which I've never really felt before."*

*"I gained happiness. I just hated regular school and didn't want to go there. Boundless isn't bad, I would never say I wanted to stay in my bed instead."*

- 2) Gained self-confidence, self-esteem, feeling of success. (n=4)

*"I don't feel like my life is a lost cause. I feel successful. It's the environment for me."*

*"Helped me grow a lot and mature, big confidence piece."*

*"I benefitted in many ways, motivation, self-esteem, self-confidence, social skills and personal care a little bit."*

- 3) Helped me learn to be myself and to respect, accept, love, and care for myself. (n=4)

*"I learned to accept myself and love myself."*

*"I can now see a version of the person I want to be. I can see how I want people to see me."*

*"I enjoyed being myself, enjoying the little things."*

*"I used to be really harsh on myself and realized I should treat myself better, as I would others."*

- 4) Taught me about the importance of hygiene and taking care of my body. (n=6).

*"I learned to know when I should take a shower."*

*"I definitely learned to put self-care to the forefront. I need to take care of myself to feel good. I let it slip away."*

*"I now take hygiene seriously. Brushing my teeth makes me feel better. Hygiene has given me confidence."*

### **Parent Feedback – Personal Benefits**

All 11 responding parents reported observing personal gains in their child attending the Boundless School. They offered many examples of the impact the Boundless School had on their children so far, and these examples were compiled into common threads and presented below.

- 1) Observed increased confidence. (n=9)

*"Boundless has helped him build confidence, hope for going to college, excited about college."*

- 2) Observed increased happiness, decreased anxiety and increased ability to control emotions. (n=8)

*"He worked through his emotional issues with the Boundless staff. He is now more skilled and patient at dealing with it."*

*"Her high mood is off the charts."*

*“She found a place to be herself. She now has positive energy and is happy.”*

*“His anxiety and depression went away at Boundless.”*

3) Boundless provided their child with hope for their future. (n=7)

*“Boundless has absolutely given her hope.”*

*“He has hope for his future, he used to be scared. Now he is making plans.”*

4) Boundless helped their child get into a better and healthier routine. (n=7)

*“He’s sticking to a more normal routine now. Waking up, doing chores, keeping a schedule, making money.”*

*“She continues her Boundless schedule. She got a watch and is really strict.”*

*“She comes downstairs more now. Used to only come downstairs in the night. Her schedule is more on track.”*

*“Before, his routine was really bad. Couldn’t sleep, complaining on and off. Sleep full days, sometimes never. After Boundless, his routine was better. “*

Multiple parents also reported that their child gained a more positive attitude from being at the Boundless School and they also felt their children became more physically fit, gained maturity, independence and the importance of self-care.

## **Other Personal Benefits**

### **Physical Activity**

It is commonly known and believed that getting physical exercise or taking part in physical activities is good for your physical health and mental and emotional well being. Research backs this belief and shows that there is a definite association between levels of activity and anxiety and depression, and that lack of activity comes with physical and psychological risks.<sup>35,51</sup> The Boundless School puts an emphasis on daily physical movement and activity for this reason, and have discussions about why exercise is important.

When the students first arrived at the Boundless School, several found the activity level and amount of walking exhausting because it was such a change for them. After a few days, however, these students reported that they got used to it, felt more fit, and enjoyed the activity level.

In agreement with the research, all the students reported feeling better when active.

*“Activity makes me feel better.”*

*“Got fitter, not out of breath. Physically felt better and helps with my mood.”*

*“I like the physical stuff. Gets you moving, gives me energy, I feel better, feel more alive”*

*“Physical activity makes me feel way better, not guilty”*

Eight of the 11 parents reported that their children came home feeling proud about their improved physical fitness and activity level. They mentioned that it boosted their child’s confidence and inspired them to be more active.

*“Got into better physical shape which boosted his confidence.”*

*“Before Boundless, she did zero exercise. Now she is totally fit and proud of it. She was working out in the gym at Boundless.”*

### **The Wilderness Setting**

It is well known that nature-based recreation and spending time in nature is positively associated with improved mental health.<sup>36,37,38,39</sup> The wilderness and remoteness of the Boundless School make it unique and is one of the reasons the school is so successful. The school is not an outdoor education centre and does not claim to offer wilderness therapy. Instead, it offers students a large and beautiful wilderness environment to explore and enjoy together. The students' relationship with nature is woven into the program model and educational curriculum in so far as the students may be unaware of its positive impact on them.

While many students mentioned liking the outdoor aspect of the Boundless School, four students specifically mentioned it as a main benefit of the Boundless School. Three reported that they benefitted by learning new outdoor skills and one said it was a great change to be out of the city and that he loved being in the middle of the forest.

Two parents reported that the wilderness aspect of the school rekindled a love for the outdoors that had been lost.

*“Without Boundless, he would never have found how much he liked the outdoors. He always had a passion for the outdoors but Boundless made him realize he had that passion.”*

### **More Positive Outlook on Therapy or Intervention**

At the Boundless school, “therapy” or “counselling” comes from staff support in the form of mentors. According to the youth, the staff mentors were successful at opening their minds to how others can help them, and that talking about their problems or issues can actually have a positive effect on them. This newfound opinion or outlook on future counselling or support is very positive and could help them in the future.

Nine youth specifically reported that they now have a more positive outlook on therapy and would seek it out if they needed help in their future. The following quotes illustrate their optimistic outlook.

*“Before coming to Boundless, I didn't think I needed help from anyone. Now I learned I do need people and support. I can see myself using the resources around me...and asking my family.”*

*“I would now seek out help. I'd get a therapist. Before I never would have thought to seek help.”*

*“Boundless helped me realize that therapy was something I HAD to do. It's the reason I'm still here. I'd be in a worse place. I've always had an open opinion on therapy but Boundless helped me understand it more. I will self-advocate now.”*

*“I was offered counselling but didn't take it. If I was going downhill again, I would definitely get help.”*

This is a very encouraging outcome and shows the trust and support that Boundless School staff have given the students has changed their outlook on getting support in the future.

## No Phones or Internet

The negative effects of excessive cellphone use and online gaming on children and adolescents mental health is an ever popular topic following the release of Jonathan Haidt's book titled *The Anxious Generation - How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*.<sup>17</sup> While it is well known that adolescents' increased time on their phones and devices is interfering with their social and community connections, Haidt's book is bringing it to the forefront. Youth, like those in the Boundless School who were socially isolated, had no structure in their homes and were not attending school, and are even more susceptible to the negative and addictive effects of phones and online games. In a world where taking a phone away from a teenager is an unrealistic and impractical threat, the Boundless School achieves it and there is no looking back. The students have absolutely no access to their phones for their 30 to 40 day sessions and although they may not realize it, many of the positive feelings they experience at the school are due in part to being phone-free.

Interestingly, not a single student mentioned missing their phone or video games while at the Boundless School. Before coming to Boundless, many of their lives revolved around their devices but once at the Boundless School, they were easily replaced by active and more social activities.

Two students reported that not having their phone was a benefit of the school and several students mentioned that they were on it less between sessions than they had been before coming to the Boundless School.

Six parents also mentioned that one of the main benefits of the Boundless School was that the students were not allowed to have their phones. Unfortunately, however, when they are back home, phones and video games become a problem again.

*"I never imagined seeing my son away from his game and the internet. There is my son before and my son after. After is much better."*

*"One of the best parts is that they have no phones. It takes away the negative."*

*"He struggled with being away from video games but he did it and is now more confident and outgoing."*

*"She is slipping back into old patterns. Her phone is the problem."*

*"Boundless was a break from screen which was good. Released from the grip, but went right back to it."*

The agency staff also felt that the no phone policy was a benefit to the students.

*"Before Boundless he only had video games. Now they have been replaced by friends, games, chores, credits, fun and nature."*

*"I would recommend the Boundless School to kids who aren't going to school because they are just playing video games and on their phones, they can't stop."*

Although the students returned to their phones during the school breaks and would return to them after graduating or leaving the Boundless School, the opportunity for them to be without their phones for an extended time will hopefully have some lasting positive effects.

## The Importance of a Healthy Routine

According to multiple sources, the most striking commonality between the students before they attended the Boundless School was that they lacked structure and a healthy daily routine.

Research suggests that stable routines support adolescents' overall mental health and well-being, while a lack of routines makes them more vulnerable.<sup>40,41</sup> As with other behaviours presented by the Boundless School students, a healthy routine has a reciprocal relationship with mental health disorders. An effective routine can help reduce stress which can lead to better mental health and reduce anxiety. According to Mental Health America, a routine is a tool used to improve mental health by organizing and overwhelming everyday tasks into a pattern that seems easier to accomplish. A healthy routine can also help maintain better sleep patterns and increase physical activity. Routines help people cope with change, improve interpersonal relationships and maintain good hygiene.

Healthy routines are especially important for youth as they help them feel safe, secure and provide stability during a time of change. Routines can help youth cultivate a sense of responsibility and the ability to self-motivate and self-regulate.

One thing that the Boundless School provides the youth throughout each session is a predictable and manageable routine and structure. Moreover, this routine is followed in a community group setting so students can be motivated and supported by others. Starting immediately, the students must learn to adapt to the Boundless School routine to get the most positive impact out of the school. While the routine at the Boundless School may appear to be strict to the students when they first arrive, it is essential for them to follow in order to succeed in their educational and social goals, and for their physical and mental well being. Unlike most other schools and programs, the Boundless School routine does not stop for 30 to 40 days. The students do not have weekends or time off and are therefore given no opportunity to regress from the routine.

When asked what they thought of the routine when they first arrived, five of the students said it was fine and they adjusted easily. The other 10 students reported that the routine was exhausting and hard at first but that they all got used to it quickly.

*“At first I was tired, but after a week I was fine.”*

*“I was exhausted from the routine, but got used to it.”*

In agreement with the research literature, 14 of the 15 youth reported that the routine and structure of the Boundless School was very good for them and made them feel better.

*“The structure was really good for me. I like structure, I just never had it. When I have things to do I feel better, I needed that.”*

*“I didn't like structured school but here you are supported by the teachers and the students. I feel better because of the support. I'm happy that I'm learning. I learned how important it is to have a positive routine.”*

*“I'm better with structured things, gives me direction, otherwise I just fall off.”*

*“Structure makes me productive and makes me do stuff. It's hard but it makes me feel better.”*



*“The routine made me feel better about myself. I was moving, eating better, not as hungry, I was physical.”*

These youth, who had little or no routine or structure before coming to the Boundless School adjusted and adapted quickly to the rigorous routine at the Boundless School. Instead of complaining about the routine they reported liking it and said it made them feel better.

A healthy rigorous routine is what the Boundless School students had been missing in their lives before coming to the Boundless School. Their mental health disorders, family situations and possibly the Covid-19 pandemic had prevented them from maintaining a healthy and stable routine. The schools and programs they attended or tried to attend were unable to give them the necessary structure they needed to positively turn their lives around.

While students enjoyed and thrived with the routine and structure of the Boundless School, the majority had difficulty maintaining their new routines when they returned home between school sessions. The break between sessions was generally one or two weeks in length with a five-month break over the summer. During the shorter breaks, the students reported some success in keeping their routine but in many cases they reverted back to their old habits during the longer summer break. All 15 students reported that they did try to keep up their routine and that they will try to do so again in the future.

*“Structure made me feel better. On my break I wanted to have lunch at 11am instead of 11pm! I got up earlier, went out way more, went downtown and to appointments I had avoided going to.”*

*“I brought the Boundless School routine home with me for 5 days but it was so boring.”*

*“During the big break in the summer, it was bad. I had planned to keep a routine but I was dealing with some bad things. But once I got over them, I started to get the Boundless School routine back”*

*“In the five-month break I did wake up earlier, was more active in general, doing more things. Less addicted to screens. But then I gave myself a break. I tried, but I fell off a bit. “*

*“I tried to have some sort of a routine but ended up to how I was before. Nothing to do. Next time I will try to get a job and do stuff”*

*“I held the routine for 1 to 2 months. Was doing activities, socialized more, energy was higher, good eating habits stuck, went out of the house for day trips, felt more energy. But once summer started, I slept all day and was awake at night again.”*

*“When I went home my routine was better but once I stopped it my old habits returned. I think there will be a lot more improvement though. I want to keep my new good habits, I want it to be continuous and eventually become automatic.”*

While all the students may not have been able to sustain the healthy routine of the Boundless School between sessions, it is very positive that they tried to hold on to it and realized that they struggled to sustain it. It would be incredibly difficult for the students to return home after experiencing such a profoundly different lifestyle at the Boundless School. The fact that they tried to maintain a routine is a good first step.

*“The structured routine really helped him. It provided him with security. I feel badly when he comes home because we have no schedule here and he is trying to keep one.” - parent*

*“The students gain self-awareness, confidence, comfort in their own skin, comfort in navigating a world that isn’t their own, become comfortable being uncomfortable, deep deep appreciation for what Boundless did for them, and what nature did for them. They also really benefited from the structure. Never thought I’d hear that.”*

### **How the Boundless School could be improved.**

During the interviews, students were asked what they would change about the school and parents and Boundless School management staff were asked to suggest ways that the Boundless School could be better.

Only five students provided a suggestion. Two felt the rules were a bit strict and another suggested that the staff should provide a better understanding of the key rules and why they are so important (i.e., community). The other two students would have liked more phone calls home to their family.

Not a single parent had a suggestion for how the school could be improved but instead provided even more positive comments about the schools impact on their child.

The Boundless School management staff suggested the following concrete ideas for how the school could be improved. They acknowledged, however, that the sessions are already very full so adding more activities or content would be challenging.

- provide the students with more opportunities to learn real-life skills such as TED talks, more community service projects, and life skills such as how to change a tire, basic plumbing, cooking, sewing etc.
- include an outdoor education course in every session as they are good for group work, physical activity, and the outdoor experiences.
- To ensure that students are keen, enthusiastic and not being sheltered, students should only be allowed to attend 4 or 5 Boundless School sessions in a row and then take a break before coming back.
- Need a transitional piece to help support the students after they leave the Boundless School so they don’t fall back into bad habits.
- There should be mandatory sessions about educational and vocational opportunities after they graduate from high school. All students should be aware of the opportunities available and supported in applying for apprenticeships, college, university, jobs etc.

### **Summary and Discussion**

It is clear from this report that the Boundless School has been effective in providing a supportive and engaging educational program for youth with comorbid mental health disorders and learning disabilities. Before attending the Boundless School, the students in this study had little hope for educational success and were isolated, inactive and suffering from their multiple challenges. The rigorous routine and model of the Boundless School transformed them into confident students who were completing high school

credits, making friends and feeling confident about their abilities. These results are very positive especially knowing that the students had tried to attend other alternative schools and programs with little success. They came to the Boundless School as a last resort or an educational life-line and it was effective in supporting them academically, socially and personally.

It is not surprising that local services and schools struggled to meet the students' needs when you look at how intertwined and comorbid their challenges were (see Figure 3). The youth needed a place to go that could support them in many diverse ways at the same time. By the Boundless School being a live-in school, the students were able to get away from many of their stressors and focus on their own well-being. It allowed them to reframe their perspective on life and work on the basic skills they needed to have positive social experiences, succeed in school, and take care of themselves. The Boundless School is a kind and creative environment that became a safe place for the students to work on themselves as students and become engaging members of a group. During the 30 to 40 day sessions, the staff were able to spend time with students in class, at mealtimes, during chores, in outdoor activities and during downtime. This gave way to deeper connections that allowed the staff to support, motivate and challenge the students to be the best they could be. The structure of the school did not allow for the maladaptive behaviours and habits of the students to continue and the group aspect enabled the students to navigate social situations and develop positive peer relationships. The students gained self-confidence, pride in their accomplishments, happiness and hope for their futures. In addition, the students all earned high school credits so they can graduate from high school and avoid the negative consequences of dropping out.

In summary, the Boundless School's location, challenging routine and no-phone policy is what these youth needed to focus on their own well-being, their social skills and their educational success. The results of this report showcase a model of education that works for youth struggling to complete high school while living with severe mental illness.

*"Boundless has been inspirational and magical. It has done what pills and doctors can't do. Nothing else helped." - parent*

*"Genuinely, I could say that Boundless saved his life." - parent*

*"I know it's the best thing for her right now. Nothing else compares." - parent*

*"Boundless is the perfect fit for her. I tried to be good and push her but it backfired. Tried other programs and schools but they haven't worked." - parent*

*"He was half a person, now he is whole." - parent*

## **Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Programs**

While the Boundless School would be difficult to replicate for many reasons, it is believed that lessons can be learned and insights gained from the success of the school. Aspects of the Boundless School that may be realistically duplicated could be embedded into already existing programs or the findings could motivate or enlighten someone to embark on developing a similar program. All recommendations are based on the findings of this research study.

Firstly, it is important for all organizations and programs to adapt to the changing needs in society and follow the current societal issues to ensure effective programming is being delivered to those who need it

most. If organizations do not adapt to current problems and needs, program funding is not being used to its full potential and could prolong or exacerbate the suffering of those who require the services and programs. The Boundless School has seamlessly and preemptively responded to the growing need for supportive education for adolescents with comorbid mental health disorders. The organization is not afraid to try new things and has been creating and re-creating unique and effective programming for multiple populations since 1984. Other organizations need to do the same and be open to constantly re-working programming and curriculum to meet current needs.

The following recommendations are intended to help the Boundless School continue to provide the most effective programming it can for students with severe and comorbid mental health disorders. The recommendations are also intended to help others learn about what works for this vulnerable and ever increasing population of youth.

Essential components that the Boundless School should continue to implement:

- No phone policy
- 30 - 40 day sessions or longer
- Continue to allow students to attend multiple sessions
- Rigorous routine and structure with very few exemptions
- Wilderness setting with outdoor activities
- Community-based live-in school (students need to be away from family life)
- Physical movement as part of daily routine
- Community chores and responsibilities
- Hands-on and experiential education
- Small teacher to student ratio
- Comfortable and casual physical surroundings
- Continue to focus on basic learning skills, social skills and life skills
- Continue to support students through staff mentors and not become overly therapeutic. Want to continue to guide and support students in a comfortable way

The following additional recommendations are things that could be added or adapted to the Boundless School programming to make the Boundless School even more effective. All recommendations would require more time and money and therefore may be unrealistic for the current program.

- More time during the school session for learning additional life skills. Learning additional skills will increase the student's confidence and be useful to them in the future.
- Need to focus on "Beyond Boundless" during the school sessions to ensure every student is aware of their educational and vocational opportunities. All students need to be supported to write their resume, research and apply for jobs and post-secondary education and to seek other opportunities and interests. This is part of the Ministry of Education's *Creating Pathways to Success* program. Discussions around what to expect in other schools, college, or apprentice programs would also be useful so students understand that their educational experience at the Boundless School is unique and heavily supported by the small teacher:student ratio.
- Before each break and especially before the summer break, staff and students need to have discussions about how to keep their healthy routines, and problem solve around potential issues or problems that may arise. These sessions are important to keep the positive effects of the

Boundless School and help the students feel equipped and supported as they go home to an environment that might not be as stable and encouraging as the Boundless School.

- A transitional piece needs to be added to the existing program to support the students once they leave the Boundless School. Jumping back into the real world after being supported and protected by the Boundless School could be a shock to some students and longer-term contact and mentoring could be effective in helping them maintain the positive benefits they gained from the school. In many cases the families do not have the capacity or experience to support their children in the way they need.

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