

2026

RISE **STEM**

Transitions to Post-Secondary Pathways in Etobicoke

Community Report



TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Research Team.....	04
Introduction.....	06
Methods	09
Family, Peer and Community Support.....	16
Community Involvement and Benefits.....	18
Real World Experiences and Career Development.....	20
Barriers and Challenges to Post-Secondary.....	21
Recommendations	27
Conclusions	36
References.....	39



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Our Project Funders



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

We acknowledge that the land on which this report was prepared is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. This land is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge all Treaty peoples, including those who came here as settlers, those who migrated in this generation or generations past, and those who were brought here involuntarily, particularly through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. We pay tribute to ancestors of African descent.

About the Research Team

Our research team gathered a mix of experiences and fresh perspectives on the journey to post-secondary education. This project was led by the Rise In STEM team, comprising Irene Duah-Kessie, Candaice Newell, and Teshyla Bailey, in collaboration with our Peer Researchers Team: Devaughn Henry-Ebanks, Kemi Oyapero, Oheneba Gyekye, and Marvis Awoyeni. They joined the project as grade 11 and 12 high school students and played a key role in shaping the research questions, collecting stories, and sharing insights. As the project grew, so did they. They navigated the transition into post-secondary education and now draw on their lived experiences to inform and strengthen their work. Together, the team completed community-based research training and contributed to every stage of the project. This included planning the research, gathering data, analyzing results, and sharing findings with the community.

Lastly, we would like to thank Chanelle Abankwah and Jerome Duah-Kessie for their exceptional work on the design of this report and Maria Pinerros for her guidance and advice.

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Rise In STEM conducted a community-based research project in collaboration with Etobicoke high school students to better understand how they prepare for and transition into post-secondary education. The project also aimed to build students' research skills by engaging them in the design and implementation of the research process.

The first year of the two-year initiative began with research training, a literature review, research design, and data collection. In the second year, students continued their research training while engaging in data analysis and knowledge mobilization activities. The completed project included the development of this report, youth wellness experiences, community presentations, a dedicated resource hub, and the Transitions to Post-Secondary Pathways Bootcamp. Together, these outputs aim to ensure that youth in Etobicoke and across the Greater Toronto Area have access to practical tools, resources, and information to confidently navigate their post-secondary journeys.

OUR RESEARCH PROCESS

Mixed methods were used to gather insights into how students in Etobicoke prepare for the transition to post-secondary education. Following a review of existing literature, the research team conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews with both high school and post-secondary students.

The interviews explored students' lived experiences with academic counselling, perceptions of systemic barriers, and family expectations. In addition, online surveys distributed through school networks, community organizations, and social media outreach were used to capture broader student perspectives. In total, 22 students completed the surveys, and 13 students participated in interviews, representing high school and post-secondary students between the ages of 15 and 21.

Key Findings

Strong Interest in STEM Pathways

Many students expressed early interest in STEM careers such as engineering, life sciences, and mathematics. However, despite this enthusiasm, Black students remain underrepresented in STEM fields in post-secondary education, highlighting the need for accessible and culturally responsive STEM programs that support long-term participation.

Family, Peer and Community Supports Matter Most

Students rely heavily on family members, peers, and community networks for guidance when making post-secondary decisions. These relationships provide emotional support, academic advice, and insights into navigating program choices and the transition into higher education.

Community Engagement Builds Skills and Confidence

Participation in community programs, volunteering, and extracurricular activities helps students develop leadership skills, networks, and a strong sense of belonging. These experiences also support academic growth and help students feel more prepared for post-secondary environments.

Real-World Experiences Strengthen Career Readiness

Hands-on opportunities such as meaningful employment, volunteering, mentorship, and leadership roles allow students to gain practical skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These experiences help youth explore career pathways and strengthen their confidence when pursuing post-secondary opportunities.

Students Face Multiple Barriers During the Transition

Students identified several challenges when preparing for post-secondary education, including limited access to information about applications and financial aid (especially for newcomer students), difficulty adjusting to academic environments, mental health pressures, and additional barriers related to immigration status and pandemic-related disruptions.

Key Recommendations

Expand inclusive extracurricular and community-based opportunities.

Schools and community organizations should collaborate to offer a wider range of accessible opportunities that allow students to explore interests beyond the classroom. For instance, intramural sports, arts, leadership initiatives, trades exploration, entrepreneurship programs, and STEM workshops. Hybrid delivery models and centralized digital hubs can help students easily discover programs, connect with mentors, and participate regardless of location or prior experience.

Strengthen support systems for newcomer students.

Newcomer youth would benefit from coordinated, wraparound support programs that integrate language assistance, academic tutoring, cultural orientation, mental health resources, and peer mentorship to help them navigate the school system and feel a strong sense of belonging. Financial aid and scholarship eligibility criteria should be expanded to allow international students without permanent residency to also qualify for support.

Expand mentorship, entrepreneurship, and career development opportunities.

Mentorship programs, hands-on learning experiences, and paid placements can help youth develop practical skills, explore career interests, and build professional networks. Programs should prioritize culturally responsive mentorship and opportunities that reflect the diverse backgrounds of students.

Enhance post-secondary preparation and guidance.

Schools and community organizations should provide structured support such as mentorship, workshops, and bootcamps focused on study skills, financial literacy, career exploration, and navigating applications. Strengthening school-community partnerships and digital tools can also help students access resources and make informed decisions about their future pathways.

Future Steps

At Rise In STEM, we will continue mobilizing these findings to strengthen support for youth transitioning to post-secondary pathways, which includes:

- **Developing a digital Resource Hub** featuring practical toolkits, checklists, and guides on topics such as applying to post-secondary programs, preparing for first year, connecting with professors, managing imposter syndrome, recovering from academic setbacks, and more.
- **Launching a Transition to Post-Secondary Bootcamp** that provides tailored support in academic readiness, career and communication skills, mentorship, and wellness strategies to help students feel confident as they begin their post-secondary journeys.
- **Advocating for expanded support and new programming**, including financial support for newcomer students, entrepreneurship opportunities, and diverse STEM initiatives.
- **Expanding our research initiative** by continuing to engage high school students as collaborators and peer researchers to deepen our understanding of youth experiences and needs.





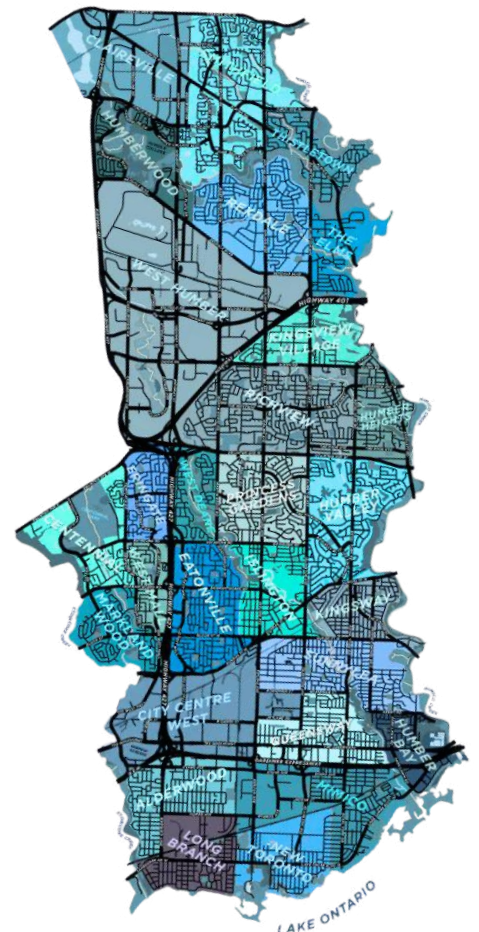
Introduction

Introduction

Education plays a vital role in shaping young minds for the future. It influences adolescents' opportunities to pursue viable careers, earn stable incomes, and, in turn, live healthy lives. When students pursue post-secondary education, they are more likely to make informed decisions, secure employment with benefits such as health coverage and retirement plans beyond what the government provides, and achieve long-term financial security.

Completing post-secondary education is crucial to obtaining well-paying and secure employment now more than ever. However, many Black youth and families continue to face significant challenges in reaching this goal compared to other communities. Our team conducted a literature review by examining both grey and academic research on Black youth and education. We also explored changes in government programs and initiatives that address systemic barriers within the education system.

In Canada, research indicates that Black youth have lower post-secondary enrolment rates compared to other groups (Bonikowska, Handler, & Frenette, 2024). Barriers to post-secondary education can arise from many factors, including experiences of discrimination, zero-tolerance disciplinary policies (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021; Rankin et al., 2013), limited access to resources, opportunities, and motivation (Ahmed-Aden, 2024), disparities in suspension and expulsion rates (James & Turner, 2017; Glogowski & Rakodd, 2019; TDSB, 2017), and limited exposure through family and community networks (Gallagher-Mackay, 2023). These insights shaped the foundation of our research questions, and we aim to contribute to the conversation by sharing what we learned from young people and sparking dialogue on how to better support students throughout their post-secondary journeys.

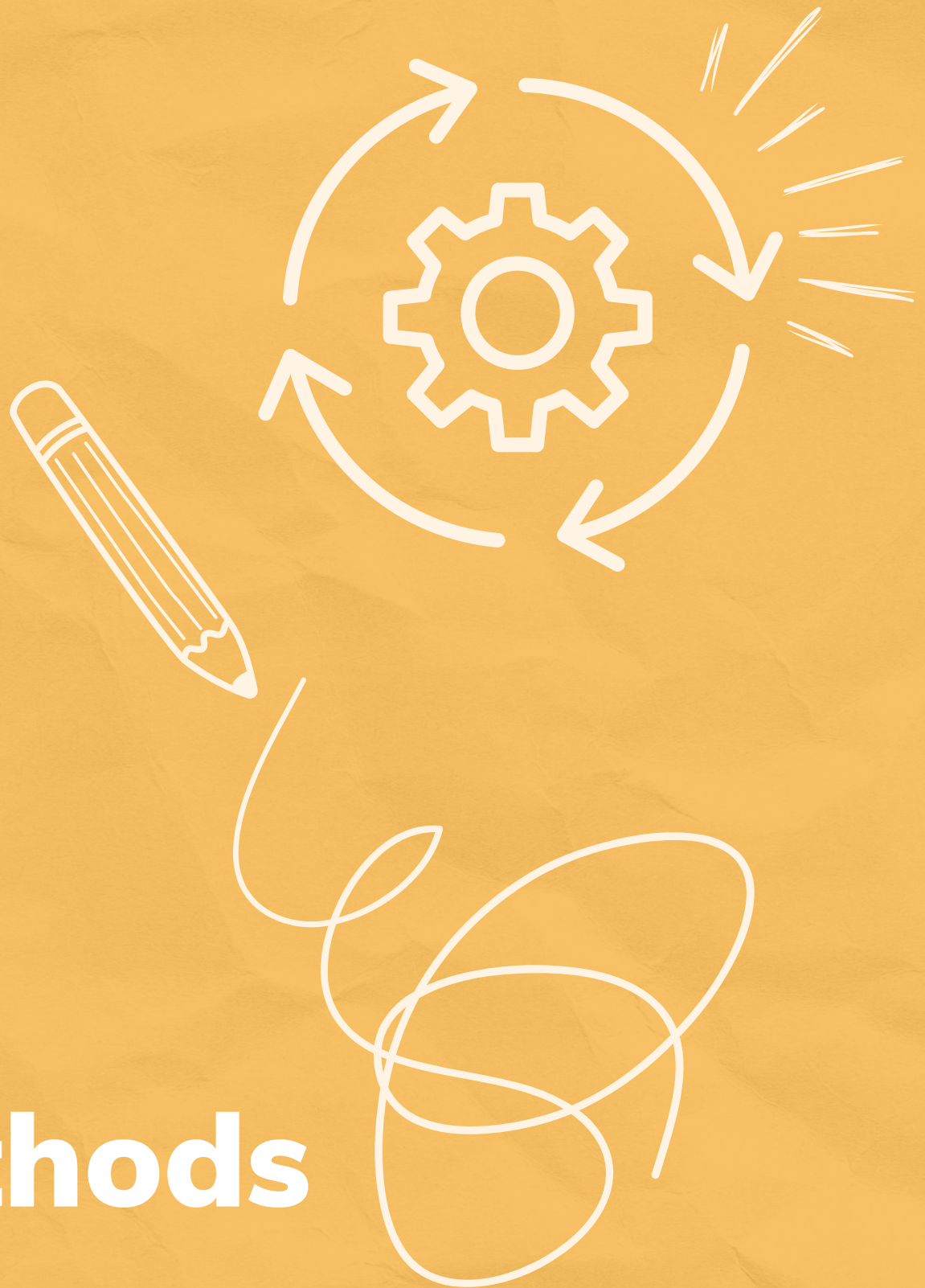


Introduction



In this project, we take a closer look at the experiences of adolescents in the Etobicoke community as they prepare to navigate the transition to post-secondary education and life after high school, including the barriers they face when planning for college, university, or other training programs, and the factors that help or hinder their decision-making along the way. We also explored community resources that support skill-building and career development. Based on these findings, we developed key recommendations aimed at better supporting youth in Etobicoke and other communities across Canada.





Methods

Our Research Methods

After conducting a review of existing literature, our research team implemented the data collection phases of the project, consisting of surveys and semi-structured interviews with high school and post-secondary students in Etobicoke. These research methods and processes were reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office in March 2024.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were developed collaboratively by the research team and geared toward understanding the lived realities of Black youth navigating post-secondary readiness. Questions were designed to explore participants' experiences with academic counseling, systemic barriers, family expectations, and personal aspirations.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 30 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were then transcribed using NVivo. Narrative analysis using Condens helped the team identify patterns, major challenges, and key themes commonly experienced by students within the education system.





Research Methods

Surveys

We conducted two surveys to understand post-secondary transition experiences, as well as the overall academic challenges and barriers students faced in their schools.

The first survey was launched in Spring 2024 and was open to all Grade 11 and post-secondary students living in Etobicoke. It was administered using SurveyMonkey. Before participating, students provided informed consent and completed eligibility questions. The survey included a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended short-answer questions, and participants could skip questions or return to them later if needed.

Our second survey launched in Spring 2025 and focused on the post-secondary transition experiences of Black students across the GTA. It was open to college and university students at any stage of their studies who identified as Black, African, or Caribbean. Following data collection, responses were initially analyzed in Excel and then imported into Condens for thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the Rise In STEM research team, school networks, word of mouth, community-based organizations, and social-media campaigns. Visual posters were distributed in person and online, detailing eligibility information and ways to participate. Phone interviews were conducted to pre-screen participants, confirm eligibility, and ensure understanding of the consent protocols.

To expand our reach for the bootcamp survey, our research team created a database of Black-led student groups across colleges and universities in the GTA. We connected with these groups through email outreach, social media campaigns, word of mouth, and the Rise In STEM network to share the survey and encourage participation.



Research Methods

INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS

Thirteen students participated in 30-minute interviews. All interview participants self-identified as Black or South Asian and were either high school students, recent graduates, or first-year post-secondary students in Ontario. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 20 years old, represented a mix of gender identities and school backgrounds, and had an average age of 17.7 years. Of the interview participants, 11 identified as Black and two as South Asian. Nine participants were currently in high school, and four were in post-secondary programs. Approximately 38.46% of interview participants worked part-time (30 hours per week or less). When looking at immigration status, 30.77% were born in Canada, 61.54% identified as landed immigrants or permanent residents, and 7.69% identified as refugees.

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 22 participants completed the survey, including 17 high school students and five post-secondary students, with ages ranging from 16 to 21 years. All survey participants self-identified as Black, South Asian, or Southeast Asian and lived in Ontario. Among high school survey respondents, 82% identified as Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, North American), 12% as South Asian (e.g., Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan), and 6% preferred not to disclose their racial identity.

The average age of high school respondents was 17 years. For immigration status, 18.75% were born in Canada, 56.25% identified as landed immigrants or permanent residents, 6.25% as refugees, 6.25% as international students on a student visa, and 12.5% selected other or preferred not to disclose. Approximately 31.54% of high school respondents reported working 30 hours or less per week at a part-time job.

Among post-secondary survey respondents, 40% identified as Black, 40% as South Asian, and 20% as Southeast Asian (e.g., Singaporean, Vietnamese, Thai). The average age of post-secondary respondents was 19 years. Sixty percent were born in Canada, 20% identified as landed immigrants or permanent residents, and 20% selected other. One-fifth of post-secondary respondents reported working part-time for 30 or fewer hours per week.



Our Findings

Across our interviews and surveys, we recognized four key themes in students' experiences in preparing for post-secondary pathways, along with the common barriers and challenges. Based on these findings and community engagement activities, we identified six key recommendations that educators, youth workers, and parents can build on to better support students in Etobicoke.

FINDING #1

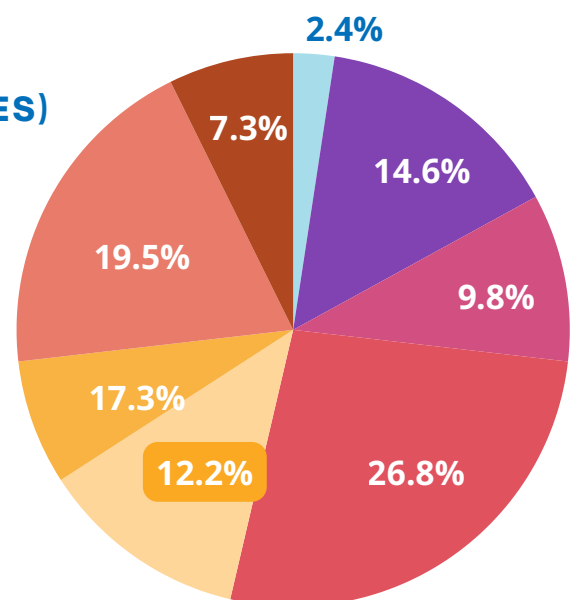
Understanding Students Interests and Motivations

Our survey results highlight that offering strong STEM-focused programming for Black high school students is crucial. Sixty percent of respondents expressed interest in pursuing STEM careers, including engineering, life sciences, and the physical and mathematical sciences. In contrast, **40%** of students expressed interest in non-STEM pathways, which often have more established supports such as school clubs, arts and business programs, and community initiatives that require fewer resources and are more readily accessible to youth. However, despite this strong early interest, Black students remain significantly underrepresented in STEM pathways.

According to Obsidi, only **16%** of post-secondary degrees earned by Black students in Canada were in STEM fields, compared to **23%** among all visible-minority groups. This gap highlights the need for accessible, culturally responsive STEM programs that can nurture early enthusiasm in STEM and help translate it into long-term academic achievement and career attainment.

PROGRAMS THAT STUDENTS PURSUE - POSTSECONDARY STUDIES (6 RESPONSES)

- Other
- Physical And Mathematics
- Arts
- Life Sciences
- Humanities
- Social Sciences
- Engineering
- Business

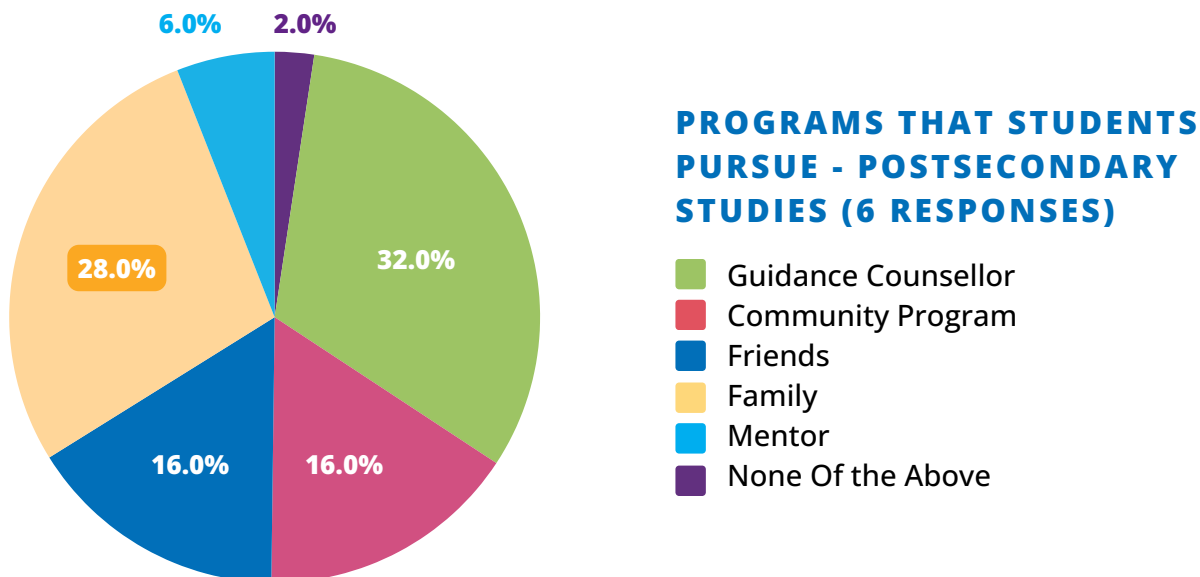


FINDING #2

Family, Peer, and Community Support

We examined the availability of community support and the factors that affect the educational pathways and decision-making for students. The majority of students indicated that family served as a crucial support system where educational choices were influenced by their mothers or other relatives. Family members influence educational choices, such as providing financial support, offering career advice, or serving as role models who have navigated similar academic paths. Our survey reveals that over **60%** of students believe a family member significantly influenced their choices about post-secondary education. The relationship with family members who have undergone post-secondary education provided younger students with insight into elements of academic life, like choosing programs and adjusting to unfamiliar learning settings. For instance, one participant stated,

“Having people in the community and my siblings who have already reached that level and are already in school helps...Family support offers emotional stability and motivation, establishing a solid basis for students to feel secure and motivated.”



FINDING #2 CON'T

Family, Peer, and Community Support

In addition to family, peers have a significant impact on the academic choices and general well-being of students. Peers offer essential social and academic support in large and frequently overburdened educational institutions. It's imperative to foster strong relationships with peers in a program, especially in faculties with larger class sizes, to limit feelings of isolation and establish a sense of community. The transition to post-secondary school is routinely easier for students who actively participate with their classmates in study groups, extracurricular activities, or mentorship programs.

Complementing the roles of family and peers, community resources and programming also provide essential support to students navigating the transition to post-secondary education. Many students rely on informal networks to learn about programs and career paths.

A student shared, **"I've been searching online, but I also have a few uncles and friends who have either attended or are currently in post-secondary programs who assist me with details about engineering programs and such."** After-school activities, mentoring programs, and faith-based groups also play a key role in student development.

Our study found that students who used community assistance programs, such as mentorship projects and local support centers, felt better equipped to enter post-secondary school. Amid rising academic demands, social media has become a vital component of these support systems. **Social media plays a significant role in shaping a student's educational experiences by providing access to academic resources, mentorship opportunities, and peer support.** Platforms like LinkedIn, YouTube, and student groups help students explore career options, receive advice from professionals, and connect with peers experiencing similar transitions. Social media also shapes perceptions of success and motivation by showcasing academic achievements and study habits. When schools, families, and friends offer consistent support, students are more likely to thrive both academically and personally, highlighting the importance of collaborative support systems in influencing their educational experiences.

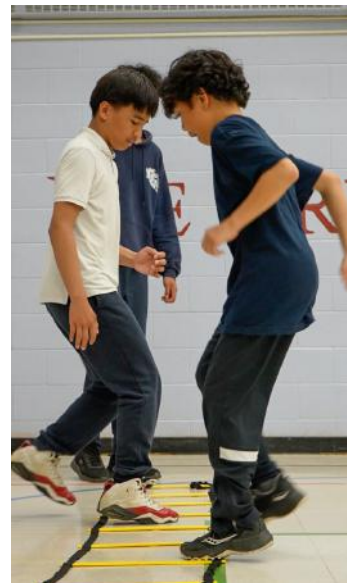
FINDING #3

Community Involvement & Benefits

Survey data collected by Rise In STEM (2024) show that **80%** of post-secondary respondents were actively involved in school or community activities. From volunteering to attending weekly programming, youth engage in their communities to develop practical skills, build valuable networks, and access resources that play a role in shaping their future. Community involvement may include **volunteering with local organizations, participating in after-school programs**, attending workshops, and joining school clubs and leadership initiatives, which foster a sense of belonging while providing both academic and emotional support.

Youth interviewed by Rise In STEM reflected on the meaningful impact of community-based programs in preparing for life in post-secondary school. One participant shared, **"I'm part of the athletics club and the choir. Outside of school, I volunteer at a middle school after-school program and a STEM program at the community centre"** (March 28, 2024). Another recalled their experience with the Black Youth Urban Alliance, stating, **"They had workshops to prepare for post-secondary. They brought in guest speakers and shared real-life experiences"** (July 30, 2024). A third participant reflected on their earlier career aspirations, explaining, **"I used to volunteer at a senior home when I wanted to be a doctor. It gave me healthcare experience and a sense of family — just a bunch of Black kids trying to figure out university and jobs together"** (July 29, 2024). These accounts illustrate how various forms of engagement can empower young people with the tools, networks, and experiences that support their goals.

"It helped me prepare for post-secondary by introducing me to new settings and improving my teamwork skills and confidence by learning to communicate and work well with others. These experiences also helped me improve in my academia as well because whilst I helped others learn new material, it was also a refresher for me"



FINDING #3

Community Involvement & Benefits

The value of community involvement extends beyond academic support to also enhancing interpersonal skills, employability, and confidence. A 2021 Statistics Canada report found that youth aged 15 to 30 who participated in community-based activities reported higher levels of life satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging compared to less-involved peers. Rise In STEM (2024) further reported that **50%** of surveyed youth shared that community program staff helped with school applications, program exploration, or grade improvement. One participant described a transformation in their teamwork skills: **“Volunteering taught me to work in groups. I normally prefer working alone, but now I know how to talk to others and collaborate”** (March 28, 2024). Others emphasized the employment advantages: **“It really helped my resume. A lot of employers commented on it, and it helped me get a job at the STEM program I volunteered with”** (July 29, 2024). Another youth shared how comprehensive the support was: **“[Community Centre Staff] helped me with my resume... they've helped me with different aspects and different views of life... and they've connected me to people who I never, ever thought I would be connected to”** (July 29, 2024).



“Many of those times I had been put on the spotlight making me face many faces, be it new or old, and that was a very challenging experience. But doing that made my confidence grow exponentially.”



FINDING #4

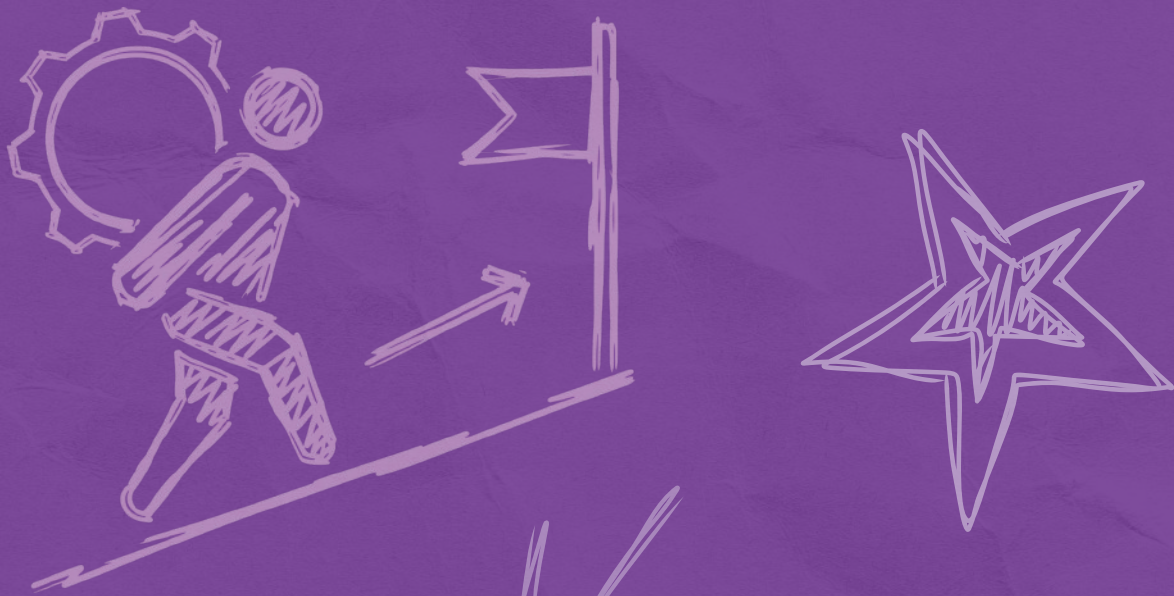
Real World Experience & Career Development

Beyond volunteering and community-based programming, youth respondents consistently mentioned the importance of real-world training opportunities. Training opportunities help students develop both technical and soft skills, like effective communication, leadership, and problem-solving. One student shared, **“Teaching kids coding helps me solidify my own knowledge. It’s made me a better communicator”** (April 12, 2024). Others, like a senior leader at a leadership camp, shared how the experience built transferable skills vital for post-secondary success: **“I learned communication, problem-solving, and teamwork—skills I know I’ll need in university”** (August 22, 2024). Many youth expressed a desire for job roles that combine skill development with guidance.

One explained, **“I’d like a job where I can learn skills that would help me no matter where I go** — like customer service, working with money, or learning how to fill out a resume” (August 22, 2024). The benefits of hands-on learning extend to job readiness and confidence. One participant explained, **“During most of my job interviews, I talk a lot about places I’ve volunteered. I think it convinces employers I can make a real impact”** (July 29, 2024). Another reflected on the value of school-based STEM programs: “We had STEM experts come to our school, and those workshops helped us focus on our interests... a lot of other schools didn’t have that. It made a real difference” (April 12, 2024). These opportunities opened the door to mentorship, helping youth align their experiences with future academic and career pathways.

“ As a senior leader at leadership camp, I honed my communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, crucial for success in university setting. Overall, my involvement in extracurricular activities has provided me with a diverse skill set and experiences that will contribute to my success in higher education







Barriers and Challenges

Barriers & Challenges

Students transitioning into post-secondary education face a variety of systemic and personal challenges. Four key areas emerged from our data: access to information, adjusting to school, mental health, and the compounded effects of the pandemic and immigration-related issues.



Access to Information and Financial Help



Adjusting to School Culture



Mental Health Challenges



Pandemic and Immigration Challenges

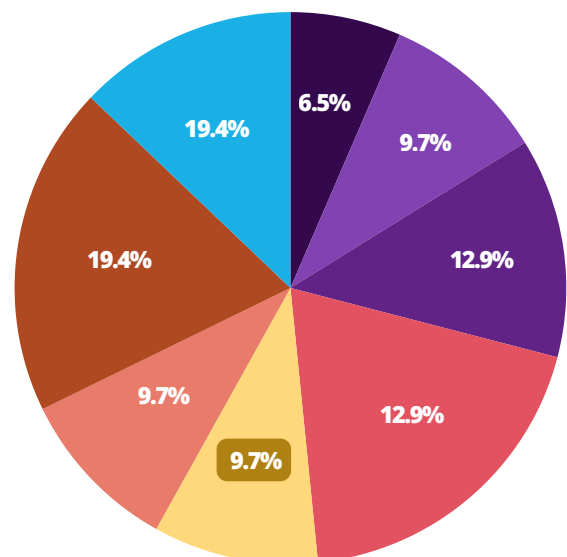
BARRIERS & CHALLENGES # 1

Access to Information and Financial Help

A significant barrier identified by many students was the lack of accessible, relevant information to guide their transition into post-secondary education. While some students were able to gather information from school guidance counsellors or personal internet searches, this support was inconsistent.

SYSTEMIC AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES STUDENTS FACE

- Access To Technology or Internet
- Mental Health
- Navigating University And College
- Financial Limitations
- Lack of Support
- Navigating University And college
- School and Program Applications
- Confused About What To Do
- No Access to Mentors



As one student shared, **“Either I got information from my school’s guidance counsellor or on my own through an internet search”** (Interview 1). However, even when guidance counsellors were available, students reported difficulty securing appointments or found the information provided unhelpful.

One participant expressed the need for broader community support: **“I need more resources, like at the community centre, to help with resumes and things in that field.”** Beyond general guidance, financial aid emerged as another major concern. Many students struggled to navigate scholarships, bursaries, and grants, with over **50%** reporting a lack of educational guidance and **62.5%** of students facing financial limitations. Only **18.75%** of students reported receiving help from community program staff, highlighting an opportunity for these programs to increase their presence and support in students’ academic planning.

“Having people in the community and my siblings who have already reached that level are already in school...Family support offers emotional stability and motivation, establishing a solid basis for students to feel secure and motivated.”

BARRIERS & CHALLENGES #2

Adjusting to School

The process of adjusting to the academic and social environment of post-secondary education was another critical challenge. According to survey results, **60%** of students felt uncertain about what steps to take due to inadequate preparatory support. Many experienced difficulty with program applications and lacked access to consistent academic guidance. Common adjustment barriers included managing schoolwork, maintaining part-time jobs, and forming social connections.



One student described the impact of ineffective instruction: **“The teacher was very difficult to understand, and the course was already hard. I didn’t feel comfortable approaching the teacher”** (Interview 6). These challenges often compounded students’ stress, especially when navigating large, impersonal classrooms. While **93.75%** of students reported involvement in extracurricular or school programs, suggesting a willingness to engage, there is a clear need for expanded access to tutoring, peer mentorship, and counselling services to support a smoother transition.

“Feeling like everyone around me has their life figured out and is involved in numerous activities can be quite overwhelming at times. It seems like everyone is juggling multiple responsibilities effortlessly, while I might be struggling to find my footing or balance my own commitments”



BARRIERS & CHALLENGES # 3

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health concerns were consistently raised across our surveys and interviews, often intertwined with academic pressures and a lack of support systems. Survey data show **56.25%** were uncertain about their post-secondary pathways, and **37.5%** lacked access to a mentor, which all contributed to heightened stress levels.

One student reflected on the psychological toll of underperformance, and after experiencing a decline in her grades, she developed a negative self-image. “Because of the lack of introduction to the school and not really getting comfortable with the environment, it confused and gave me a mental breakdown... I would beat myself up over lab assignments” (Interview 12). This recollection underscores the importance of providing students with someone to talk to, including a mentor, counsellor, or peer support group, to promote emotional resilience. The survey findings display a need for more on-campus employment opportunities, wellness programs, and safe spaces where students can access emotional and academic support.

Pandemic and Immigration Challenges

Students who immigrated to Canada or began school during the COVID-19 pandemic reported feeling especially vulnerable and isolated. Many described experiencing culture shock, social disconnection, and fear around the application process. One student shared, “The immigration experience made me feel depressed. Not knowing anything, or anyone, was the main reason why” (Interview 5). The pandemic compounded these challenges, as students were separated into cohorts and required to wear masks, making it even harder to build relationships. “It was hard to meet new people,” another said. Immigration status added further complications. Some students expressed fear that not having permanent residency would hinder their ability to apply to schools or scholarships. “I couldn’t apply for any scholarships because they required me to be a permanent resident or Canadian citizen” (Interview 5). These barriers demonstrate the urgent need for inclusive policies and tailored support for newcomer services.

“Starting nursing...during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, poor mental health, difficulty balancing school work and difficulty in discipline and motivation”





Knowledge Sharing and Recommendations

Knowledge Sharing and Recommendations

We developed these recommendations based on our interviews, survey results, and knowledge-sharing activities with youth and community members. As a result of mental health and wellness being a central theme from our findings, we launched a three-part wellness series for young people to explore new self-care practices, including fitness, culinary arts, yoga classes, and to share ideas about the support they need. We also curated a resource list highlighting post-secondary and mental health services and offered one-on-one guidance to navigate these supports.

In addition, we presented our findings and ideas for a Transitions to Post-Secondary Pathways Bootcamp to the members of the TCDSB parent council and the North Etobicoke Youth Leads council to gather additional feedback and explore opportunities for future collaborations to advance this work.

Grounded in youth voices and community insights, below are the key recommendations and areas of focus for developing resources that can help ease the transition to post-secondary pathways.



Expand Access to Extracurricular Opportunities



Increase Access to Community-Based Programs



Strengthen Support for Newcomer Students



Pandemic and Immigration Challenges



Additional Post-Secondary Preparation



Mentorship and Career Prep

Expand Access to Extracurricular Opportunities

THE CHALLENGES:

- Many students entering high school may feel unprepared or lack the confidence to join clubs or sports
- Some extracurricular options often prioritise high skill or prior experience, which can limit participation
- Information through posters and announcements can feel overwhelming or inaccessible
- School counsellors may lack the capacity to guide students toward external opportunities
- Students may lack awareness of community programs, and those with multiple interests in STEM, arts, and trades may not see clear pathways to explore these opportunities

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS

- Offer a diverse range of extracurricular and community-based opportunities (ex. sports, arts, leadership, trades, entrepreneurship, STEM)
- Partner with social workers, Graduation Coaches, or established community organizations to deliver inclusive programming
- Design programs that prioritize exploration, connections, and skill building over performance
- Develop a centralized digital hub within school platforms, where students can easily discover opportunities, receive personalized recommendations, and track participation
- Provide hybrid access models through recorded talks, webinars, and virtual mentorship, social media reels and highlights, as well as in-person workshops led by industry professionals

Expanding access to these opportunities creates low-barrier entry points for students at all skill levels. This can increase participation among students who may feel disconnected or unsure where to start, while broadening career exposure and creating more equitable pathways to explore interests beyond the standard curriculum.



RECOMMENDATION CONT:

Many students entering high school face barriers to joining sports teams or clubs due to limited skills or a lack of confidence, which discourages their participation. To combat the barrier to entry, schools should expand extracurricular activities beyond competitive teams by offering inclusive programs such as intramural sports, student-led clubs, volunteer opportunities, and skill-building workshops. Institutions can also increase access to programs in areas like trades, entrepreneurship, STEM, and the arts. Additionally, some students shared that school counsellors often lack the capacity to guide students toward these resources effectively. For example, the University of Toronto Schools (UTS) offers a wide range of extracurricular programs, including intramural sports, arts, and leadership initiatives, encouraging student involvement across interests and skill levels. **The Outward Bound program is also a strong model, offering hands-on learning experiences in leadership, teamwork, and career development through outdoor challenges and community-based projects.**

Locally, a hybrid platform could help students discover similar programs, track their progress, and receive guidance from mentors. In-person sessions could offer workshops led by professionals, while virtual sessions could include recorded talks and interactive webinars to increase accessibility and engagement. Schools should also focus on creating a community for students who aren't currently involved by offering digital platforms where extracurricular opportunities are promoted and tailored to their interests. A similar model would help students who feel disconnected or overwhelmed by providing clearer pathways to get involved through posters and announcements.

“I would love to see more opportunities that provide real-world skills and training for students that can transition into the work force.”



“

“I would create programs for the younger children to participate in so that they can socialize more. Also, I would create a garden where every week all teenagers and children can come , talk about their experiences throughout the week and then just socialize.”

”



Strengthen Support for Newcomer Students

Newcomer students often struggle to adjust to the Canadian culture and its school system, facing challenges related to language, academics, and their emotional well-being. While existing services offer fragmented support, a more integrated approach is needed. A centralized program could provide support through language, academic tutoring, mental health resources, and cultural orientation in one cohesive model.

The Welcome Centre in Toronto provides an example, offering mentorship, career counselling, and educational support for immigrant youth. Building on this, a comprehensive program could include peer mentorship from students who've already navigated the system, offering relatable guidance and reducing isolation. This wraparound approach would save time, reduce confusion, and provide holistic support for newcomers.

“I would create programs for the younger children to participate in so that they can socialize more. Also, I would create a garden where every week all teenagers and children can come , talk about their experiences throughout the week and then just socialize.”



THE CHALLENGES:

- Newcomer students face language, academic, and cultural adjustment barriers
- Emotional well-being and isolation can impact school engagement
- Existing supports are often fragmented and difficult to navigate
- Families may struggle to understand the school system and available resources

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS

- Develop a centralized, wraparound support program for youth that integrates:
 - Language support
 - Academic tutoring
 - Mental health resources
 - Cultural orientation
- Introduce structured peer mentorship from students who have successfully navigated the system
- Provide family-facing resources to clarify pathways, expectations, and supports

This matters because a coordinated, wraparound model reduces confusion, strengthens belonging, and ensures newcomer students receive holistic support as they transition into the school system.



Expanded Mentorship, Entrepreneurship, Career Preparation Supports for Youth

SSchools and community organizations should offer targeted programs that build foundational business skills through hands-on learning and mentorship. The UK's Young Enterprise program allows students to build real businesses and gain experience in marketing, finance, and leadership.

A similar model could be adopted locally with a focus on digital business development, including coding, app creation, and e-commerce. A virtual platform could allow students to network, share ideas, attend workshops, and pitch their ventures, making entrepreneurship education more inclusive and accessible for all.

THE CHALLENGES: 🔍

- Many students, particularly newcomers, racialized youth, and those from low-income backgrounds, lack access to entrepreneurship training and mentorship opportunities
- Students may have limited exposure to career pathways that combine entrepreneurship, technology, and creative industries
- Access to mentorship and career guidance is uneven, leaving many youth without the networks necessary to explore opportunities and navigate post-secondary pathways
- Financial barriers and limited work experience can make it difficult for youth to gain the skills and confidence for future careers



“I would create programs for the younger children to participate in so that they can socialize more. Also, I would create a garden where every week all teenagers and children can come , talk about their experiences throughout the week and then just socialize.”

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS

- Develop entrepreneurship and innovation programs that provide hands-on learning in areas such as digital business development, coding, app creation, and e-commerce
- Introduce mentorship programs that connect youth with professionals and mentors who reflect their backgrounds and can provide both academic guidance and career exposure
- Expand experiential learning and paid placements through partnerships with schools, nonprofits, and corporations to build practical skills and reduce financial barriers
- Embed life skills and career readiness programming within existing youth services, including resume workshops, financial literacy training, networking opportunities, and career exploration activities
- Create platforms and spaces where students can collaborate, attend workshops, share ideas, and pitch projects to help build confidence and entrepreneurial skills

Expanding access to mentorship, entrepreneurship, and experiential learning opportunities helps youth build practical skills, strengthen professional networks, and gain a clearer understanding of potential career pathways.



Mentorship can also connect youth to resources and networks beyond their immediate circles, strengthening both short and long-term academic and career goals. Research by Smith et al. (2020) shows that mentorship programs significantly improve outcomes when mentors reflect participants' backgrounds and provide both academic and emotional support. One interviewee suggested that schools offer free mentoring and tutoring to students who lack access outside school (Research Participant, July 30, 2024). Another noted, "My mentor could support me academically by showing me programs that could help me better understand my chosen career" (August 22, 2024). These insights highlight the importance of mentorship that offers both academic guidance and real-world exposure.

Further research shows that paid work-integrated learning improves youth engagement and skill development and reduces financial strain during key transitions (Campbell & Kwakye, 2021). Programs such as the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals' VFX, Tech 2.0, and E-Trades initiatives demonstrate the impact of combining technical training with paid placements and mentorship. Implementing these evidence-informed approaches can create more supportive transitions for youth in North Etobicoke and similar communities.

"They could provide assistance by actively answering my questions about university and support me by being open to brainstorming sessions and conversations."



"Help me with gaining experience and or taking part in opportunities to help me in my future and to find jobs."

Enhance Post-Secondary Preparation and Guidance

THE CHALLENGES:

- Many first-generation and underserved students struggle with the transition from high school to post-secondary education due to limited academic preparation, lack of guidance, and financial barriers.
- Not all students have access to family or community networks that can help them navigate post-secondary decisions and expectations.
- Students often feel unprepared for the academic, social, and career demands of post-secondary education.
- Traditional orientation programs focus on general campus information but lack practical skills development such as study strategies, financial literacy, and career exploration.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS

- Develop mentorship and counseling that support students with academic planning, career exploration, and navigating post-secondary pathways.
- Offer skill-focused workshops that prepare students for post-secondary life, including study strategies, time management, financial literacy, networking, and career development.
- Implement early student engagement initiatives in grade 8 and provide academic transition support for students entering grade 9
- Strengthen school-community partnerships with universities, nonprofits, and businesses to provide tutoring, mentorship, scholarships, and co-op opportunities.
- Use digital platforms to expand access to mentorship, career exploration resources, and virtual sessions with industry professionals.



Preparation programs, academic and community partnerships help students better understand post-secondary expectations and equip them with the practical skills needed to navigate the transition with greater clarity and stability.

Our research shows that family, peer, and community support play a major role in easing the post-secondary transition; however, not all students have access to these networks. Over 60% of students surveyed said family members who have pursued post-secondary education influenced their decisions, highlighting the need for structured school and community support systems. Many students transitioning to post-secondary school feel unprepared for the academic, social, and career challenges ahead. One student mentioned

“Getting a more detailed guide on programs in university instead of having to make a decision on what to do for the rest of your life when you're 16!

For instance, at my school we just had a career workshop which was understandably rushed because there are so many options to choose from and it left me and many others just more confused.”



Early academic and social preparation is key, particularly in large institutions where students may feel isolated. Many students emphasized the importance of strong peer connections and guidance before entering post-secondary, suggesting that mentorship and workshops could help bridge this gap

One solution is mentorship and counseling programs. For example, McMaster University's "Academic Success Program" and "Gear Up For Mac" helps students build skills like time management and study strategies before their first year, boosting their confidence and performance. Similar free or low-cost workshops could include mock lectures, career sessions, and financial literacy training.

One solution is mentorship and counselling programs. For instance, McMaster University's "Academic Success Program" and "Gear Up For Mac" help students develop skills such as time management and study strategies before their first year, thereby boosting their confidence and performance. Similar free or low-cost workshops could include mock lectures, career sessions, and financial literacy training. Traditional orientation programs often focus on general campus information, which leaves gaps in practical skills. Institutions should expand access to inclusive, skill-focused bootcamps that target areas such as study strategies, time management, financial literacy, career exploration, and networking. These programs present students with a structured way to develop essential skills before or during their first semester.

Stronger school-community partnerships can provide added support. Programs like Helping Youth Pursue Education (HYPE) provide a range of individualized support to prepare for post-secondary education by reducing as many barriers as possible, offering on-campus learning experiences, and maintaining relationships among mentors, faculty, staff, and youth. Lastly, digital tools can expand access. The UK's FutureMe platform connects students to professionals and offers virtual mentorship, improving career confidence. A similar local platform could include student-run forums and monthly webinars with industry experts. By combining mentorship, workshops, community partnerships, and digital tools, we can better support students during the transition to post-secondary education and improve their chances of success.

“More skills for life and woke outside of school , more resources to help me be successful in school, guidance counsellors who actually care and push me to my full potential”

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the study that may impact the generalizability of the findings. Some students started the survey but did not complete it, which may have resulted in partially captured perspectives. The study also had a small sample size and only reflects the perspectives from select schools in the Etobicoke area, which may not represent the experiences of all students in other regions or educational settings.



Conclusion



Conclusion

The findings of this paper reveal that while STEM and post-secondary education are widely desired among young people, the support available for Black, newcomer, and first-generation students often falls short of being accessible, relatable, and sustainable. Consistent with our literature review, students from underserved communities continue to face barriers such as financial constraints, limited access to information, difficulties adjusting to a new academic environment, mental health challenges, and immigration-related obstacles. These barriers can leave students entering post-secondary pathways without the preparation or guidance to help them succeed, often navigating these transitions with greater uncertainty compared to their counterparts.

Our recommendations reinforce what students and community leaders have long emphasized: the need for stronger collaboration between schools and community organizations, more diverse opportunities for career exploration, expanded mentorship with real-world experiences, and stronger financial support to help students successfully navigate their post-secondary journeys. Ultimately, meaningful youth engagement should lay the foundation that empowers students to see themselves as capable learners and to feel a genuine sense of belonging in post-secondary institutions.



CONCLUSION CONT:

Future work at Rise In STEM will focus on mobilizing these findings to strengthen support for youth transitioning to post-secondary, including developing a digital Resource Hub featuring practical toolkits, checklists, and guides on topics such as applying to post-secondary programs, preparing for first year, connecting with professors, managing imposter syndrome, recovering from academic setbacks, and more. We will also launch a Transition to Post-Secondary Bootcamp that provides tailored support in academic readiness, personal finance, career and communication skills, mentorship, and wellness strategies to help students who may feel unprepared or uncertain feel confident and engaged as they begin their post-secondary journeys. In addition, Rise In STEM will continue to advocate for expanded support, including financial aid for newcomer students, entrepreneurship opportunities, and diverse STEM initiatives, while strengthening collaboration with schools and community partners. We also aim to continue expanding this research initiative by engaging high school students as collaborators and peer researchers to deepen our understanding of the experiences and needs of young people.

We know cross-sector collaboration requires time, intentional engagement, and sustained funding. However, it can create a more seamless support system to help youth throughout the different stages of their educational journeys.

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Appendix

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants Interviewed (n=13)

Participant Characteristics	Percentage/Average
Age	17.7 (range:16-21)
Ethnicity/Race	
Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, North American)	84.62%
South Asian (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka)	15.38%
Level of Study	
High School	69.23%
Post-Secondary	30.76%
Job Status	
Part time	38.46%
Student	61.54%
Immigration Status	
Born in Canada	30.77%
Landed immigrant/ permanent resident	61.54%
Refugee	7.69%

Appendix

Table 2: Characteristics of Survey Participants: High School (N=17)

Participant Characteristics	Percentage/Average
Age	17 (range: 16-18)
Ethnicity/Race	
Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, North American)	87.50%
South Asian (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka)	12.50%
Level of High School	
Grade 11	50.00%
Grade 12	50.00%
Job Status	
Part time	31.25%
Student	68.75%%
Immigration Status	
Born in Canada	18.75%
Landed immigrant/ permanent resident	56.25%
Refugee	6.25%
Student visa	6.25%
Prefer not to answer	6.25%

Appendix

Table 3: Characteristics of Survey Participants: Post Secondary (N=5)

Participant Characteristics	Percentage/Average
Age	19 (range: 18-21)
Ethnicity/Race	
Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, North American)	40.00%
South Asian (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka)	40.00%
South East Asian (e.g. Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand))	20.00%
Level of Post-Secondary School	
Year 1	83.33%
Year 2	0.00%
Year 3	16.67%
Job Status	
Part time	20.00%
Student	80.00%
Immigration Status	
Born in Canada	60.00%
Landed immigrant/ permanent resident	20.00%
Prefer not to answer/Other	20.00%

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