FROM SCHOOL TO SUCCESS PIPELINE PROJECT
Factors that Impact the Experiences Disenfranchised Black
Youth have with Education, Employment and Training in
Ontario
Final Report
June 2025

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From School to Success Pipeline Project:
Factors that Impact the Experiences Disenfranchised Black Youth have with Education, Employment and Training in Ontario, Final Report

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How to cite this report: Adamu, P. (2025). Factors that Impact the Experiences Disenfranchised Black Youth have with Education, Employment and Training in Ontario. Toronto: From School to Success Pipeline Project, TAIBU Community Health Centre.

African Ancestral Acknowledgement

We are all Treaty people. Many have come here as settlers, immigrants, newcomers in this generation or generations past. I would like to also acknowledge African people that have been stolen from their land and forcibly transplanted in Turtle Island as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade. Therefore, I honour and pay tribute to the ancestors of African Origin and Descent.

Land Acknowledgements

As members of the Collective are situated in both the cities of Toronto and Hamilton, we have included land acknowledgements for both places.

Toronto
The City of Toronto is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Hamilton
The City of Hamilton is situated upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We further acknowledge that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Today, the City of Hamilton is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island (North America) and we recognize that we must do more to learn about the rich history of this land so that we can better understand our roles as residents, neighbours, partners and caretakers.

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About the Authors

Dr. Patience Adamu is a dynamic leader and researcher dedicated to advancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across communities and organizations. With a Ph.D. in Policy Studies from Toronto Metropolitan University, her expertise spans community engagement, program evaluation, and strategic partnerships. Dr. Adamu has over a decade of experience leading impactful programs such as the community benefits initiative and equity-driven strategies at the University of Toronto. Her academic and professional journeys are underpinned by a commitment to empowering historically underserved communities, having contributed to groundbreaking research on Black entrepreneurship, women in trades, and having served on as Chair of the Rexdale Community Health Centre, co-chair of the ASE Community Foundation for Black Canadians with Disabilities and as vice chair for the Viola Desmond Justice Institute.

TAIBU Community Health Centre is a community-driven organization, located in Malvern, serving the Greater Toronto Area's Black-identifying communities. TAIBU offers Black-identifying clients from throughout the Greater Toronto Area access to primary care, health promotion and disease prevention programs in a culturally affirming environment. It is this culturally affirming environment that uniquely positions TAIBU to conduct this research. TAIBU is engaged in systems change in all of its programming. This involves addressing the root causes of social issues that affect the populations that we serve. TAIBU's position as a Black-serving community health centre supports its stated mandate to support the whole person through targeting all social determinants of health (income, education, food security, housing, child development, social inclusion, working conditions, affordable health care and structural conflict).

Terminology

Anti-Black Racism	Anti-Black racism is a socio-cultural force and reality that defines the historical experience of Black community in Canada. It manifests in individual, institutional and systemic forms. It informs the everyday interactions Black individuals face and engage in with institutions, authorities, as well as with individuals.
Collective	A group of organizations supporting TAIBU Community Health Centre's From School to Success Pipeline Project. At project launch members included: Black Creek CHC, Hamilton Urban Core CHC, TAIBU CHC, Women's Health in Women's Hands CHC, Young Diplomats, and the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals.
Disenfranchised Black Youth	We use the term **disenfranchised Black youth** to refer to Black individuals aged 18-24 who are systematically denied full access to rights, opportunities, and resources that are typically available to others in society. The disenfranchisement is inclusive of (but not limited to): ● Political disenfranchisement ● Economic disenfranchisement ● Social disenfranchisement ● Cultural and emotional disenfranchisement Ironically, Black youth are often caught at the intersection of the oppression from a dominant anti-Black racism regime but also the demands of its victims who happen to be other generations of Black community members. This is often the case when parents, adults and elders seek to shield them from the adverse impacts of anti-Black racism and emphasize their cultural protections.
NEET	In socio-economic research, the term NEET stands for Not in Education, Employment or Training. It refers to individuals who are not currently enrolled in school, not working, and not participating in any job training programs. This term is employed in research and policy by organizations like the OECD, World Bank, and ILO to monitor youth engagement and labour market health. The NEET category is used to identify youth at risk of long-term social and economic exclusion. It captures a group that may be disconnected from key systems that support economic stability and personal development. While we are familiar with and are aligned with many criticisms of this term, we also feel there is utility in better understanding how to support individuals experiencing NEET status by being able to learn about them through the available literature.
Steering Committee	The From School to Success Pipeline (FSSP) Project Youth Steering Committee consists of Black Youth who were recruited as active participants for engagement, planning, implementation, and evaluation purposes related to this system change initiative. The membership of the Youth Steering Committee consists of Black youth, ages 18 to 30 living in the GTHA who are currently or in the past faced challenges graduating school and finding meaningful employment. Members were expected to: Represent themselves and speak to their experience(s) with NEET experience and share the common goal of wanting to help design solutions to address barriers faced by Black youth in graduating and finishing meaningful employment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Project Overview and Background

The From School to Success Pipeline (FSSP) is a five-year research initiative led by TAIBU Community Health Centre, in collaboration with key partners across Ontario. This project's name is devised from the term school to prison pipeline, referring to the school system's tendency to exclude and expel Black students, pushing them from the classroom to the courtroom over the course of their childhoods. The project focused on understanding and disrupting the structural factors that contribute to NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status among Black youth aged 18–24 in Ontario.

The FSSP project proposal indicates that more than 80,000 youth, the majority Black and racialized youth, are not engaged with Education, Employment and Training systems. NEET is not just an individual problem of being left out of the labour market with limited employment prospects, NEET status is also an issue for a system whose major resource is the services and intelligence of its people. NEET status is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes-- economically, it often leads to poverty, long-term or even intergenerational worklessness, and 'wage scarring,' where even after securing employment, former NEET youth earn less than their peers; physiologically, it is linked to poor physical and mental health, high rates of substance addiction, and increased mortality (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017).

This Final Report is a highly collaborative summary of peer-reviewed academic literature, disenfranchised Black youth experiences, Black caregiver experiences and insights, and practitioner perspectives on how to intervene in a system that is leaving disenfranchised Black youth behind. The report ends with a policy discussion and set of recommendations that comes directly from what we heard in the five diverse communities of Black families we spoke to throughout our five-year study.

Goals of the Project:
- Develop alternative models to support Black youth excluded from traditional employment and education systems.
- Build youth capacity to navigate institutions and support systems.
- Enable institutions and systems including health and social service agencies to understand the true barriers faced by the Black youth through dispelling myths and stigma and working together to bring about changes in areas of access, service delivery, evaluation of service outcomes, etc.

This initiative is grounded in TAIBU's **Model of Black Health and Wellbeing**, which guides all programming through three strategic pillars: **Prevention**, **Restoration**, and **Advancement**. These pillars served as the organizing framework for this project and this report:

- **Prevention**: Proactively addressing mental health stigma and barriers to care through leadership training and outreach.
- **Restoration**: Supporting Black men's healing journeys through navigation, peer support, and culturally safe interventions.
- **Advancement**: Mobilizing knowledge, developing an evidence-informed model, and strengthening Black-led mental health systems.

2. Methodology and Research Design

The full report was written in three sections to align with the TAIBU CHC Model of Black Health and Wellbeing and leveraged Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yasso's Critical Race Methodology of Counter-Storytelling to centre disenfranchised Black youth and their caregivers as re-envisioners of their lived experiences in education, employment and training.

This research investigates the effectiveness of targeted interventions aimed at dismantling systemic barriers that inhibit access to success, defined as broadly as possible. The study employs a multi-site pilot program design allowing for comparative evaluation of different approaches across settings. The rationale for this design is grounded in an understanding that the systemic inequalities in Ontario are complex, intersectional, and context-specific; therefore, no single intervention can address all challenges. Instead, multiple complementary pilots are tested to determine which combinations can produce the most meaningful outcomes.

Methods Used:
- Literature reviews
- Focus groups with youth and caregivers
- Photovoice studies
- Pilot intervention evaluations
- Community validation sessions

Key Collaborators:
Led by TAIBU CHC, in collaboration with Black Creek CHC, Hamilton Urban Core CHC, Rexdale CHC, Women's Health in Women's Hands CHC, Young Diplomats, and the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals.

3. Prevention, Restoration, and Advancement

Prevention Phase Highlights:

It is difficult to measure the success of preventative interventions as there are many contributing factors as well as a diversity of ways that disenfranchisement is showing up for Black youth in Ontario. To connect the real experiences of Black youth in Ontario, to the conclusions and

recommendations that were emerging from the literature we: (i) conducted a focus group to better understand the challenges that led to disenfranchised Black Youth experiencing NEET status, (ii) ran a short in-school intervention for Black children at risk of dropping out, called *The Life Experience Project*, (iii) gathered insights from an ongoing prevention program called *The Plug Program*, and (iv) incorporated the reflections of parents and caregivers who spoke to us about the experiences of their Black children in Ontario.

- Prevention programs like the Life Experience Project and PLUG reduced risks by affirming identity and addressing school discipline.
    - Risk factors for NEET status include poverty, gender (Black boys), immigration status, and mental health challenges.
    - Life Experience Project increased mental health literacy and connected Black boys with affirming peer networks.
    - The PLUG Project reduced suspensions/expulsions and improved access to mental health diagnoses and supports.
    - Caregivers called for structured transition programs, culturally affirming school relationships, and Saturday caregiver hubs.

<u>Restoration Phase Highlights:</u>

Building trust in institutions and supporting the self-worth of disenfranchised Black youth requires more than theory—it demands practical tools and systems-level understanding. To ground the literature in the realities faced by Black youth in Ontario, we: (i) reviewed research on how youth rebuild trust and self-esteem after system failure, (ii) introduced a Systems Map that traces how funding flows—and fails—across Ontario's youth-serving landscape, and (iii) evaluated three programs designed to help Black youth reconnect with their communities, re-enter the labour market, and reimagine their futures.

- Restoration programs (e.g., CEE Essentials, Photovoice) helped build trust and self-esteem through culturally affirming spaces.
    - Photovoice revealed that precarious employment negatively impacts mental health, housing, and food security.
    - CEE Essentials showed 85% retention and increased confidence among disengaged youth.

<u>Advancement Phase Highlights:</u>

The future of work is uncertain, and for Disenfranchised Black Youth, it has rarely been stable to begin with. As Pichette et al. (2019) note, "gone are the days when a high school diploma, college certificate or a bachelor's degree could set workers on a course for a job with a single employer

until retirement" (p.3). For Black youth, survival in today's labour market requires more than credentials—it requires recession-proof skills and an unshakable sense of self. Too often, programming focuses only on short-term employment outcomes, overlooking the need for long-term advancement. In this section, we call for a shift: from short-term fixes to future-building. Advancement must be rooted in programming that is youth-centered, Black-focused, and responsive—programs that are culturally grounded, advocate for young people, accommodate their lived realities, and provide the wraparound support needed to stay the course.

- Advancement initiatives (NexGen Builders, Hair Braiding & Barbershop SE) created sustainable skill-building and employment pipelines.
  - NexGen Builders (TCBN) integrated Black youth into the trades via mentorship, apprenticeships, and wraparound support.
  - The Hair Braiding and Barbershop Social Enterprise equipped Black youth with technical, identity-based, and entrepreneurial skills.

4. Policy Discussion & Recommendations

General Reflections

- Improving economic outcomes for Black youth requires empowering change at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels.
- Community Health Centres (CHCs) are well-positioned to lead this work through their holistic understanding of social determinants of health.
- Disenfranchised Black Youth (DBY) often lack a safe and welcoming place to return to when life plans are disrupted.

Systemic Gaps Identified:

- Youth face exclusion across health, education, justice, and training systems.
- Francophone, disabled, and immigrant Black youth are especially isolated from services.

Recommendations:

1. Sustain and scale successful grassroots interventions (e.g., PLUG, Her L.I.F.E., NexGen).
2. Invest in Black-led, youth-centered spaces that provide holistic support for youth and caregivers.
3. Institutionalize anti-Black racism training with accountability mechanisms.
4. Build pipelines for long-term advancement, not just short-term employment.

Table 1. FSSP Recommendations Summary

	Prevention	Restoration	Advancement
For Youth	Exposure Programs for Critical Transitions	Expanded Social Enterprise Program	Long-term Check-In Program run by Ministry of Education
For Caregivers	Saturday Programs		Access to Social Enterprise Program

Recommendations for Prevention

Youth-Focused:
- Establish Black-led, community-based transition programs for DBY moving from Grade 8 to 9 and Grade 11 to 12.
- Incorporate mentorship, job-shadowing, and campus visits to help youth feel supported and exposed to opportunity.
- Ensure these programs are run by culturally affirming organizations like TAIBU to reinforce a social safety net for youth.

Caregiver-Focused:
- Launch weekly Saturday drop-in programs for Black caregivers to access resources, peer support, and system navigation tools.
- These programs should focus on building caregivers' empowerment, knowledge, and confidence in school-family dynamics.

Recommendations for Restoration

Youth & Young Adults:
- Expand Social Enterprise programs (e.g., hair braiding, barbershop) to include new trades (like sewing, video editing, and auto mechanics.)
- Reinstate vocational education (e.g., Home Economics, Woodshop, Auto Shop) in secondary schools to provide practical, career-aligned skills.

Recommendations for Advancement

Caregiver Cohorts:
- Offer skill-building cohorts for caregivers in a safe, Black-led space to enhance their resilience in the labour market and better support their children.

System-Level Intervention:
- Implement a 10-year follow-up program where every Black student is contacted twice a year from age 14 to 24 by a system navigator.
- Provide each student with a dedicated contact (phone/email) to offer guidance and referrals when life disruptions occur.

Youth Needs Addressed:
- Ensure Black youth have someone to reach out to when faced with academic failure, job loss, or personal crises.
- Support long-term navigation between ages 14 and 24, a critical developmental window where lack of support leads to long-term disengagement.

INTRODUCTION

The From School to Success Pipeline ("FSSP") project represents a deliberate, community centred effort to develop a positive pathway to Education, Employment and Training Opportunities for disenfranchised Black youth. It is rooted in a wellbeing concept defined broadly and holistically, and includes physical, emotional, social and spiritual health dimensions.

According to some studies 11% of youth in Canada are not engaged with Education, Employment and Training with a much higher percentage experiencing NEET status in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas (Bourbeau & Pelletier, 2019). A large majority of these youth are from racialized and marginalized communities. We also know that Black youth are disproportionately impacted by suspensions and expulsions in schools. The Toronto District School Board (2020) reports that although Black students account for only 11% of the student population, they accounted for 36% of the suspensions in 2016, 34% 2017-28 and 33% in 2018-2019.

Black youth are also impacted by various social determinants of health including poverty, adverse childhood experiences (more likely to have interfaced with the Child Welfare System), lack of adequate support services, undiagnosed or unsupported mental health challenges and anti-Black racism. In fact, according to a 2015 U.S. study, Black students in grade 8 are 55% less likely to be classified with a learning disability in comparison with their White counterparts (Aviles, 2019). Thus, they are less likely to benefit from the system-level support available for students with disabilities including grants for caregivers, dedicated in-class support and other accommodations that help families to navigate other social determinants.

Due to these challenges and barriers, Black students disengage with various systems and institutions such as education, training and employment support services. In many cases, after remaining disengaged and invisible, they appear at the wrong time and at the wrong space; usually the criminal justice system.

The FSSP Project worked with disenfranchised Black youth to design a pathway and a systems change intervention model that, if implemented, will prevent the disengagement of the youth from systems and institutions, and will foster culturally affirming support systems.

The primary objectives of the project include:

- To develop a **pathway and model of support** for Black youth who have not been served through traditional pathways and employment programs. (usually referred to as '*high risk youth', 'hard to engage youth', 'disengaged youth*').
- To develop **a model of capacity building** for youth to be able to engage with and navigate institutions and support systems.
- To enable **institutions and systems to** understand the true barriers faced by the Black youth and work together to bring about changes in areas of access, service delivery, evaluation of service outcomes etc

The project deliverables are:
- **Training and Capacity Building Modules** for Disenfranchised Black Youth (DBY) to assist them in their path towards employment
- **Strategy and Framework for Career Pathway** for DBY
- **Service Delivery Framework** when supporting DBY (for Community Based Agencies)
- **Model for Parental/Caregiver Support** with DBY
- **Upstream and Prevention** for Black Youth at risk of Not engaged with Education, Employment and Training (NEET)

The project implementation was led by TAIBU CHC in collaboration with four (4) other Community Health Centres (Black Creek, Hamilton Urban Core, Rexdale and Women's Health in Women's Hands) in the GTHA and a youth focused community organization, referred to as the Collaborative, throughout this report. Community Health Centres are an important part of how this study of disenfranchised Black youth outcomes are different from others. Community Health Centres provide inter-disciplinary and comprehensive health and social services programs and services to all age groups, adhere to the Alliance for Healthier Communities model of health and wellbeing (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Model of Health and Wellbeing.

Some of the principles such as health equity and social justice, population needs-based, grounded in community development, anti-oppressive and culturally affirming practice place CHCs in an advantageous position to respond to emerging community needs. Unlike youth-centered organizations that often have a time limit on their services to community members (i.e. 18-24 or 16-29), because of their offering of primary health care CHCs have an open-door, come-one-come-all approach that grants them access to "hard to reach" people like refugee and Francophone populations.

All of the Community Health Centres participating in the FSSP initiative have strong relationships with communities of African descent including youth. Women's Health in Women's Hands and TAIBU CHC have unique and specific mandates to serve women of colour and the Black community across the GTA respectively. Black Creek, Rexdale and Hamilton Urban Core's majority clientele are from Black communities due to their location and geographical catchment areas.

All of the CHCs offer programs and services that support Black youth. For instance, Rexdale has been providing the Pathways to Education program supporting Black youth navigate the education system. TAIBU and Rexdale collaborate on the PLUG project addressing the disproportionate impact of suspension and expulsions in schools for Black students in the Rexdale and Scarborough neighborhoods. Women's Health in Women's Hands implements the networking Mentorship program for young Black women. All the CHCs are also part of the collaboration of the IMARA Generation project led by TAIBU in developing a Black youth centered and peer led mental health mentorship network and capacity building program. Hamilton Urban Core CHC also provides specific programs for the Black communities in Hamilton including the Substance Abuse Program for African Canadian and Caribbean Youth (SAPACCY) – a culturally affirming mental health and addictions support for Black youth aged 14 – 29 and their parents. Rexdale and TAIBU CHC are also part of the expansion of this program.

This report is written in three sections to align with the TAIBU CHC Model of Black Health and Wellbeing (see Figure 1) and will leverage the Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso's (2002) critical race methodology of counter-storytelling as an analytical framework to ensure (i) race and racism in all aspects of the research process; (ii) racial majority dominant archetypes and stereotypes are consistently challenged by the voices of the communities highlighted in this report, and (iii) interdisciplinary sources are used to document the persistence of racism from those harmed or suffering as a result of its legacy.

Section I will cover the literature, findings and recommendations pertaining to programs, tools and interventions that strive to **prevent** Black children from experiencing NEET status. Section II will cover the literature, findings and recommendations for the **restoration** of disenfranchised Black youth once they have experienced NEET status. While there are no long-term findings, the third section will review the literature and community-generated recommendations for the **advancement** of formerly disenfranchised Black youth to cement their journeys to success.

Figure 2. TAIBU CHC Model of Black Health and Wellbeing
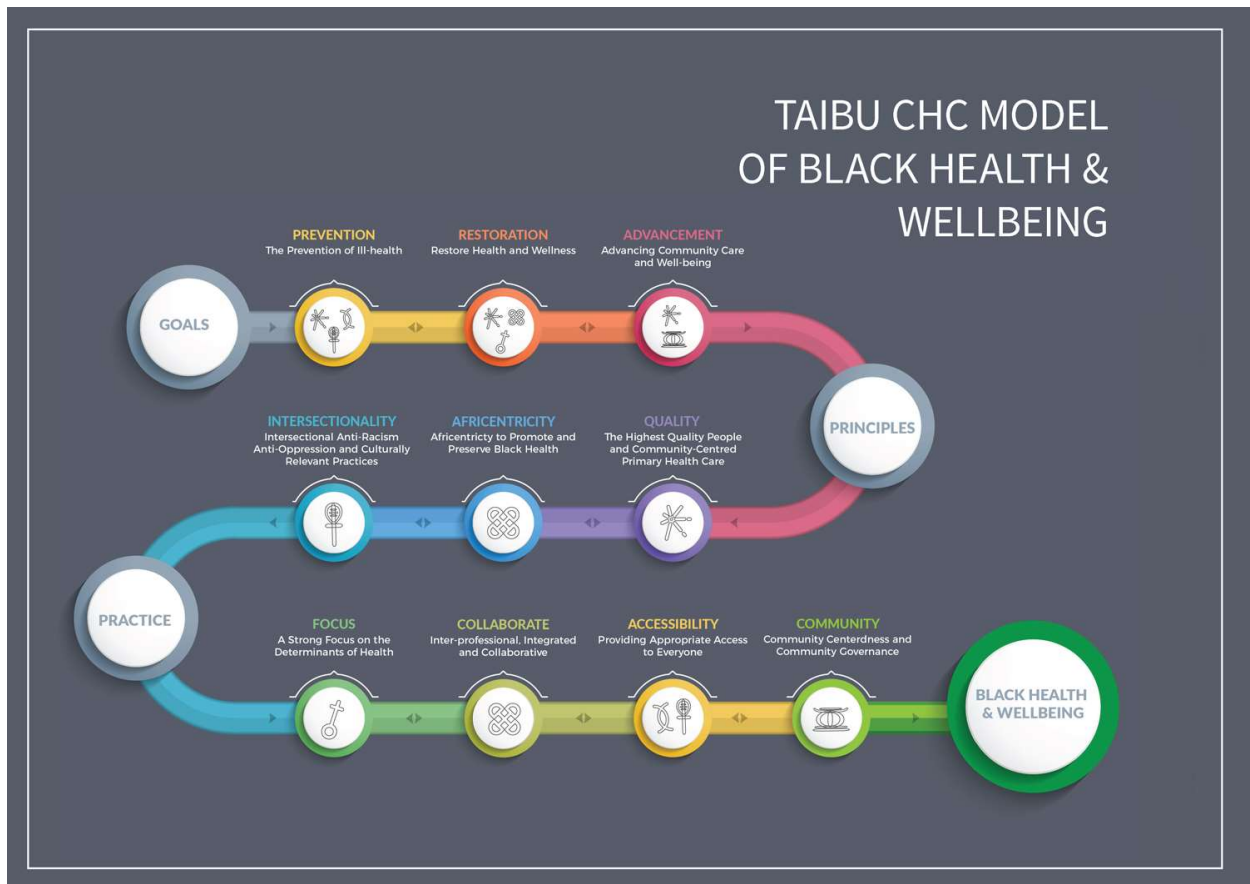
This project's name is devised from the term school to prison pipeline, referring to the school system's tendency to exclude and expel Black students, pushing them from the classroom to the courtroom over the course of their childhoods. The terminology "From School to Prison Pipeline" has been used to describe this trend and the collective at the helm of this project aims to change this and has thus boldly given the title "From School to Success Pipeline" (referred to as "FSSP") to its project.

Prior to delving into the intricacies of this project, the FSSP Collective sought to do the following:

1. Develop a pathway and model of support to Black youth who have not been served through traditional pathways and employment programs. (Some of these youths have been referred to as 'high risk youth', 'hard to engage youth', 'disengaged youth');
2. Develop a model of capacity building of youth to be able to engage with and navigate institutions and support systems;
3. Enable institutions and systems including health and social service agencies to understand the true barriers faced by the Black youth through dispelling myths and stigma and

working together to bring about changes in areas of access, service delivery, evaluation of
service outcomes, etc.

This report is a highly collaborative summary of peer-reviewed academic literature,
disenfranchised Black youth experiences, Black caregiver experiences and insights, and
practitioner perspectives on how to intervene in a system that is leaving disenfranchised Black
youth behind. The report ends with a policy discussion and set of recommendations that comes
directly from what we heard in the five diverse communities (listed in alphabetical order: Black
Creek, Hamilton, Ottawa, Rexdale, Scarborough) of Black families we spoke to throughout our
five-year study.

Theory of Change

The FSSP **key principles driving successful interventions** in the condition of disenfranchised
black youth are:

- a youth centred vision
- a holistic approach
- asset based positive development
- democratic interventions
- culturally rooted and community centred interventions
- flexibility
- targeted universality
- dynamic in-built evaluation and data collection.

Our vision for what effective interventions will have included these defining elements: *small size;
supportive schooling and community environments; flexible schooling and training structures;
personal learning and career planning that target youth needs and aspirations; local hiring and
job development opportunities; mutually respectful and democratic relationships especially in
relation to working with youths; youth led program design arrangements; practical supports for
life-needs such as food and accommodation.*

Priority will be given to Black youth who are the easiest to place in education or training
opportunities to start with because they are the most-ready, but then using the principle of targeted
universalism, the focus will shift on those with greatest need, sometimes referred to as 'hard to
serve' because they are often neglected for lack of resources or knowledge of how best they
respond to outreach and engagement. The early gains will demonstrate the success we
need to legitimate/validate the rest of the interventions.

Cultural grounding: A critical response to the ravages of Anti-Black racism on the social,
psychological and emotional well-being of disenfranchised Black youth is validation through
cultural affirmation. Africentric approaches to Black youth NEET programing are important for
addressing the identity and cultural issues implicated in the proliferation of Black youth NEET
status. They are essential to building African Canadian youth self-esteem through centring
them in the design process of interventions, by raising awareness of African culture and its

contributions, and developing their sense of responsibility to a larger community through the principle of Ujima (collective work and responsibility). The application of Africentricity to the NEET project is an important development in addressing the condition of people of African descent everywhere, but particularly in the African diaspora.

E. Resources and Infrastructure
The theory of change leans on public (provincial/municipal), private (corporate), community (NGO Funding agencies and Foundations, community service organizations – including youth led and youth organizations, parental networks), for resources and the infrastructure necessary to deliver on the key interventions identified by the Project.

Black led organizations and Black youth serving organizations: Black led and Black serving organizations offer several benefits to youth. They play an important role in facilitating a sense of belonging through programming which focuses on celebrating community achievements and reinforcing cultural ties and transnational connections. The focus here is on Black community youth organizations, consistent with the principle of youth led and youth engaged interventions. Such youth led organizations that are focused on working with NEET Black youth and using principles that support the theory of change that FSSP has articulated.

Employment: We seek to address the unemployment and underemployment of Black youth by advocating for the enforcement of equitable hiring practices and policies that work to eliminate racial discrimination in hiring and compensation processes

Education: We seek to redesign the curriculum in Ontario schools, so they are inclusive of Black histories, cultures, and accomplishments as well as having alternative learning opportunities (e.g. arts based learning). This will ensure that students develop new attitudes towards education and also improve the student climate for Black students.

Career Training: We focus on the support and improvement careers, education, and employment opportuni.es using holistic, person-centred, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant approaches. Opportunities for coaching and mentoring will also be developed.

Social Enterprise: Focus on enterprises that both demonstrate entrepreneurial potential as well as commitment to the community and its needs.

Mental health: We seek to build capacity in mainstream and community mental health organizations to provide services that are responsive to Black communities and improve access to services. This will ensure better monitoring for youth with mental health challenges and timely access to trauma counseling for the youth.

Support Black Youth and their Families to Deal with Ontario Systems: We seek to support Black youth and their families and communities to better navigate and engage with systems in acknowledgment that current systems are not set up by Black people or for Black people.

Recreation: We seek to nurture the long-established connection between physical activity, educational achievement and good health. Recreation can also be a basis for community

building and part of a process of socialization because it involves collective action and individual expression.

F. Disaggregated Race-based data collection:

Effective policies to address the Youth NEET experience must support flexible and holistic youth education, training and employment interventions. These programs require longitudinal, high quality and timely data that is currently unavailable and call for the collection of disaggregated data by race and sub-group to inform both policy and program design as well as ensure that progress is measured for the most vulnerable youth. The diversity of the Black communities also needs to be taken into account when disaggregating the data being collected to ensure that there are no inequi.es within and among the communities. Gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, place of origin, immigrant status are some of the variables that need to be captured.

G. Outcomes/outputs

Transform the levels of NEET vulnerability among the DBY to levels consistent with that of other cohorts and over time to levels that underperform those cohorts. To the extent that we are focused on the African Canadian populations, the objective is to ensure that differences within the communities are also tracked for progress, so that the benefits are felt across the diverse African Canadian communities.

H. Impact

The vision is to develop a province where a shared vision along the lines that FSSP represents is transformed into positive impacts for DBY and all other youth in the communities in which they live.

Using the goals of TAIBU's model of Black Health and Wellbeing – Prevention, Restoration & Advancement the theory of change will incorporate the following:

Early Intervention
Academic Mentorship
ARts Based Learning
Identify affirming cultural programs
Protective & Supportive parental support

Prevention

Restoration

Addressing dispropotionate school suspension and expulsions
Positive school and learning experience
Addressing barriers to mental health
Black students' Office

Social Entrepreneurship
Trade & vocational capacity building
soft Skills building
Poverty Reduction
Peer Mentorship/Peer leadership
Engaging Mainstream insitutions (ABR

Advancement

SECTION 1
PREVENTING BLACK CHILDREN FROM
EXPERIENCING NEET STATUS

Several factors contribute to Black young adults experiencing NEET status in Canada. Across OECD countries, studies have found that factors such as disability status, ethnic minority backgrounds, caring responsibilities, immigration statuses, homelessness and criminal history are known indicators of NEET status, but recent Canadian data suggest that socioeconomic status, gender, immigration status and mental health status are all early indicators of NEET status among disenfranchised Black youth (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017).

A central through line evident in all of the literature reviewed in this section is that in a complex and imperfect world, "the decision to stay in school is outstanding in its importance, as dropping out has both public and private costs" (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p.29). In fact, "how well a child does in school predicts eventual income, well-being and health outcomes in adulthood" (Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, 1993; Card, 1999, Heckman, 2007).

While socioeconomic status, gender, immigration status, mental health and wellbeing are all indicators of NEET status, they are also underpinned and influenced by race as the single most consistent determinant of exclusion from the labour market in Canada. From studies that report that Black and Indigenous children have less supportive relationships with their elementary school teachers (Jerome et al., 2009; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015); to international meta-analyses that show teachers have the lowest expectations for Black and Latinx students (Turcotte, 2020); to studies that report that when children form close and warm relationships with their teachers they perform better in school, take on more responsibility and build positive relationships with peers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012) - race continues to shape the everyday experiences of Black children.

Socioeconomic Status

While Black Canadians are a heterogenous and incredibly diverse subset of people. Black Canadians are classified within a range of socio-economic statuses from high income professionals, middle class, working class to low income, working poor, and those on social assistance. Black Canadians continue to lag behind other groups in educational achievement. A study by Anne-Marie Livingstone and Morton Weinfeld (2017) found that household income and family structure are significant factors to Black students completing high school by age 18 or 19.

Notably, since the 2011 census Black Canadians have lagged behind other income earners. This lag in earnings has consequences particularly because in 2021, 21% of Black families were lone-parent families (compared to 9% for non-racialized) and over half of Black children living in Toronto were living under the poverty line (Schimmele, Hou & Stick, 2023).

The combined effect of larger families with fewer income earners on a child who is in school attempting to focus on completing secondary education is profound and has been documented in the literature as being *pulled out* of school. In their work, Bradley and Renzulli (2017) share that while there are a number of reasons why students do not complete secondary education, the

reasons fall into two categories--they are either *pushed out* or *pulled out*. Kids who are *pushed out* are responding to in-school factors resulting in their failure to create meaningful identifications and positive connections with the school (Bradley & Renzulli, 2017). Alternatively, children who are *pulled out* have weighed the pros and cons of the promises of school and typically find themselves responding to out-of-school forces like familial responsibilities and loyalties that have real-life consequences for them (Bradley & Renzulli, 2017).

This work contributes to our understanding of disenfranchised Black youth and their relationship to education, employment and training through their conclusion that while students who have been *pushed out* of schools can find safety, belonging and success in a new learning environment (particularly if the learning environment is thoughtful about providing these three things), those who were *pulled out* need a broader, more systemic response to support their reintegration into employment, education and training.

Gender: The Black Boy

Martin Turcotte's (2020) analyses of the labour market outcomes of Black youth based on 2016 census data demonstrates that "the gap between postsecondary graduation rates for Black youth and other youth remained after accounting for differences in socioeconomic and family characteristics" (p.1). In fact, Black young men were nearly twice as likely as other young men to experience NEET status in 2015 - while the proportions of Black young women were stable with their non-Black peers (Turcotte, 2020). The gap in the academic achievements of Black males and Black females has been well documented. In their review of the literature on Black student achievement Anthony Abbot Sangmen, Desmond Oklikah Ofori and George Botchey (2024) assert that studies consistently show that for Black students, gender plays a significant role. Academics in the space have several theories about why that is, Terrell Strayhorn (2017) notes that Black male success is influenced by the presence of a strong support network of peers and teachers and access to on-campus resources, while in Stacey Wilson-Forsberg and company's (2018) work professors and counsellors are part of the problem as they label Black male students 'troublemakers'.

While the data does not display significant differences in high school completion rates between Black youth and the rest of the population, we anticipated when reviewing the literature that the root cause of NEET status is in secondary school - despite evidence of disparity among graduation rates not being there.

In testing interventions and shaping recommendations, we have been intentional about creating opportunities for Disenfranchised Black Youth to connect with peers who share their racial and gender identities. Research on race and gender as predictors of NEET status highlights the importance of these connections--not only for validating shared experiences but also for encouraging accountability and positive peer influence.

Immigration Status

The Black community draws from descendants of some of the earliest (enslaved African) settlers in Canada, as well as immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, the United States and Europe. Notably, the Black Canadian population is growing and changing in its composition. The group has more than doubled since 1996, reaching over 1.5 million in 2021 and representing five percent of the country's population (Statistics Canada, 2025). While historically the majority of Black Canadians have been second generation or higher, in 2021, 60 percent of Black Canadians were foreign born or immigrants (Graham, Statistics Canada, 2025,[1]).

The overlapping impact of immigration status, national origin, accent discrimination, growing xenophobia and the barriers that exist for foreign trained and those with international work experience are only amplified for Black communities in Canada. Importantly, members of our Collective have shared that the pathway of immigration determines which rights, privileges and benefits disenfranchised Black youth and their families have access to, adding further complexity to a web of systemic challenges and barriers.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Status

In Canada, the Black community experiences disproportionately poor health outcomes and are burdened by health inequities in treatment and unequal outcomes in justice, education, and child welfare, among others (Cenat et al., 2022).

Work around structural inequalities and epistemic injustice in Canada (Beagan et al., 2024; Kidd & Carel, 2017) report that Black individuals have more barriers to, and often have to advocate for, healthcare. When youth are struggling to get access to medical attention, treatments or diagnoses it leaves little room for employment, education or training.

Distinct from the structural, access to health care, issue that Black Canadians are challenged with, is the cultural stigma that plagues both mental health and child welfare among Black communities. For mental health, recent studies (Cenat et al., 2022; Matheson et al., 2021; Husbands et al., 2022) have demonstrated that anti-Black racism has an adverse effect on the mental health of Black Canadians. These studies have concluded that racism is a stressor that is related to anxiety disorders across the Black Canadian population and only intensifies with education and employment. The approach to child welfare has gone through quite the transformation post-pandemic with Children's Aid Societies across the province developing and releasing equity strategies to state publicly that "Black children and families were oversurveilled at such a high rate that overrepresentation now exists in most Children Aid Society's across Ontario" (Durham Children's Aid Society 2023-2025 Equity Strategy) and that "there is no system in Canada so deliberately built on the ideals of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and

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[1]

Eurocentrism than the child welfare system" (Durham Children's Aid Society 2023-2025 Equity Strategy).

Findings

It is difficult to measure the success of preventative interventions as there are many contributing factors as well as a diversity of ways that disenfranchisement is showing up for Black youth in Ontario. To connect the real experiences of Black youth in Ontario, to the conclusions and recommendations that were emerging from the literature we: (i) conducted a focus group to better understand the challenges that led to DBY experiencing NEET status, (ii) ran a short in-school intervention for Black children at risk of dropping out, called *The Life Experience Project*, (iii) gathered insights from an ongoing prevention program called *The Plug Program*, and (iv) incorporated the reflections of parents and caregivers who spoke to us about the experiences of their Black children in Ontario.

In order to have a framework to discuss our findings, we used the insights gleaned from the focus group to create a Journey Map (see Figure 2).

The journey of Black youth navigating NEET status is captured visually in the attached. In this summary of Black young people's journey in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), it is important to recognize that there is no normative model of youth transition (Raffo & Reeves, 2000).

To design this journey map we spoke to eight youth who were either experiencing NEET status, or were recovering from a period of experiencing NEET status. Here, we use the term "recovering" to describe becoming re-introduced and re-engaged and embedded in the system. This term is used to emphasize that NEET status is a state of being excluded and alienated from a system that was not designed to serve and support everyone. Refer to the system map (see Figure 3) to better understand the dynamics observed within the system.

Importantly, no two youth have the same journey or the same expectations of what their journey will be. What is captured in this journey map are touchpoints and interventions (and related mapping indicators) that help offer perspective to an audience that can appreciate nuance and complexity without claiming to understand the dynamic, historical and ever changing social relationships that create the circumstances young, Black Canadians living in the GTHA find themselves in today.

Figure 2. Broader Journey Map Expanded to include Opportunities for Early Intervention

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARLY INTERVENTION — Pushed-out of high school | Pulled-out of high school

LATE-STAGE PREVENTION · **RESTORATION** · **ADVANCEMENT**

Phases: Withdrawal | Transition | NEET | Transition | Recovery

Opportunities for Early Intervention section

Category	Values
Youth Needs	Diagnosis; Dignity & Respect; Inclusion; Resources; Child care; Parent/guardian support
Touchpoints, Outlets & Context	PEACH Program; YAAAACE/Generation Chosen; High-wage, contract/seasonal employment
Community-System Embeddedness	(icon)
Emotional State	Discouraged; Unwanted; Overwhelmed
Connection to systems	Family; Friends; Teachers?

Late-Stage Prevention / Restoration / Advancement section

Category	Withdrawal	Transition	NEET	Transition	Recovery
Youth Needs	Seeking social service provision; Take break from university	Seeking social support; Advocacy for connection / resistance to online format	Seeking community; Seeking purpose/calling	Outlets, training, development opportunities; Identity (re)formation; Peer, Informal & formal mentorship experiences	Embedded in community organization(s) – many options/spoiled for choice; Embedded in community / family OR developed capacity to leverage social capital
Touchpoints, Outlets & Context	Shift by institutions to online-only format/delivery; University	Family; Friends	Excessive partying; Substance abuse; Hanging out with the wrong people/not friends	Local Community Health Centres; High school / night school; YOWs	Entrepreneurship/Community-Enabled Business Development Program; School enrolment
Community-System Embeddedness	(icon)	(icon)	(icon)	(icon)	(icon)
Emotional State	Isolation; Identity crisis; Lack of confidence and self-respect	Feeling stigmatized; Exhaustion	State of vulnerability; Rejection / fear of rejection; Mental health depression; Feeling stuck/inaccessible; Reluctant to ask for help	Feeling vulnerable; Lucky; Tenacious, Curious	Supported; Flexible, Expansive
Connection to systems	Community organization; University supports	Challenges with family; No connections back to systems	Incarceration; No connection back to systems	Culturally-situated interventions (i.e. CEE / TCBN); Friends?	Community organization; School-based supports; Friends. Family?

Life Experience Project

The Life Experience Project is a three-week program that engaged eleven 14 to 19-year-old Black boys from Scarborough who were identified as at risk of being left out of education and employment opportunities. In the spirit of developing an intervention that focused on the gendered aspects of disenfranchised Black youth, the Life Experience Project's objectives were to amplify the voices of Black boys in education and employment as well as to explore the impact that these systems have on their educational and career journeys.

Critical Black Mental Health was central to the development of the Life Experience Project curriculum. It is an approach needed to serve diverse Black youth. Much of the research on Black mental health suggests that when Black youth feel safe they not only have greater success in education and employment but an overall improvement of their health and well-being. The theory of change within this approach focuses on carving out socially-emotionally nurturing spaces where Black youth feel affirmed, heard, their voices are amplified and reflected through curriculum examples, activities, content and practices rooted in an anti-Black racism lens. Getting to know each young person is pivotal, as is reflecting on our positions of power as facilitators. This approach rooted in anti-Black racism pedagogy celebrates Black joy and acknowledges that in order for learning and development to exist, so must joy and Black identity affirmation.

The evaluation of this project revealed the prominence of anti-Black racism witnessed or experienced at school--in line with *pushed out* themes discussed by Bradley & Renzulli (2017)-- issues around stigma and access to mental health services, as well as concerns around school preparedness and employment transition support. Notable project outcomes include:

- 90% of participants indicated that they had never sought out professional support from a counselor but were more likely to do so following this program;
- 80% of participants reported that the Project helped them feel more connected to other Black youth and staff;
- 60% of participants stated that their Black identities were affirmed through the co-construction and co-development of the mental health arts-based curriculum;
- 70% of the participants reported that the project helped them build mental health literacy from an anti-Black racism lens.

The Life Experience Project is an intervention that serves the needs of children who are at risk of experiencing NEET status. The project decreases the probability that they will experience NEET status by building a cultural- and gender-affirming community that reminds them of their potential and capabilities, creating a community of support, empowering them to co-create the tools to strengthen their mental health and begin to destigmatize Black mental health through increased literacy and know-how.

The PLUG Project

Another project that combats the tendency for Black boys to be pushed out of school is the PLUG Project. This intervention aims to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline by addressing the factors in the system, as well as in Black and racialized students' lives, that contribute to school suspension and expulsion. Disproportionate school suspensions and expulsions present a significant challenge for Black students and their communities, of the 213 students who were expelled over the 5-year period of 2011–2012 and 2015–2016, 48% were Black students, despite representing only 12% of all students (Gateri, 2021).

While school exclusionary practices continue to have a profound and unequal impact on Black learners, early results of the PLUG Project have been overwhelmingly positive. This intervention successfully intervened for every single student referred to PLUG for suspension or expulsion. Results for the 2022-2023 school year include: three potential expulsions cancelled, three suspensions reduced (from 20 days to 10; from 20 days to 5; and from 2 days to 1); 13 suspensions expunged from the students' record (some students had multiple suspensions expunged); as well as a granting of four Appeal Hearings.

While these results are impressive, the impact of this project is best illustrated through one of the community testimonials shared below:

[The Program Coordinator] supported the family and was able to get the student a health card—he didn't have a health card. She was able to navigate and support the family with getting the card and getting him to the doctor. That is how they found out that he had some serious nutrition issues going on and that needed to be addressed immediately. They had a referral to another clinic where they do a full assessment of looking at ADHD and other different components of the child with his lack of attention and then a burst of energy that was kind of out of control.

The PLUG Project's ability to get to the root cause of a nutrition deficiency and an ADHD assessment is support that will not just help the student in the short-term as they navigate school, but it will serve to prevent NEET status through access to accommodations, and hopefully a deeper, more comprehensive knowledge of self. The correlation between disabilities and school suspension and expulsion rates in Canada are not known, but based on a review of the trends in the U.S. Claire Raj (2018) shares that when it comes to disability, discipline, and student rights that "while today's schools no longer formally exclude students with disabilities, they routinely achieve this same end through school discipline policies" (p.860).

Upon reviewing the literature it is clear that school progressive disciplinary terminology is punitive and negatively affects the self-image of children. According to Haight and company (2016), "it is not only the act of suspension, but also the way it is communicated in language that affects youths' emerging self and social identities" (p.237). The authors go on to note that, "our analyses indicated that a total of 51 criminal justice and legal terms were spontaneously used 474 times by 59 out of 78 participants. These terms included "self-defense", "offender", "crime", "misdemeanor" and "assault" to refer to children's misbehavior at school" (p.237).

While the examples offered here have focused on the plight of Black boys, we would be remiss if we did not explain how throughout North American history all Black children have been read and seen as more mature than other children and thus treated as though they require less adult protection (Haight et al., 2016). Black girls also struggle with the punitive nature of school discipline practices and there is evidence to suggest that faculty and staff do not intervene effectively in the sexual harassment of girls; "instead they may punish the girls for defending themselves or trivialize their responses" (Haight et al., 2016, p.236).

If we are committed to building a pipeline from school to success and preventing NEET status, more work needs to be done to ensure Black children are safe at school and create programs to affirm their belonging, mental health and wellbeing. Without stable funding for the Life Experience and PLUG Projects, we cannot fairly discuss and set expectations for Black student achievement within these systems.

Caregiver Insights on Prevention and Early Intervention

In each section of this report, we will integrate the observations and suggestions that came from the caregivers of Black children. Caregivers, whether they be parents, grandparents, older siblings or family friends, are critically important for children's development because they provide the emotional, physical and social support that shapes a child's growth. Qualitative research shows that Black parents encourage youth to aim high, but school factors (teacher expectations, lack of Black representation among faculty, discriminatory disciplinary practices, Eurocentric curriculum, and racial academic tracking) affect students (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017).

While there were a variety of suggestions brought forward by caregivers for interventions that could prevent Black children from experiencing NEET status later in life, three themes emerged: (1) transition programs, (2) caregiver support programs, and (3) strategies to make Ontario schools less harmful to Black children.

Transition programs are a best practice intervention for supporting key milestones and rites of passage for individuals. Systematic reviews confirm that well-designed transition programs lead to better retention, mental health and wellbeing, particularly for students from underrepresented or marginalized groups (Donaldson, Moore & Hawkins, 2022). Parents and caregivers of disenfranchised Black children suggested that the creation of transition programs would help children thrive in the education system despite the harms that await them there. These programs could support transition into secondary school (grade 8 to 9), early intervention for transition into tertiary education and training (occuring in grades 10 and 11) or formal transition into tertiary education in grade 12 and if needed in a 5th (or "lap") secondary school year. While moving into secondary school can bring stress and emotional anxiety, girls transitioning reported both at higher rates than boys (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018). Structured transition programs with mentoring, social support and community-building activities help mitigate these risks significantly.

The second theme that emerged focused on the support caregivers needed in order to effectively support Black children from experiencing NEET status later in life. A Saturday Program as articulated in this report is actually a grouping together of caregiver requests from our community validation sessions that include but are not limited for: a one-stop shop for resources; a judgement-free community where caregivers can get advice; a community-based space where families can get support advocating for their school-based needs; a place to learn a skill, improve their financial literacy. This concept of a Saturday Program is contingent on being upstream intervention that is funded well-enough to meet the ongoing and emerging needs of Black parents.

The third theme to emerge focused on how to make the schools less harmful for Black children. In our community validation sessions youth and caregivers alike explained that there was a need to improve parent-school relationships through anti-Black racism training for staff and

administrators, an increase in hiring faculty from communities present in the student population and more language and translation support for Francophone and Newcomer parents. Notably the TDSB's Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement provided a real example of this effort, although it's only in its infancy.

<u>Her L.I.F.E.</u>

In 2018, TAIBU was a partner in the '*her L.I.F.E.*' Program. This 12-participant grade 8 to 9 transition program targeted Black girls in the East Scarborough communities of Kingston, Galloway and Orton Park. The structure of the program allowed for weekly check-ins with program facilitators, 1-1 mentoring on a monthly basis, ongoing engagement with Black women guest speakers scheduled to offer talks on career exposure and exploration content, and occasional opportunities to travel as a group to key Black history sites like Kitchener-Waterloo and Windsor, Ontario.

This Ontario Trillium Foundation-funded collaboration between Alpha Alpha Delta Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough and TAIBU Community Health Centre was designed to address service gaps impacting Black girls through the development and implementation of a community based program.

While this program did not have the infrastructure to track the program participants into tertiary education, the short-term impact of the program was clear from the girls' self-reported results as well as the reports of parents. Participant testimonials are provided below:

- One participant had this to say about her mentor: "In the program she teaches me how to be more confident in myself".
- Another participant reflected on a specific situation in which she felt supported by her mentor: "There are these people that were bothering me at school and, then, my mentor – I told her about what was happening – and she told me to not talk to them; talk to your teacher and make sure they are not bothering you to the point that you start crying at home and stuff. So, that helped me".
- One participant reflected on the demeanor and comfort of her mentor: "My mentor is really nice. I like her. She compliments me. The kind of person I wish was my sister or something".

According to the program evaluation, the program benefits were substantial. Comments and reflections provided by participants and mentors indicate that the delivery of the program led to a number of positive impact factors for Black girls in the community, including:
1. Sustained commitment to the healthy development of Black girls in the East Scarborough community;
2. Commitment to providing space for Black girls to bond and learn from each other;

3. Increased number of Black girls with knowledge of social system i.e. education and successfully completing secondary school and moving on to post-secondary programs;
4. Established "circle of care", connection through improved relationships between Black girls and their family members, community members (mentors) and other adults;
5. Improved knowledge and practices of self-care for Black girls, which support healthy transitions throughout secondary, post-secondary school, and in their lives in general.

The importance of support from adults who look like you and have gone through the transition you are about to experience cannot be overstated. Caregivers understand and are asking for interventions that support their children through these challenging transitions.

Saturday Program

The second theme that emerged focused around supporting Black caregivers to stabilize, intervene or advocate earlier for their child(ren)'s education. A Saturday Program as articulated in this report is actually a grouping together of caregiver requests where parents and caregivers can gather in a safe space and share best practices, gain skills, build language proficiency and get support with system navigation.

The clearest articulation of this need came from our youth validation session in Ottawa, where they say the need for,

> *"Support/education/capacity building to enhance parent's communication skills as well as building their capacity surrounding punishment vs discipline."*

Our caregiver community validation sessions in Toronto (at Black Creek and Rexdale) echoed the request. We heard the following in Black Creek,

> *"Education around financial literacy: debt, credit, life insurance. Education on navigating the system (e.g., how to avoid setbacks). Raise awareness around legal issues: age of consent, CJ records cycle, and addiction diversion programs."*

Then we heard similarities in Rexdale,

> *"More support from parents with work, career exploration. Maybe a pilot project also for parents - single mothers, one parent household to develop skills building, financial literacy to support their children."*

Importantly, while the Saturday program being used to offer education-based support for caregivers of Black children as a prevention mechanism is nuanced, it is hardly new. What would be new is making it a reliable offering, delivered in a community space that is safe, Black-led and

can maintain its grassroots, upstream capacity. Volunteer-led organizations like Parents of Black Children and the Black Daddies Club have occasional meetups that are advocacy and socially-driven but what the communities we spoke to shared with us is that there is a need to receive and process information in a culturally affirming, non-judgemental environment on a regular basis and there is no funding for that currently.

Similarly to how there are social determinants of health that describe various barriers to health care, there also prerequisites for education. Children who are educated in an environment where their caregivers can collaborate with the teaching faculty, perform better in school, so investment in the stability, security and capacity of the caregivers to do their part is critical.

Reforming Schools to be More Responsive and Inclusive

Canada, and Ontario in particular, has seen a deliberate shift in the design of its social programs toward an "enabling society" model (Hicks, 2015). This model emphasizes that individuals should largely finance and manage their own welfare, rather than relying on governments to support them. Caregivers who send their children to Ontario public and Catholic schools feel that their schools have not only moved toward this model, but have taken on the assumption that if children are not performing well the problem lies with the children as well as their caregivers. Meanwhile, caregivers in focus groups held throughout the project consistently mentioned that "one of their greatest challenges is accessing consistent information and resources to support their children. They often rely on their own initiative to seek out opportunities, feeling that many programs and resources are not well-publicized" (Caregiver from Focus Group in February 2025).

A simple solution to caregivers struggling to access consistent information and resources to support their children is a strong working relationship between the family and the school, but family-school relationships are complicated by issues of social power and racial discrimination.

Given that social power often lies with the teaching faculty who run the classroom and the administration who have tools at their discretion to make the school either hostile or safe--a number of caregivers we encountered in our community validation sessions shared that they would like all school staff and teaching faculty to go through anti-Black racism training. The training will be used to combat a well-established concern, "[that] teachers [even Black teachers] often assume the worst of Black students due to their internalized negative pathologies" (McPherson, 2022, p.10). While Anti-Black Racism training for Board faculty and staff is a worthwhile effort, it will fail to meet caregiver expectations without comprehensive accountability checks and other measures to track and monitor anti-Black racism.

Referring again to Kisha McPherson's (2022) work with Black girls in Ontario schools, "these Black girls are clear on what constitutes racist behaviour and attitudes in their schools. They can interpret how Whiteness and power continue to be normalized within school spaces and are

therefore able to contextualize the situations they experience and witness based on that understanding" (p.16). We should not underestimate how much Black students understand and internalize while they remain in institutions that are imbued with Anti-Black Racism, nor should we underestimate the long-term implications of this exposure.

SECTION 2
RESTORATION OF DISENFRANCHISED
BLACK YOUTH PATHWAYS

In this section, we will first explore how the existing literature discusses helping youth develop trust in institutions, building self-esteem and review some practical tools that have propelled youth forward to build the lives they desire. Then we introduce a Systems Map, which outlines how funding works in Ontario and identifies gaps where the system and its programs and activities are failing disenfranchised Black youth. At the end of this section, we will review three programs we developed and evaluated to provide practical and reliable navigation tools to help ensure disenfranchised Black youth can reintegrate into their communities, the labour market and broader society.

The FSSP project proposal indicates that more than 80,000 youth, the majority Black and racialized youth, are not engaged with Education, Employment and Training systems. NEET is not just an individual problem of being left out of the labour market with limited employment prospects, NEET status is also an issue for a system whose major resource is the services and intelligence of its people.

NEET status is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes--economically, it often leads to poverty, long-term or even intergenerational worklessness, and 'wage scarring,' where even after securing employment, former NEET youth earn less than their peers; physiologically, it is linked to poor physical and mental health, high rates of substance addiction, and increased mortality (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017).

Literature Review

Rebuilding Trust in Institutions

Disenfranchised Black Youth in North America, particularly in major metropolitan areas, often experience systematic marginalization in education, criminal justice and employment spaces. Their trust in institutions has been eroded by generations of discriminatory practices, over-policing, under-resourcing and underrepresentation at decision-making tables. Rebuilding this trust is imperative for democracy, social cohesion and long-term civic engagement.

In 2024, Henderson and company published a report on how researchers and research institutions can work to gain the trust of Black communities. Two of the report's five principles apply here and are worth restating, first "institutions bear the responsibility for trust-building, due to historical and current day traumas perpetuated against Black participants and communities" (p.128) and finally, "to become trustworthy, institutions must listen and show up for communities" (p.128). This is the work that programs and interventions in the Restoration phase must do.

A shift from the tendency in our increasingly 'enabling society' model in Ontario, in order for Disenfranchised Black Youth to trust institutions, they cannot explicitly and consistently favour

their non-racialized or non-Black peers in the classroom or workplace; "trustworthiness places the responsibility of trust-building on institutions" (p.128), where it belongs.

Building Self-esteem

Recovering from NEET status requires a high self-esteem and high self-mastery, but the internalization of racism and negative stereotypes has been shown to significantly undermine self-esteem and overall mental health among individuals from Black communities, particularly in the absence of social support (Cenat et al., 2024). Extensive research identifies social support as a critical protective factor that mitigates the psychological distress associated with exposure to prejudice and other adverse experiences (Cenat et al., 2024). While Disenfranchised Black Youth are not necessarily more likely to lack social support, they deal with different dynamics. Black youth are often caught at the intersection of the oppression from a dominant anti-Black racism regime but also the demands of its victims who happen to be other generations of Black community members. This is often the case when parents, adults and elders seek to shield them from the adverse impacts of anti-Black racism and emphasize their cultural protections.

According to Eaton, Livingston & McAdoo (2010) self-esteem is a dimension of self-concept that is inclusive of an individual's subjective evaluation of themself, it includes "feelings of self-worth, one's judgement, and perceptions of one's values, morals and personal attitudes" (p.815). While we take for granted that racism impacts self-esteem "little is known about the detrimental effects of racial discrimination on the mental health and self-esteem of Black individuals in Canada" (Cenat et al., 2024, p.119). Work by Zeigler-Hill, Wallace & Myers (2012) investigated the relationship between social stigma and self-esteem and found that Black individuals tended to inflate their self-esteem when asked, as though they needed to put on a facade of self-esteem and confidence. Notably, the impact of race is separate from the impact of socioeconomic status, "a meta-analysis found that socioeconomic status accounts for small but significant differences in self-esteem in young adulthood" (Erol & Orth, 2011, p.608).

Developing Practical Tools for Sustained Restoration: Arts-Facilitated Identity Development

Labour market integration is more challenging for Disenfranchised Black youth who do not have a high school diploma or post-secondary education certificate or degree. The data illustrate it to be especially difficult for young Black men, who are more likely to be unemployed or experience NEET status, even when achieving similar levels of education to their White men and Black women counterparts (Turcotte, 2020). Other studies on the labour market integration of young Black men could explore such factors as non-socioeconomic (family origin), or other factors related to human capital, to shed some light on why so many of these young men are excluded from the labour market as they begin their working lives. This is a task the project case takes into account, but does not explore further.

Disenfranchised youth, often labeled as 'at risk youth', 'hard to engage' or 'hard to reach'

youth are an important public policy concern. These categories and labels have the effect of both stigmatizing and blaming the youth, shifting systemic accountability to them as individuals with excuses such as "they are hard to reach". The stigmatizing implication of the 'at risk' label creates feelings of fear and insecurity for organizations and staff tasked with working with these youth.

In order to navigate the system and make best use of the resources that are available, it is important to understand how the system works.

Figure 3. System Map
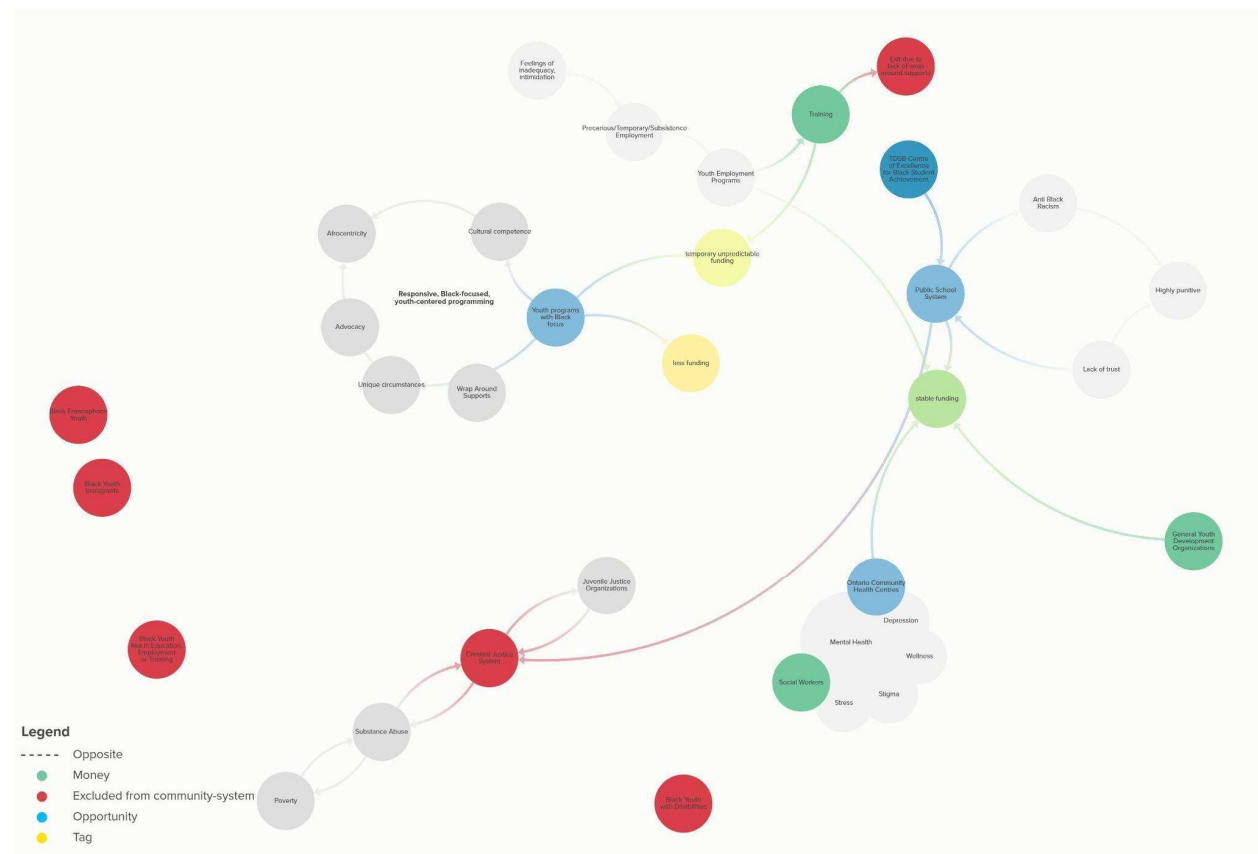
The system map was created to document, interpret, integrate and share how our FSSP Steering Committee along with members of the FSSP Collective (consulted via one-on-one interviews) felt the system in Ontario currently operates. This map was created in 2022 and refers to a number of intersecting systems including the health system, school system, criminal justice system and training system. To understand the map is important to understand the colours: green indicates 'money' or funded programs and activities; red indicates exclusion, marginalization or separation from the system; blue indicates 'opportunity' suggesting areas of opportunity for finances and funded programs. While tracking how the system is functioning is important, key to us is understanding who is in red - who is excluded. Highlighted in red here are the actors and agents who are not formally connected to, or considered by, any existing systems. These actors and agents include, but are not limited to, Black youth with disabilities, Black Francophone youth, Black immigrant youth and of course Black youth experiencing NEET status.

The system map provides us with a number of key insights:
- Opportunity is contingent on access to financial resources.
- Exclusion is both systematic and isolating, individual actors feel when they have little connection to resources or opportunities.

- Intervention points lie in the green and blue nodes, so our recommendations need to bridge from where the funding and opportunity currently is toward the excluded (red) ones.

Findings

The findings of our restoration phase focused on the results of our arts-based interventions that focused on Disenfranchised Black Youth experiencing NEET status. The first intervention was a photovoice study with the FSSP Steering Committee, the second was an evaluation of the CEE Essentials program provided by the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals.

<u>Photovoice Study</u>

Photovoice is a participatory research method where participants use photography to document and reflect on their lived experiences. When working with disenfranchised youth there are many reasons to lean on this method, the two most compelling of which are that is empowers youth to tell their own stories (Wang & Burris, 1997) and it is a counter storytelling method that has a non-academic, visual and creative orientation (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005) which is more accessible than more traditional methods of data collection.

The photovoice component of the From School to Success Pipeline Project asked Black youth to reflect on three questions:
1. How does precarious employment affect (good or bad) your livelihood and your neighbourhood?
2. What changes have you noticed in your neighbourhood as a result of precarious employment in the neighbourhood?
3. What resources are available in your neighbourhood for people experiencing precarious conditions?

Eight Black youth who were either not in education, employment or training or had recently not been in education, employment or training were sent these three questions and encouraged to take photos using their smartphones and do their best to describe what they intended to capture or represent through that image. Photos and relevant captions are included in Figure 4.

In response to the first question, how does precarious employment affect your livelihood and neighbourhood, health was the most commonly cited effect with 8 direct references and 14 indirect references including mentions of 'wellness', 'anxiety' and 'depression'. The youth also mentioned several states of being in terms of the impact of precarious employment. They used words like 'enslaved', 'overwhelming', 'unsettling', 'taxing', 'exploited' to describe a loss of control over their lives and explained how precarious employment acted as both a barrier to certain things as well as a transition into other things.

In response to the second question, what changes have you noticed in your neighbourhood as a result of precarious employment in the neighborhood, the young people focused on affordability. In Ontario following the global coronavirus pandemic, there has been a focus on pandemic recovery and addressing the growing issues around affordability. Youth provided several examples of what a crisis of affordability looks like including: gas prices being at their highest, utilizing food banks, flooding of shelters, homelessness, very difficult for young adults in Toronto to find affordable housing or own property, maintenance needed.

The third question, what resources are available in your neighbourhood for people experiencing precarious conditions, drew patterns in responses. With four participants citing food banks and three participants citing churches as resources available with expressions of the lack of availability of transportation and a lack of resources targeting the Black community.

Altogether the photovoice study highlights how precarious employment and systemic inequality intersect to shape the lives of youth, especially those from racialized and marginalized communities. Participants detailed the psychological toll of instability (including anxiety, exhaustion, and a sense of exploitation specifically felt by Black communities) as well as the everyday barriers to achieving stability in a highly volatile labour market. Transportation challenges, unaffordable housing, and inadequate access to quality food, childcare and community support were recurring themes. Youth emphasized the importance of local resources like food banks, churches, and community hubs but noted they are often overstretched or fail to meet the unique needs of Black communities. Their reflections call for systemic change: investments in affordable housing, equitable employment, accessible transportation, culturally responsive supports, and inclusive policy development that centers youth voices.

Figure 4. Photovoice Study Results
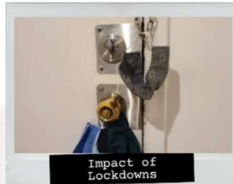
From School to Success Pipeline Project
Photovoice Study

Health and Wellbeing | Affordability | Access

Photovoice is a community-based participatory visual research methodology that empowers research participants to co-create research with the research team.

Community Hubs

Impact of Lockdowns

"Overall I see the masks as a prison and we have all become enslaved to non-living objects that now hold more power than any one person in society."
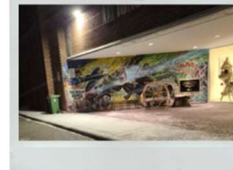
Remote Work and Schooling

"I also do online school from my laptop and knowing that I need to rely heavily on my laptop is a little unsettling since it shuts down randomly and sometimes that affects the quality of both my paid work and school work."

"I love that I now have a more casual work space, however the informal atmosphere can be very taxing on my mental health since this work from home relationship between employees and higher management can easily be exploited by the higher rank."

Transportation

"I do wish there were more supports available within a reasonable distance, as many people with myself included rely on public transportation."

"I find that transportation has been an issue in my neighbourhood for many years and has negatively affected me at times. I can remember walking home from school at times because my specialized school program stopped providing bus tickets for me and other kids from my neighbourhood to attend school. I tried to walk home on days with nicer weather to conserve the last set of tickets I received from my middle school. I could see the financial strain that this put on my parents who both work part time jobs so walking home when I could manage the weight of my backpack was the smallest contribution I could think of to make the tickets last longer."

COVID-19 Testing Clinic

Clothing Banks

Economic Exclusion

Issues with and lack of affordable housing

"precarious employment in my neighborhood causes many people rent homes and basements as houses are too expensive."

"In my neighbourhood there has been a lot of maintenance that has not been done due to precarious employment. A lot of homes have tried to fix things themselves, resulting in making things way worse than usual. Some apartments have mice outbreak, bed bugs, moldy showers, cracks, holes, electronics and heaters not working especially when it's needed in the winter."
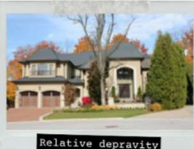
Relative depravity

"I've noticed that it is very difficult for young adults to find affordable housing or even buy/own property in Toronto despite our efforts. It's very discouraging to know that despite all our hard work that the vast majority of us will not be able to afford housing in the city of Toronto."

"precarious employment leads to many families relying on government aid and being stuck in an endless cycle of living from paycheque to paycheque. Therefore, many families end up shouldering financial burdens together, kids included."

Living paycheque to paycheque

"Precarious employment affects my livelihood and neighborhood because when you don't have a stable source of income-you're subject to poor mental health"

"precarious employment has led me to have an overall lower quality of life as I am not able to meet all my needs, so my mental, emotional, and physical health suffers"

The struggle to earn a livable wage

"The waitlist for these daycare facilities can be very long and quite competitive to get a spot on these lists. Parents often coordinate with their older children and other available adults to drop off and pick up their smaller children from daycare because attendance is very important and crucial to maintain a spot in the facility. This has affected 2 generations of my family, my sisters who were in high school had to pick me up from daycare to help our mother who worked multiple jobs and usually finished work late at night while I picked up my older sister's son from daycare while i was in middle school so she could maintain her job while caring for him as a single mom."

**The Importance of Seeking and Finding Help**

Food Banks

My community has many resources available ie. employment counseling, food banks, community service centre, walk in clinics, sexual health clinics. There are also many church available for those looking for help regarding their mental and spiritual health.

"There are food banks you can call/email or even walk into around Scarborough or the GTA. Some are based on your race or situation than some allow anyone. I remember years ago I used to receive a christmas basket from the salvation army every year until it stopped. This helps a lot of families experiencing precarious conditions. However it is important to look for more than one and to still seek employment because it does not last forever and you are only limited to one single box if you live alone and two boxes if you are a family."

Churches

"Some churches like Malvern Christian Assembly and St. John of the cross takes clothes and offers family for free which is far better than a thrift store. These resources can be found on flyers if you do not have computer access, from your social worker/ODSP worker and by google search if you have access to the internet and a phone."
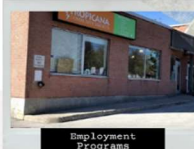
Employment Programs

"Employment programs do not process the same as they used to decades ago. I found myself struggling to find out especially as I have a disability. Most jobs are very low minimum wage which cannot provide enough income sources to pay market rent on your own"

Shelters, Hubs and Family Services

"Before the "Hub" was built my community had to rely on the library and YMCA within the mall across the library to get help writing resumes."

"With the addition of the "Hub" i have seen more immigrant targeted services offered in a larger variety to help newcomers settle into Canada and gain employment as soon as possible. These services and their systems are not perfect but i think they had a positive impact on the neighbourhood and has helped bridge major language barriers especially with the arab, somali, and east asian communities, as well as encourage teens to gain employment to combat boredom and deter them from getting involved in local gangs and petty crime mischief."

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CEE Centre for Young Professionals' CEE Essentials Program

As part of our findings we felt it was responsible to include the most impactful centre for Disenfranchised Black Youth in the city of Toronto, the Careers Education Empowerment (CEE) Centre for Young Professionals. The Toronto-based CEE was established in 2012 with a vision for transforming the delivery of workforce development and employment programs to Black youth. Their vision to create a society and economy in which Black youth can achieve financial prosperity and a high quality of life for themselves and their families and to contributing to the advancement of Canada is aligned with our work, as is their mission to advance the economic and social development of Black youth facing multiple barriers to employment. CEE achieves career development and job readiness using holistic, person-centered and culturally relevant programs and services. the backbone and throughline of all CEE programming for NEET youth (youth who are not in education, employment or training) and the model CEE Essentials uses to attract, support and prepare NEET youth for the career of their dreams.

Essentials has been shaped by and improved upon by dozens of staff members over more than a decade. The program content seeks to meet multiple learning styles and prioritizes experiential learning as much as possible. The program suite is structured according to five programmatic pillars: Engage, Empowerment Education, Employability, Entrepreneurialism.

- Engage is a commitment to creating a space where participants play an engaged, rather than passive role in their learning. Participants are encouraged to participate in a way where they walk away from sessions knowing that they played an active role in their development.
- Empowerment is their commitment to creating workshops that are designed to train members to take up space, take ownership of their learning and see themselves as people who can succeed within their field.
- Education conveys that members will learn technical and soft skills relevant to their sector of choice. The education will not only come from instructors and facilitators, but they will also teach each other through peer support and collaborative exercises. This approach to education deviates from a deficit-based approach by empowering members to see what they have/know, how it is relevant to their field and how it can be further developed.
- Employability speaks to their focus on skill development that directly influences increased employability. Sessions may include resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills but also more person-centered workshops like career planning as well as personal and professional audits.
- Entrepreneurialism is a pillar that ensures programming is available that increases knowledge of what an entrepreneurial pathway would look like within their field. Including but not limited to how to get started, resources, opportunities.

Program staff select individual lessons from these pillars to be taught alongside the sector-specific training of a particular program. How and when these lessons are integrated into a program's overall journey is subject to staff members who are guided by the protocol. Staff are encouraged to shape and adapt the lessons as they see fit to suit the needs of the program or the cohort.

Since launching in 2006, a growing alumni of 423 people and 282 new participants have been supported by the CEE Essentials program and the interconnected social support team. These alumni were formerly disengaged, and as a result of graduation from the program have seen their lives positively impacted. CEE heralds a participant retention rate of 85% with 241 of 282 young people remaining in the program. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, 123 youth were placed of the 193 engaged.

In 2022, CEE standardized the CEE Essentials curriculum so that it could be used by non-profits in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, as well as in Houston, Texas. CEE Essentials include offerings that are either: Personal Development, Health & Wellness, Sector Navigation, Career Navigation, or Workplace Skills. CEE alumni become sources of transformation for their communities by bringing their peers into the network of support (i.e. hiring others through their business). A prominent feature of the Essentials suite is seen in the growth in personal confidence and self-awareness. This is evident in the results above, but also in how many of them go on to start their own businesses and develop their own independent projects.

SECTION 3
ADVANCEMENT OF FORMERLY
DISENFRANCHISED BLACK YOUTH
TO CEMENT THEIR JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

In the words of a recent Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario report by Pichette et al. (2019), "gone are the days when a high school diploma, college certificate or a bachelor's degree could set workers on a course for a job with a single employer until retirement" (p.3). While long-term meaningful career trajectories are the desired outcome, emphasis needs to be placed on recession-proof skills paired with unbreakable self-confidence in order to survive today's volatile labor market.

Advancement is not frequently a discussion point in work around DBY experiencing NEET status, as the focus tends to be on immediate outcomes, but a job today does not mean a job tomorrow. In Section III we are advocating for advancement to feature more prominently in the planning for Disenfranchised Black Youth as historically this group has only had access to short-term, unstable, insecure and precarious work. These challenges require the adoption of new approaches to how education and labour market integration is done. In the system map (see Figure 3), advancement is based on **Responsive, Black-focused, youth-centered programming.** As you can see in Figure 5, the foundations of advancement are youth programs with a Black focus - especially when these programs are culturally competent, afrocentric, advocate for youth and young people's needs, accommodate unique circumstances and provide wraparound support to ensure program continuation and/or completion.

While articulating what is the foundation to advancement is important, it may be equally important to outline what parts of the status quo are not setting Black youth up for success. In Figure 6, we have highlighted how typical or mainstream youth employment programs have two outputs. First is precarious, temporary or subsistence employment where youth are often exploited and work for low wages in non-union or physical labour roles where there is no career pathway, this type of work leads to feelings of inadequacy, intimidation and mental health challenges ranging from burnout to severe anxiety and depression. Second, is training where youth are put in an intensive training without any wraparound supports like a daily stipend, transportation support or mental health support (i.e. therapy) and youth end up exiting the training program due to lack of wraparound support.

Figure 5. Detailed view of System Map: Responsive, Black-focused, youth-centered programming component.
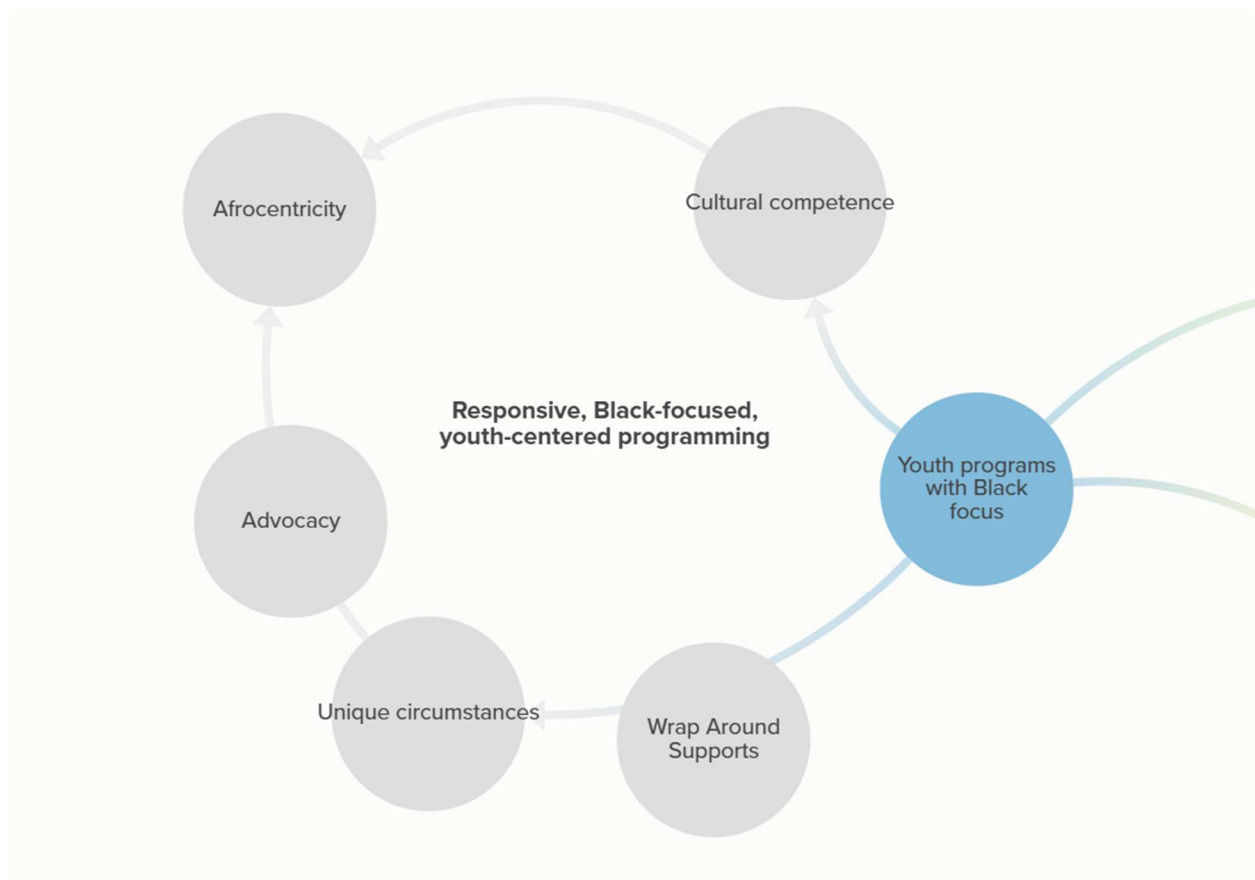

Figure 6. Detailed view of System Map: Youth Employment Programs

Going it alone: Building a Business and Becoming an Entrepreneur

For members of the Black community, access to employment is fraught with barriers, the work

on offer is largely precarious - temporary, part-time, casual, contract, work which is low paying, low skill, dead end, with poor working conditions and no job security.

These relate to unequal access to employment opportunities due to systemic exclusion from key social networks, as well as unequal access to education, training and other forms of discrimination in employment such as credential recognition challenges that lead to the devaluation of African labour (Statistics Canada, 2020).

<u>Toronto Community Benefits Network's NexGen Builders Mentoring Program</u>
The Toronto Community Benefits Network's (TCBN) NexGen Builders Mentoring Program is a program that is both designed with Disenfranchised Black youth in mind and is deeply rooted within Black communities. NexGen operates in the same ecosystem as the FSSP program and has strived to reintegrate Black youth into the labour market through employment and training opportunities within the construction industry in the Greater Toronto Area.

For the purposes of evaluating the NexGen Program we will focus on the core components while paying attention to the support system TCBN has built for their program participants, including but not limited to: The Building Diversity Awards Program, The Employer Portal and Ready to Hire List, the Apprenticeship Readiness Curriculum, and the Quick Start in Construction program. When evaluated together these programs create a holistic asset-based and community rooted ecosystem that builds long-term resilience and delivers on re-integrating Black youth experiencing NEET status into the labour market.

In 2018, when the TCBN was working to ensure that local residents, historically disadvantaged communities and equity-seeking groups entered into community benefits agreements (CBAs) with owners of large infrastructural investments, TCBN learned that there were a number of barriers to these benefits. First, construction projects were not able to find job seekers from these communities; second, when they did find these jobseekers, the jobseekers were not ready to work; third, the programs designed to prepare jobseekers for these opportunities lacked capacity to meet the needs of the projects. Over six years TCBN has developed a network of interventions that address all of these gaps.

TCBN is a community-labour coalition, representing over 120 member organizations and groups, including 11 construction union members and 1 construction professional union and the organization only collaborates with industry leaders who share their values of diversity, equity, inclusion and reconciliation. Among TCBN's membership are construction organizations looking to recruit members of equity-deserving groups who meet the prerequisites for becoming an apprentice, as well as organizations like grassroots community groups, workforce development agencies, pre-apprenticeship providers, and social enterprises with a vested interest in supporting equity-deserving groups in their quest for gainful employment.

In the literature (Francis, 2005; Livingstone and Weinfeld, 2015; Rankin et al., 2013), best practices for Black youth experiencing NEET status call for tactics to be grounded in holistic interventions, rooted in the communities from which the youth come from and to which they feel they belong. The literature identifies parameters of program delivery that allow for a holistic intervention, we have included them below:

- small size;
- supportive environments;
- flexible schooling and training structures;
- personal learning and career planning that target youth needs and aspirations;
- local hiring and job development opportunities;
- mutually respectful and democratic relationships especially in relation to working with youths;
- youth led program design arrangements;
- practical support for life-needs such as food and accommodation.

The NexGen Builders Mentoring Program offers individuals from underrepresented groups the practical advice, moral support and the guidance of an experienced journeyperson as they navigate the challenges of the apprenticeship system and workplace cultures that are not always welcoming. NexGen Builders is a tri-mentoring program with mentees, peer mentors, and mentors all contributing and gaining knowledge from the program components and all benefiting from the support system and various tools offered.

Mentee eligibility is relatively open. The program targets Black, Indigenous and newcomer communities, with priority for women and youth, who are in the process of preparing for work or who have been recently employed as apprentices or professionals in the construction industry. The program has four intakes per year of up to 30 participants in each cohort. From the participants perspective the length of the program includes three months for training, one year with a mentor once matched; professional development, quarterly mixers and annual retreats are ongoing into alumni status. Desired outcomes for mentees include that they leave the program with the knowledge, skills, experience, guidance, tools, resources and support they need to secure employment in the construction trades. Practically the measure of success for a mentee is whether they were able to obtain or remain in an apprenticeship program or in another construction sector work environment.

Mentor eligibility is more prescriptive, as mentors must be currently employed within the construction sector, have completed a construction apprenticeship or be an experienced professional in the industry; and peer mentors should be at least a 2nd year apprentice and recognized as a leader. All mentors should be willing to commit for at least 1 year and demonstrate an understanding of the challenges underrepresented groups face and want to see

them succeed in the construction industry. Desired outcomes for peer mentors, all of whom already work in the construction trades and have access to knowledge, include leadership development experience gained by acting as a mentor, while still benefiting from the access to a more seasoned construction worker. Desired outcomes for mentors who are acting as community elders in support of both the peer mentors and the mentees include leadership development and facilitation experience. NexGen Builders Mentoring Program's use of one-on-one and group mentoring has allowed for true knowledge sharing and community building.

In addition to the mentoring aspect, NexGen Builders Mentoring Program participants benefit from a number of work integration interventions that build pathways for Black youth to enter the construction trades.

It is important to understand the experience of the NexGen Builders Mentoring Program from the participant perspective, so six 30 minute one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with five mentees and one peer mentor to get a better understanding of how they learned about the program, why they joined, whether they felt supported, and the impact of the program on their access to the construction industry.

When explaining how participants discovered the TCBN and the NexGen Builders Mentoring Program, word of mouth was paramount. This was anticipated given that mentoring is such an intimate experience and without a warm connection or a sense of trust, it would be challenging to commit to. The TCBN has truly transformed the expectations of the typical racialized construction jobseeker, they have democratized entry into the industry. This is exemplified by one participant who spoke to who said, "The first time I heard about them, an electrician in the CUSW union told me about the TCBN and their work. The second time I heard about the TCBN was after I began to pursue the trades and my dad who works for the TDSB told me about it too." The reality for many program participants is that they have to see TCBN multiple times from different sources in order to feel as though they should give it a try. For interviewed participants who did not learn about the program through word of mouth, social media and large Black community events, like Afrofest, featured prominently in their discovery of the program.

When asked why they joined the program, the responses were insightful. From interviewees who had some construction experience in another country and a desire to return to the industry, to someone who was working in construction but was struggling with managing the experiences of exclusion on the basis of race, gender, age, and criminal history. Participants mentioned that from the perspective of readiness, the program was "very accommodating" and took care of everything from resume support, helping them purchase construction personal protective equipment (PPE), to helping them cover their union fees.

The mentoring experience of the mentees was not consistent. There were a few both good and less than ideal experiences, however, it is worth noting that the participants shared that the mentoring is getting better as the program continues post-pandemic, and that as the program matures it continues to gain positive reviews through word of mouth. Despite the actual mentoring experiences, the participants all agreed that there is enormous value in this program and its potential to provide access to people who are interested in working in the construction industry.

A majority of interviewed participants are in the construction industry and already rely on the relationships built during the program to keep them in the industry or help them find new opportunities. Canada's labour market is relational rather than purely merit-based with many people finding their jobs through distant but warm connections like former cohort-mates or old mentors. These relationships are also important to build in construction as it is a cyclical business in Canada, with work slowing down bringing major layoffs in the colder months.

It is important to contextualize these results as indicative of the potential outcomes of an asset-based approach to re-integrating Black youth who are not in education, employment and training. With seven years of experience learning of the challenges and barriers to securing meaningful employment in unionized construction and designing and developing solutions, TCBN felt confident in their ability to design NexGen Builders in consultation with local youth, community, labour and industry stakeholders and ultimately develop strategies that support Black youth access construction. The NexGen Builders Mentoring Program offers a host of learnings on the barriers Black youth face when entering the labour market as their program design, execution and evaluation manage these challenges with humility and deep thoughtfulness.

Since the start of the NexGen Program, there have been 432 individuals who identify as Black youth who have participated and received training and wrap-around supports and who are matched with a mentor. This program contributes positively to the integration of Black youth who are experiencing NEET status into the labour market and does so while prioritizing the wellbeing of its participants. As should be evident through the data collected in one-on-one interviews, the NexGen Program is a 'Second Chance' program and rather than being based in an oppressive school system, it is culturally grounded and based in the places where Black communities thrive and celebrate (i.e. Afrofest).

The NexGen Builders Mentoring Program should be noted as a best in class program for Black youth not in education, employment and training because as it grows it does not lose its community-element, the thing about the program that makes it feel like a soft place to land for Black youth and young people. From prevention to restoration and advancement, this program meets youth where they are and offers them support in getting to where they have decided they can be.

Social Enterprise Hair Braiding and Barbershop Program

Black hair spaces like the barbershop and the hair salon are widely understood as safe spaces for articulations of life's frustrations, family issues, and mental health struggles for Black and Afro-descendant communities. Given the historic lack of professionals in psychotherapy, psychology and psychiatry, "many African Americans rely on faith, family, and social communities for emotional support rather than turning to health care professionals. This may be not only because of a lack of resources, but also due to the fact that few people of colour work in therapy spaces" (Kalteflieter and Alexander, 2019, p. 191).

Nishaun T. Battle's (2021) recent work *Black girls and the beauty salon: fostering a safe space for collective self-care*, inspired the interventions that were implemented in Phase 1. Many of the Black youth experiencing NEET status that we had spoken to in early phases of our study, including the design thinking workshop, mentioned a need for technical skills in a fast-paced world, but also sought a supportive, Black-centered environment where they could operate free from White-centered realities and harm. An intervention focused on hair braiding and cutting hair met both of those articulated needs.

In Caroline K. Kalteflieter and Karmelisha M. Alexander's (2019) *Black girls saving themselves*, they share how self-care is an act of resistance for Black girls who are often fighting to get access to care. They state that, "care of the self is therefore to be understood in both states of being; care of self means to take care of others as well as taking care of the self, and therefore is extended to know oneself on a continuum of care" (Kalteflieter and Alexander, 2019, p. 189). Indeed, part of Black girls saving themselves is remembering that Black girls are not magic and are deserving of time, rest, and care. This act of Black communities caring for each other happens in barbershops, in hair salons, but also perhaps more often in living rooms where hair is braided and in bathrooms where hair is cut.

The From School to Success Pipeline Project selected hair braiding and hair cutting as its intervention because of the power of the self-care spaces in the Black community,

> *"beauty salons and barbershops are located in all communities…and have received increasing attention as a place for reaching and engaging with large numbers of individuals, including those not reached through traditional settings. Beauty salons/barber shops are considered a "safe" space where individuals can focus on personal appearance, receive community news, and socialize. A unique and trusting relationship exists between the customer and barber or stylist." (Linnan, D'Angelo and Harrington, 2014, p. 77)*

The Social Enterprise Hair Braiding and Barbershop Program was FSSP's signature offering in the communities of Rexdale and Scarborough in Toronto and Hamilton. What we sought to measure was three-fold.

1. What conditions are required for Disenfranchised Black Youth to learn a new skill?
2. How can programs accommodate the 'gig economy' or 'hustle culture' that has taken our economy by storm, while providing Disenfranchised Black Youth with short-term solutions to income loss experienced during COVID-19?
3. In what ways can we model what a culturally-affirming, self-care (or family-care) driven learning environment looks like for Disenfranchised Black Youth?

The program included two 180-minute interventions per week for 13 weeks, totalling 78 hours of training. The program provided all of the tools required to practice (mannequin heads for the hair braiders) or to get started upon graduation (clippers for barbershop).

When the program started to run in Fall of 2023, the desired outcomes for this intervention included: building Black pride, building on technical skills that can build wealth, facilitation of group settings where self-care and community care are prioritized. Part of establishing resilience in youth is giving them a sense of self-esteem, self-worth and pride, "an extensive body of literature indicates that retaining one's heritage culture while also participating in the larger society results in high levels of well-being" (Medina, Rowley & Towson, 2019, p. 98).

In Phase 1 of testing we are measuring the following hypotheses:
- Hair braiding and barbershop 12-15 week intervention will build confidence, self-worth and Black pride in Black youth experiencing NEET status.
- The intervention will increase interest in employment, education or training.
- The intervention will increase the degree of clarity and career navigation of participants.
- The intervention will increase the resilience of participants.

Table 1. Hair Braiding and Barbershop, Phase 1 Participation.

	Registered	Completed	Woman	Man	Age Range	Program
Hamilton Urban Core	21	11	7	4	18-29	Hair Braiding
Rexdale	11	11	3	8	17-29	Barbershop
TAIBU	11	8	11	--	16-19	Hair Braiding

Sample Demographics

The team was able to collect questionnaire insights from 14 participants, 12 of whom identify as Black, 71% of which have Grade 12 as their highest level of education completed and 79% of

who were born in Canada. It is important to give disenfranchised Black youth the opportunity to share space with a community of fellow Black youth at different stages of their education, employment and training journeys.

The focus groups discussions were intended to be as accessible as possible. The facilitators asked how the program was going, what success looks like for each participant, what new strengths they gained, and what challenges they faced (if any). Themes emerged across all three sessions. When asked how the program was going, the team learned that from the perspective of the youth the benefits were multi-pronged: there was dinner provided in the program (which is a valid concern given the rise of issues like food insecurity in southern Ontario post-pandemic); participants could build a sense of community with instructors and fellow participants; and there was a sense of safety within the Community Health Centre space.

When asked about strengths they had discovered or developed, many participants said they did not think they could pick up skills as quickly as they did - that they were surprised by their own capabilities. Many participants joined these programs to perfect an existing technical skill (hair braiding and cutting hair are common skills in Black and Afro-descendant communities), however they may not be able to identify skills like: patience, budgeting, customer service, or tenacity as relevant skills given their interpersonal nature. Also given the focus group setting, youth may have been reluctant to admit publicly that they feel they have gained new strengths.

In terms of what success in this program, or in life, looks like participants shared that technical expertise (in hair braiding or cutting hair), building community/networking, self-care (and community care), and money or wealth-building were all important success indicators. In fact, one of the participants in Hamilton shared that success to him was to be able to cut his younger brother's hair and confidently send him off to school.
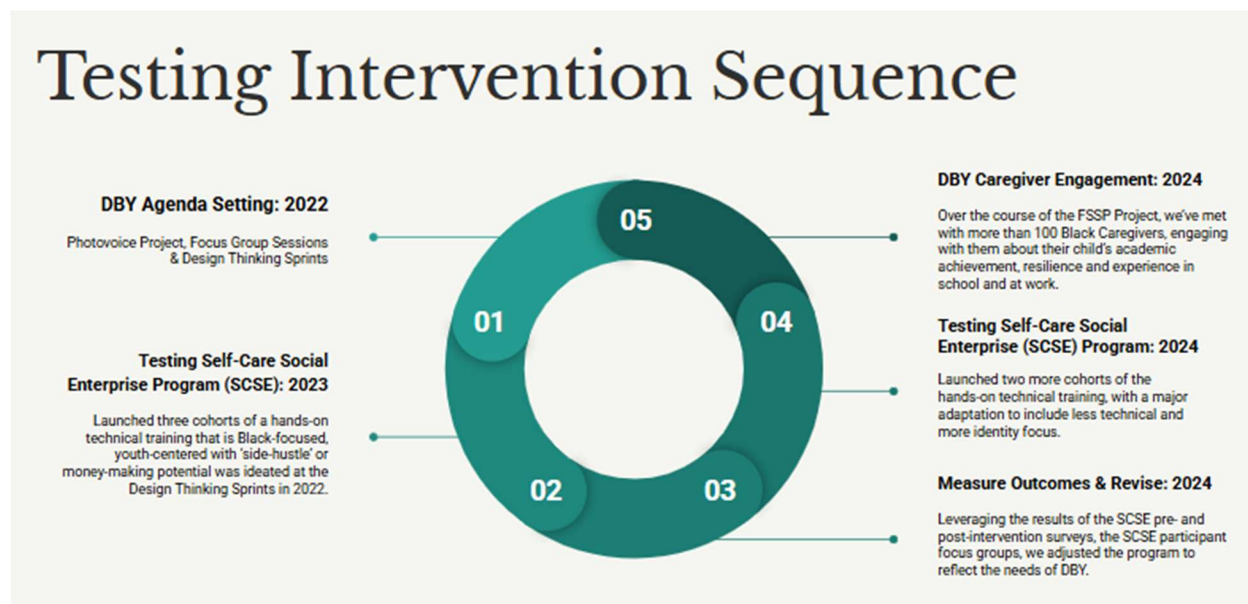
At the end of the first phase it was identified that recruitment of NEET youth required more lead time, relationship and trust building. Appropriate wrap around support services including mental health support has to be a key component of program delivery. One of the centres had youths involved in the criminal justice system who were not able to complete the program because they got incarcerated.

In the first round of program delivery the focus was technical, such as learning basic hair care principles and understanding different hair types and textures. In response to program feedback, the second round added identity and business-oriented focus areas including
- Paying taxes
- Purchasing of supplies
- Renting chair or owning space
- Professionalization opportunities: courses, investing in equipment, the importance of

- using social media to promote
- Branding
- Goal setting in business
- Client retention
- Services provided
- Saving, Credit, Budgeting

Chart 1. Social Enterprise Testing Intervention Sequence

Testing Intervention Sequence

DBY Agenda Setting: 2022

Photovoice Project, Focus Group Sessions & Design Thinking Sprints

Testing Self-Care Social Enterprise Program (SCSE): 2023

Launched three cohorts of a hands-on technical training that is Black-focused, youth-centered with 'side-hustle' or money-making potential was ideated at the Design Thinking Sprints in 2022.

01 02 03 04 05

DBY Caregiver Engagement: 2024

Over the course of the FSSP Project, we've met with more than 100 Black Caregivers, engaging with them about their child's academic achievement, resilience and experience in school and at work.

Testing Self-Care Social Enterprise (SCSE) Program: 2024

Launched two more cohorts of the hands-on technical training, with a major adaptation to include less technical and more identity focus.

Measure Outcomes & Revise: 2024

Leveraging the results of the SCSE pre- and post-intervention surveys, the SCSE participant focus groups, we adjusted the program to reflect the needs of DBY.

The Social Enterprise Programs were a result of a true ideation cycle. The first stage in this cycle we are calling Disenfranchised Black Youth (DBY) Agenda-Setting. In this stage we learned from the FSSP Steering Committee who shared their experiences through the Photovoice Project, Focus Group Sessions and Design Thinking Sprints. It was the FSSP Steering Committee who felt it was imperative that youth not just get access to soft skills, but that they get technical skills in a space that is designed for them.

Once the DBY set the agenda for our signature intervention, the team launched three cohorts of hands-on technical training that was Black-focused, youth-centered with direct side-hustle or money-making potential. The infrastructure for the curriculum was borrowed from a member of the FSSP Collective, Black Creek Community Health Centre who raised that they had a history of running this program in their Centre and it did very well for the youth they served.

Following the first three cohorts we expanded the program, as described earlier, from a technical focus (as instructed by the FSSP Steering Committee) to a combination of technical, identity and business focus areas - which was met with great satisfaction.

As evident in Figure 7, at the beginning of the program the DBY participating were intently focused on their desire to learn new skills that included: (1) the technical skill of grooming and hairstyling; (2) the social skill of making a client feel comfortable; (3) the business skill of designing a profitable business; (4) the social skills of making new friends and building community.

Figure 7. Participant Desired Outcomes for Pilot Interventions in Communities.
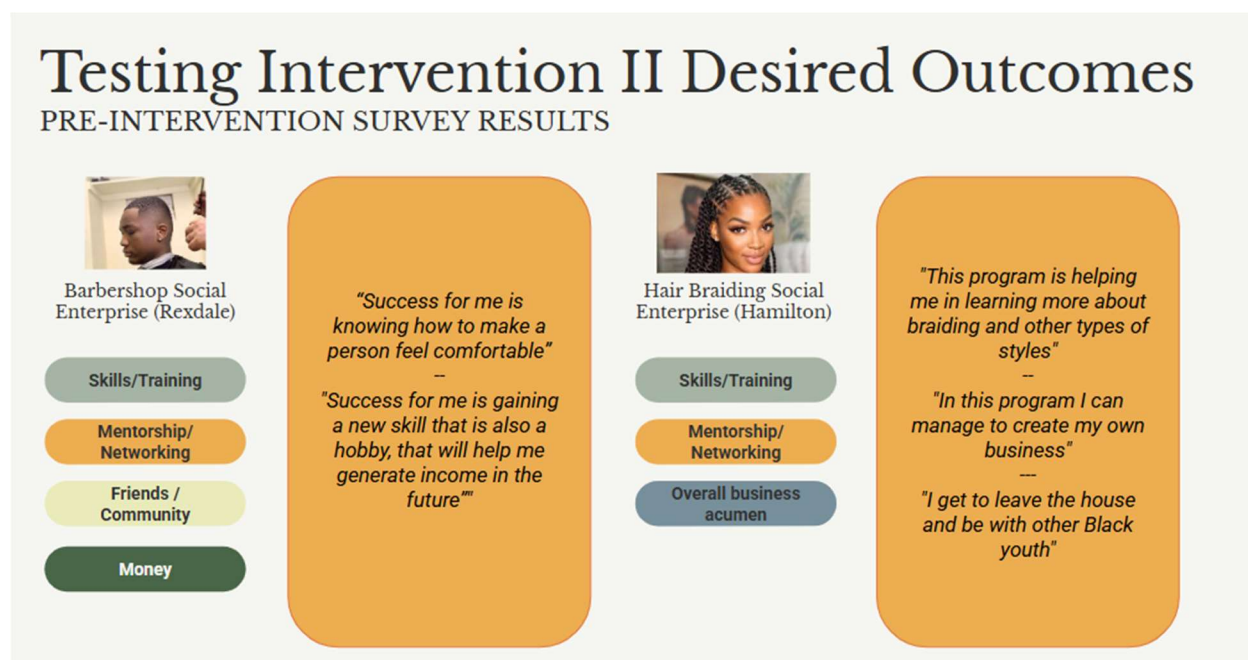
In Figure 8 we can see that DBY were pleasantly surprised and felt supported by the offering. Notably the outcomes in Figures 7 and 8 are ranked in terms of importance to the cohorts, and you will note that while skills and training rank highest in the importance (likely due to the lack of programs that feature this as a key component), other experiences outrank or are close to outranking the skills and training - demonstrating the importance of focusing on the whole person when offering training.

Hair Braiding: Working with Young Black Women in Hamilton

In our Hamilton sessions we learned that the hair braiding social enterprise program was very attractive to Black women experiencing NEET status. By the end of the program, participants shared that the entrepreneurial skills gained through the program were helpful in building their businesses. One participant shared that she can see the program benefits already.

"I joined this program when I didn't know anything and I didnt expect to know anything [by the end of the program]. And I was surprised to see that I know everything now. I can reduce expenses, I can make my own hair, I can make money. I even hope they will extend the program for more months so I can learn more."

Hair braiding in Afro-descendant communities is a core aspect of self-care. Given separation from African communities, hair braiding has fallen out of practice and is less common, and thus more difficult and expensive to find. Being able to braid hair reduces costs because the participant no longer needs to pay to have their hair done, they can do it themselves.
The participant quoted above also mentioned that they did not expect to learn as much as they did in the program, but were surprised at their skill development. Another participant shared that the program instructors who were teaching the technical hands-on skills were very encouraging despite a challenging and high-pressure environment.

"I can't say anything was easy, everything was difficult, but I really appreciate the teacher, the teacher was encouraging and made us feel good. She's so kind."

This asset-based positive development approach is created through a kind, encouraging instructor as well as a strong desire to acquire the skill - both of these elements resulted in an enormous shift in the confidence of the program participants. Their confidence was demonstrated through their willingness to put themselves out there, a few participants shared that they have offered to do the hair of people in their communities including family members, neighbours, and even other women in the program.

Participant 1: "What you see here I did myself (shows hair on camera) and we've done for other people around us, we keep trying with neighbors and children"
Participant 2: "For me I do my hair and my young sister's hair."

The skill development and confidence went further than the technical ability to do hair, it included the confidence that came from understanding how to time manage, knowing how to set prices, de-escalate conflict and professionally manage clientele. A couple of participants shared examples of this below.

"I know how to draw in henna and now I know how to braid, so now I can open my social media showing my pictures of what I do, people can see it and they can see what I do. In the morning I can go to school and in the evening I can work."
"I know how to handle customers, how to handle other employees, how to handle business, how to overcome any obstacles [problem solving], how to handle conflicts as a professional."

> *"I didn't have confidence. I was just doing it as a normal thing. Now I can charge my own price, I didn't take it as a serious thing. I know who I am right now. I do it like someone who knows what I want."*

The literature around economic resilience identifies that seeing oneself as possessing many skills with multiple options is key to surviving in a volatile labour market such as the one characterized by Ontario in the early 21st century.

It became evident from the discussion with program participants that referrals into the program were a key part of their commitment to the program. The participants felt seen and appreciated by their referrals, and did not want to let them down now that they had been given an opportunity. One participant shared that her social worker referred her to the program when she was going through a rough time.

> *"Valeria is a social worker and I went to go and see her, at the time I wasn't in a good place, and she said I'll get to come around people, see people and get to know people. But now I'm a pro and I know everything."*

Another participant shared that building rapport with staff at the Community Health Centre helped them get recognized for this opportunity.

> *"For me, that [hair braiding] was what I wanted to do with my life, but I didn't know how would go about doing that so I approached Patience and she said she would help me... so that's why I said to Patience there are things I don't know how to do and she said come and you'll get a certificate."*

We have learned through our work with NEET populations that transitions are important times for intervention. One participant mentioned that she knew she was not going to return to her job following her maternity leave and was seeking a business venture opportunity to help her make ends meet and this program was a great fit.

> *"I was trying to change careers before I went on maternity leave, and then Patience called me for this program and it was helpful. I can see a career for myself in braiding. I knew a lot about braiding but I wasn't confident in myself, but after this program I am confident now."*

The Hamilton session included 11 of the 12 program participants, most of whom rated their program experience a 9 or 10 out of 10, ten being the best experience with no room for

Improvement. A few recommendations for program improvement were given by the participants. Notably, even the recommendations were overwhelmingly positive and demonstrated the need for a program that is longer in duration or broader in scope.

> *"I felt like I learned a lot, there were lots of things that I didn't know what to do. I thought I couldn't do it. And the things I did know I felt there wasn't a market for them here in Canada. I want God to bless you so much for this program."*

> *"My recommendation is that if there are any other programs like this, do not hesitate to tell us about it."*

Figure 8. Participant Observed Outcomes for Pilot Interventions in Communities.
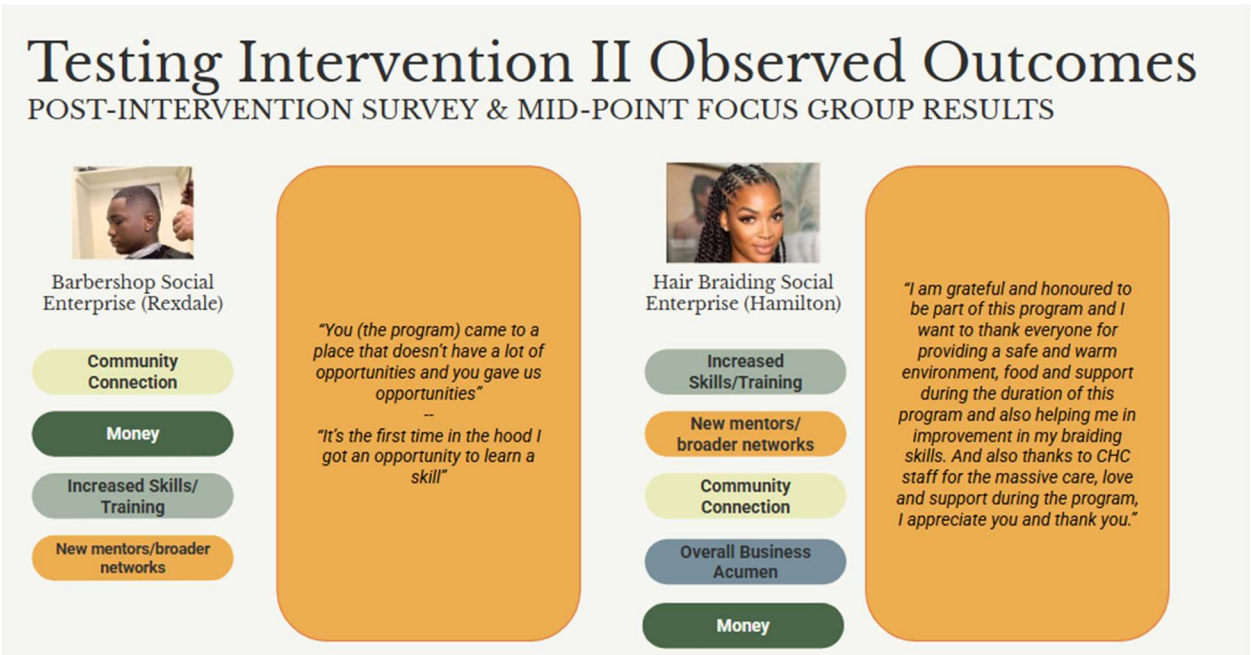
Policy Discussion

Our point of departure is the recognition arrived at by numerous studies and community observation that Black youth experience systemic marginalization in mainstream society and as a result, they do not feel like a valued part of Toronto and are alienated from its mainstream activities.

In 2001, the Canadian population was 2.2% Black, by 2021, the Canadian population almost doubled reaching 4.3% and it is expected to double again by 2041. The Black population is younger than the general Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022) which only further

highlights the need to focus on educational attainment as it is a significant part of escaping NEET status. While our public discourse language has never stated this explicitly, "policymakers have interpreted Black urban poverty as pathological--as the product of individual and cultural deficiencies" (Hinton, 2016, p.3). These deficiencies propel NEET status culturally.

The Ontario Government maintains direct responsibility in the policy, programming, oversight and funding for a variety of human services that can directly influence youth marginalization in Toronto, including health, education, social and employment services, law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Table 1. Typology of Policy Intervention.

Upstream	Downstream
Pre-Neet	Post-Neet

An important lesson from this system change exercise has been that the purpose and the source of the intervention should contribute tremendously to their design. An upstream intervention refers to strategies or actions that address the underlying factors contributing to a problem. These programs will mitigate the effect of unfortunate, but common milestones such as employment terminations, the end of a training or education program, or moving to a different geographic area. The upstream interventions fall within Section I of this report, as they fall in line with the desire for the Project. Pre-NEET interventions exist to honour the reality that it is better for Black youth to be able to find programs and services that support them to remain connected to systems and remain embedded in their communities as they transition out of an employment, educational or training experience. The period immediately following a NEET experience is a sensitive time where needs will vary from individual to individual and wraparound services are critical to ensuring a rebuilding of trust, self-esteem and self-confidence. A downstream intervention refers to strategies or actions that address the immediate effects of a problem.

Recommendations

While the From School to Success Pipeline Project did much more than originally anticipated, it is important to reflect on whether the project delivered on the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes that were set at the beginning.

In the words of York University Professor, Dr. Uzo Anucha, "improving economic outcomes for Black youth must include a multi-directional empowerment process that promotes equitable

change on an individual, interpersonal, and institutional level" (p.9), there are few organizations better placed to facilitate such a process than Ontario Community Health Centres (CHCs). Ontario CHCs are the biggest advocates for social determinants of health in the province. They understand how education, employment and training are underpinned by food security, housing stability, race, gender and health.

All primary evidence from the Disenfranchised Black Youth and their caregivers, as well as the secondary evidence from the literature suggests that Disenfranchised Black Youth are pushed out of school and thus struggle to find a safe place to return to once their life has not gone to plan. Unfortunately, Black youth need a safe place to return to once their life has not gone to plan. They need a place with friendly and familiar faces, resources and service navigators and should be able to rely on guided programs with a clear stated objective.

Table 2. FSSP Recommendations Summary

	Prevention	**Restoration**	**Advancement**
For Youth	Exposure Programs for Critical Transitions	Expanded Social Enterprise Program	Long-term Check-In Program run by Ministry of Education
For Caregiver	Saturday Programs		Access to Social Enterprise Program

Recommendations for Prevention

For youth, we are recommending community-based, Black-led and Black-focused transition support for DBY moving from Grade 8 (Middle or Elementary School) to Grade 9 (Secondary School), a transition preparation service for DBY one full-year in advance of graduation, in the summer between Grades 11 and 12. The interventions should be responsive to the needs of the children and may include mentors at a certain stage, job-shadowing at a later stage, or even trips to college and university campuses or skilled training centres. It is imperative that these interventions be run by an organization with a Black-centered, holistic approach to asset-based positive development like TAIBU Community Health Centre. Underpinning these interventions is how exposure programs reinforce the presence of a social safety net for young people. In our focus groups with NEET youth, the shame and humiliation that characterized their NEET status prolonged the experience of disconnection. In response we are advocating that these exposure programs are hosted by a permanent, welcoming organization that is a permanent fixture in the community. This will give the DBY a safe place to land if they experience NEET status later. It is critical that they have somewhere to come back to if they fail out of post-secondary education or lose a member of their family and need support resources to remain on track.

For caregivers, we are recommending a weekly Black-led community-based drop-in intervention to take place weekly on Saturdays. Throughout our frequent discussions with various diverse groups of Black parents (Francophone, Muslim, Newcomer, Educators) we learned that there is a great need to demystify the fear and perception that parents have both when they are seeking basic information about their child, and when they are looking to challenge a decision made about their child's behaviour, identity, or future. The solution for Black caregivers was a greater focus on resources that could empower them, Jo Rowlands (1997) notes that in order for empowerment to take root it should include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as capable of taking on decision-making, empowerment requires that the people impacted come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence. Saturday Programs have the ability to place caregivers in a position where they have control over the family-school relationships that are such strong determinants of their child's educational achievement.

Recommendations for Restoration

For youth and young adults who experience NEET status our recommendation is for an expanded Social Enterprise Program that covers the technical, identity-based and commercial aspects of starting one's own business. Youth and caregivers alike are looking forward to future cohorts of the hair braiding and barbershop programs that we piloted in their communities; and have more ideas for skills we could help them acquire so they can build their own businesses including sewing, video editing and automobile mechanic skills.

This raises a concern, where has vocational training gone and can it be brought back to our public secondary schools? With the growth in the importance of college, university and the knowledge economy "there has been a rapid and continuing decline in the number of students enrolled in vocational courses in secondary schools over the past decade" (Smaller, 2003, p.96). We cannot attest to the wider appeal across non-Black communities, but the Black community sees the need for reintegrating vocational courses like Home Economics, Woodworking and Autoshop back into the secondary school core curriculum.

Recommendations for Advancement

For caregivers, we would like to honour a request they made to our team. Following the success of our social enterprise hair braiding and barbershop programs, caregivers requested a cohort dedicated to helping them learn new skills in a Black-led, safe space in their communities. Offering caregivers access to this training would support younger children still supported by these caregivers and would make caregivers more resilient against our volatile labour market and its cycles of expansion and contraction.

A modern, inclusive approach to labour market advancement integrates consistent critical skill-development, mobility, well-being and equity. While we cannot control equity among employers in the labour market, the Ministry of Education has a significant amount of influence over critical

skill-development, mobility and well-being. Our recommendation for advancement is a decade-long check in program. In this program a central office would be responsible for calling all Black students who were registered in a Ministry-funded school in ninth grade -- at age 14-- twice a year, every year for ten years. Ideally, this effort will function as a tether, where the young person regardless of whether they drop-out of school, graduate with honours, move to another city, town or county, will receive access to a system navigator from age 14 to 24.

Within this recommendations are two needs that were articulated through all of the youth and young adults we spoke to during the FSSP lifecycle. First, when things go wrong Disenfranchised Black Youth do not know where to go. Providing them with a central phone number or email, or even allowing them to wait until they get a phone call or email, is a simple but life altering intervention. Second, Disenfranchised Black Youth are struggling to stay the course between age 14 and 24. Some of them are pushed out of school because school is not safe and nurturing for them; others are pulled out of school because they are needed to support their families; some make it to university only to find they do not have the life skills to thrive in the new environment; others lose the only job they have ever had and don't have the tools to build a new resume or get the skills they need for their next opportunity. While these concerns are not limited to youth ages 14 to 24, they are amplified and correlate with poorer achievement outcomes if these initial struggles in early adulthood do not build resilience.

CONCLUSION

The From School to Success Pipeline project reimagines the trajectory of Black youth in Canada by centering community-driven solutions that prevent exclusion, restore dignity, incorporate family as a key influence and promote advancement of the whole person.

By identifying early indicators of NEET status and implementing tailored interventions, the project directly confronts the systemic barriers that push Black youth to the margins. The focus on prevention recognizes that equitable support must begin early, with culturally relevant tools and targeted programming that address root causes such as poverty, mental health challenges, and institutional bias. This shift in focus--from criminalization to care--lays the groundwork for long-term, sustained empowerment.

In prioritizing restoration and advancement, the FSSP Collective demonstrates that meaningful reintegration and success are possible when institutions engage in trust-building. And when youth are equipped with the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

Ultimately, this project offers not just a counter-narrative to the school-to-prison pipeline, but a transformative framework that builds systems of possibility, care, community, family and equal opportunity for Black youth across Ontario.

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