

THE FOUR PILLARS

Hamilton Community Foundation's **ABACUS** initiative is based on four pillars that are common to early intervention programs that are successful in encouraging and supporting high school success and participation in post-secondary education, especially among those who face disadvantages.¹ The four pillars are:

1. **Academic upskilling:** Students need to perform well academically
2. **Counselling and mentorship:** They need access to support and guidance through mentorship
3. **Information and goal-setting:** They learn to set goals as well as aspire to and believe they are able to attend PSE
4. **Incentives:** They need to receive financial and other incentives to reduce barriers to success in the educational journey.

While these are described as four distinct pillars, there is overlap and interplay between them: they are mutually supportive, working best in combination. Goal-setting often occurs because of a mentorship relationship. Mentorship can take the form of an academic coach – and improved academic performance is the result. Financial incentives can encourage parents to think about the possibility of post-secondary education and aspirations or goal-setting for their children.

In practice not all pillars have equal weighting within a program. Programs will emphasize different pillars depending upon their program goal, population being served, and program approach. Additionally, not all programs are able to offer supports from all four pillar categories. In these instances, programs are encouraged to consider partnership opportunities that help increase access to additional supports.

We are also learning that comprehensive early intervention programs require things that may be seen as falling outside of the ABACUS four-pillar framework including:

- Parent involvement
- Cultural awareness of students' backgrounds
- Basic needs
- Foundational literacy skills
- Extra-curricular activities

¹ Deller, F. (2014). Getting there from here: Early intervention programs: A background report for the Hamilton Community Foundation. Hamilton, ON: Hamilton Community Foundation. [link to document](#)

Finally, we understand that not all youth are ready to connect with an intensive, multiple-pillar program and that engagement type programs play an important role in reaching youth who face multiple, complex barriers. Thus, programs that focus on offering learning enrichment opportunities are also an important part of ABACUS.

This document describes the intent of each of the four pillars with examples and possible indicators of success.

Pillar #1: Academic upskilling -- increasing achievement and preparedness

Intent To ensure students are academically prepared and equipped to graduate from high school and pursue PSE.

Description Programs/initiatives that support youth to obtain the necessary grades, skills, and self-confidence to succeed in middle school and move forward in their high school and post-secondary education. Because of their strong correlation to academic performance, this pillar also includes programs that increase the engagement and attendance of youth in school classes and interest in learning more generally.

Examples

- Afterschool homework support
- Formal tutoring programs
- Computer literacy
- Non-traditional classroom approaches to learning and engagement and promoting school attachment.

Potential success indicators

- Improved grades and improved literacy and/or numeracy scores
- Improved learning skills or soft skills
- Increased attendance at school and school-related activities (including ABACUS programs)
- Increased engagement in academic activities or ABACUS programs

Pillar #2: Counselling and mentorship

Intent To ensure youth have support and guidance that will enable and encourage success in high school and the pursuit of PSE.

Description Middle-school students, especially those who face educational disadvantages, benefit from support and guidance in their lives. This support can come from teachers, community members and other role models. It also can take different forms: formal mentorship, role modeling, and in some cases peer mentorship. In the best case, this support and guidance can also move into a more action-oriented space of working as an advocate and a connector for the student. It also allows for the development of a trusting, safe and reflective relationship that can enable challenging youth to grow and succeed.

Examples A variety of forms of counselling and mentorship increase the likelihood of PSE attendance, such as:

- Formal adult 1:1 mentorship programs
- Counselling services
- Access to community role models
- School guidance counsellors
- Peer mentoring
- Peer group activities and parental engagement.

Potential success indicators

- Increased number of trusting relationships with adults and/or positive peer support network(s)
- Improved education pathway planning
- Improved self-esteem and confidence
- Improved feeling of connectedness to school and/or improved sense of identity
- Improved soft skills including conflict resolution, communication, etc.

Pillar #3: Information and goal-setting

Intent To ensure students and families understand the paths to high school completion and post-secondary participation and are inspired to pursue those paths. It is also intended to raise aspirations among students and parents for post-secondary attendance.

Description Many decisions made during the middle-school years affect a student's educational path, including their possibility for a post-secondary education. Encouraging and supporting students to set educational and career goals that include success in high school and PSE attendance are critical to that process. Exposure to the different career possibilities and PSE programs allow the student to have a wider choice and may bring about additional or new interests. Increased knowledge about financial support programs for PSE may help encourage students and their parents to consider a PSE trajectory. Middle-school students may have a tendency to set shorter-term, interest-based goals which can then enable a discussion about how these shorter-term goals relate to longer-term plans. Goal-setting needs to be linked to each child's level, but needs to directly link current short-term goals to longer-term PSE aspirations.

Examples

- Parental education and awareness initiatives around PSE
- Financial literacy
- Information workshops for parents and youth
- Exposure to different careers and role models
- Support in mapping choices related to high school courses and long term career goals and eventually applying for student financial assistance and post-secondary education.
- Programs that raise aspirations for youth to attend post-secondary education such as academic summer programming
- Time spent on college/university campuses and career planning.

Potential success indicators

- Increased knowledge of PSE programs and options
- Improved understanding of high school course selection that enables PSE participation
- Increased financial savings for PSE
- Improved parental support for PSE attendance
- Increased knowledge of possible career paths (and the student's ability to articulate a career path)
- Increased number of visits to, and familiarity with, PSE campuses.

Pillar #4: Incentives

Intent To encourage activities that will result in high-school success and PSE participation as well as reducing barriers that create educational disadvantages for students. Programs should clearly describe how the incentive will increase the likelihood of success in high school and pursuit of PSE.

Description Incentives can be important strategies to encourage activities and behavior. They can also be used to reduce barriers to participation in programs. For middle-school students, incentives should be short-term and not be monetary. As a general rule (with exceptions), middle-school students have a harder time conceptualizing (and therefore being motivated by) money. Financial incentives can be a strategy to encourage parental engagement and involvement. With any incentive, it should not simply be offered to students to provide a fun exposure opportunity hoping this may “spark” something in the student. If incentives are offered correctly (time, size and attractiveness) they should not only provide an exposure opportunity to students but should also directly link their experiences to future thinking, aspiration building and PSE.

Examples

- Supports such as bus tickets, meal programs, or program materials to encourage program participation
- Experiential incentives or reward activities for improved behavior, marks or attendance.
- They could include encouragement and incentives for parents to start saving for PSE.

Potential success indicators

- Increased number of program participants
- Improved participant program attendance or completion
- Improved grades
- Increased school attendance
- Increased number of parents with savings for PSE.