



# **R.I.S.E. (REACH INSPIRE SOAR EMPOWER) ACADEMY YEAR 2 (2025- 2026) EVALUATION REPORT**

This report contains highlights of an independent evaluation conducted by the Students Commission of Canada on the specific results of the R.I.S.E. (Reach Inspire Soar Empower) Academy grant, funded by Catapult Canada through the Rideau Hall Foundation. Catapult Canada is a national platform dedicated to increasing equitable access to learning opportunities for youth across Canada. Specifically, Catapult Canada invests in community-based organizations committed to improving educational outcomes for youth through innovative approaches.

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March 2026**



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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The Impact NOW! initiative, launched by R.I.S.E. (Reach Inspire Soar Empower), provides equitable, personalized, and community-rooted education for marginalized, racialized, and low-income youth. Through hands-on, inquiry-based learning, students earn high school credits while building essential life skills, exploring career pathways, and developing leadership abilities. Grounded in equity, student-centered learning, community engagement, and workforce readiness, the initiative aligns with UN Sustainable Development Goal #4: Quality Education.

This report highlights the program's progress in its second and final year of Catapult grant funding, demonstrating how the initiative has continued to evolve, strengthen, and scale its impact through sustained community partnerships and youth-centered programming.

Impact NOW! serves as an early-intervention model, engaging at-risk youth (ages 14–21) in meaningful, skill-building activities before they disengage from school or employment pathways. By combining alternative education, entrepreneurship, and mentorship, the program helps prevent academic dropout, unemployment, and social isolation, key risk factors for marginalized youth. Weekly workshops, hands-on business development, and social enterprise projects equip participants with financial literacy, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. Credit-bearing opportunities support academic progress, while exposure to mentors, industry professionals, and real-world business experiences fosters confidence, career readiness, and a stronger sense of belonging. Over the final grant year, these supports were further deepened through expanded credit pathways and strengthened mentorship networks.

Designed for 15–20 high school-aged youth, the program takes place at The Caldwell Family Centre in Ottawa on Mondays from 4:30 PM to 7:00 PM. It offers a collaborative, community-driven environment where participants actively contribute to community improvement while gaining future-focused skills.

Key program components include collaborative community projects, event planning, and social enterprise creation. Youth work together to make The Caldwell Family Centre more welcoming and engaging, address challenges such as low youth participation, and strengthen community connection. They plan events to increase youth engagement and can design and launch social enterprises that directly benefit the community. In its final Catapult-funded year, these components were enhanced with more structured project cycles, greater integration of community feedback, and expanded leadership roles for returning participants for continued youth ownership and enhanced youth and community engagement.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION - CONTINUED

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Beyond academics, Impact NOW! supports the development of project management, entrepreneurship, collaboration, and leadership skills that prepare youth for postsecondary success and future careers. The final year of Catapult support enabled R.I.S.E. to refine these skill-building outcomes, document effective practices, and strengthen partnerships and resources for sustaining continuity.

With the completion of its two-year Catapult Canada grant through the Rideau Hall Foundation, R.I.S.E. Academy concludes this phase of its work aligned with Catapult's broader goals: creating safe community spaces, empowering youth and families, supporting career pathways, and addressing challenges faced by diverse communities.

## REPORT METHODOLOGY

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In partnership with the Students Commission of Canada (SCC) through its Sharing the Stories (STS) program, R.I.S.E. conducted an evaluation of the Impact NOW! initiative. This report summarizes insights gathered from students, program staff, and youth mentors through a focus-group interview process. The evaluation captures the experiences of youth interns who work directly with participants, offering firsthand perspectives on the program's effectiveness and overall impact.

## EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

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The Impact NOW! initiative by R.I.S.E. Academy continued to create a safe, structured, and inclusive environment that enhanced youth engagement and positive experiences. The program emphasized an uplifting atmosphere and community-building exercises to foster mutual understanding and trust among participants. The structured approach included involving community members in planning to prioritize meeting the needs and preferences of the students. As the initiative moved into its second year, staff noted that these foundational strengths continued to be embedded in the program's culture, consistently contributing to strong participation and positive youth outcomes.

Inclusivity was a keystone of the initiative, addressing equity in education and providing a platform for marginalized voices. By focusing on vulnerable communities and removing barriers, the program became more accessible and inclusive, accommodating diverse voices and experiences. Youth engagement was a critical aspect, with the program involving students in decision-making and providing culturally relevant learning experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and motivation. Additional insights gathered from program staff and facilitators reinforced that these inclusive practices remained equally strong throughout the second year, with youth continuing to express feeling welcomed, heard, and represented in programming. Staff highlighted that maintaining these practices has allowed relationships to deepen and trust to strengthen over time.

Overall, the Impact NOW! initiative was said to be effective in creating a dynamic and inspiring environment where youth could thrive and succeed. By integrating culturally relevant learning experiences and valuing diverse forms of intelligence, the program empowered students to pursue their passions and achieve academic success. These impacts were not limited to its first year; facilitators observed that the same level of enthusiasm, empowerment, and motivations persisted into the second year, demonstrating the program's consistency and long-term effectiveness.

As the Impact NOW! Initiative concluded its second and final year of Catapult funding, evaluation findings showed that the program continued to uphold and strengthen its commitment to a safe, structured, and inclusive environment. Students, program, and youth mentors alike reported sustained engagement, deeper relationships, and consistent positive outcomes. Overall, the second-year evaluation reaffirms the program's lasting impact and effectiveness beyond its initial funding period.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS: FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW WITH STUDENTS

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R.I.S.E. Academy held five focus group sessions with 14 (n=14) out of 27 (n=27) students enrolled (51.85%) to gain insight into their experiences and the impact of the program. The qualitative analysis that follows highlights key themes that emerged from the discussions, supported by representative quotes and frequency counts. Across all themes, the program appears to foster a rich ecosystem of learning that blends entrepreneurial skill-building, mentorship, community engagement, and personal development. Although the quotes that follow reflect student input, It is important to note that students also serve as staff leaders in programming through their roles as interns and facilitators.

Youth describe feeling supported, empowered, and connected, experiences that for many of them stand in contrast to their traditional schooling experiences. The emphasis on responsibility, diversity, collaboration, and real-world experience contributes to strong growth in both practical competencies and socio-emotional skills. Collectively, these insights portray a program that not only teaches youth how to build businesses but also equips them with confidence, agency, and community rootedness that extend far beyond the program's duration.

## Individual Outcomes

### Positive Experiences (5)

The following quotes highlight positive experiences, showing that participants found the program enjoyable, socially meaningful, and skill-building. Students describe feeling motivated to attend because activities were “fun,” forming friendships and even collaborating on small business projects that boosted confidence and creativity. They emphasize gaining practical skills such as professionalism, craftsmanship, baking knowledge, and patience that they apply beyond the program. Overall, the reflections show that Impact NOW! fosters a supportive environment where youth discover their capabilities, build relationships, and develop both personal and vocational skills.

*“You know, [student] kept begging me [to stay] and then I just found it fun at [one] point... [coming] to R.I.S.E. [was] fun...”*

*“My experience here has been good. So far, I have made some friends and I [have a] partner... my friend... with a business named [name of business] and we're doing good so far... I like it... I like when customers come around and check our bracelets...”*

*“[Name of staff member] actually elevated the program for me on a good path... and really just elevated my [knowledge in] baking, and I just really like it overall.”*

*“I would say the program, [the program] make(s) us [realize] what we're capable of. Like, most people don't even know [what] they can do... like [a] bracelet... Everyone thinks they can [start a] business... but, like, being... so good and professional at [it]... it's like a different thing... to be able to do it and be professional at it. [It's] two different things... it [helped] us with [so] many things... like what we know how to do... how to keep us busy and creative... So that's a positive part.”*

*“I learned a lot of patience here... [and] applied [it] to my life, like my personal life.”*

## Appropriate Structure (7)

The following quotes highlight the program's effective structure which supports youth engagement by offering a consistent routine, clear guidance, and a well-organized environment that fosters growth. Participants describe being drawn in by the welcoming atmosphere and predictable schedule, which helped establish positive habits and a sense of belonging. Youth highlight that the structured components such as step-by-step business development, leadership from staff, expectations around punctuality, and credit earning criteria, provided direction and accountability while still allowing room for exploration and entrepreneurship.

Even when initially perceived as strict or confusing, the structure ultimately enabled students to understand expectations, stay motivated, and work toward meaningful goals. Suggestions for meeting more frequently or having a designated space further show that participants recognize the value of structure and want even stronger organizational supports to help them succeed.

*"I just really like the atmosphere... after [student] kept begging us to join... it became a routine..."*

*"I was coming to The Caldwell Family Centre for a different program, which was youth drop in. And then it when I got in, I saw that there was another meeting happening. So, then I asked one of the adults... They told me, [that they were hosting the Impact NOW! program] and [that] this [was] R.I.S.E. Academy. They do this, this, this, and this... I got interested. I was like, 'Oh, that's really cool!' and then they said, 'Oh yeah, you want to come in? There's food inside.' ... after I heard that, I was like, 'Yes, yes, I want to go in and see what's going on'... I've been in the program since September, well... since October, and I've been here since."*

*"This program to me... was a really good experience. Honestly, because it gave me a chance to experiment a little bit with something I never tried before. Like I never tried to make my own business. I didn't know how to start. I [didn't] know what the first step was, but this program was a way for me to explore that and experience that... see how [one] can do it, like the steps to it and how to succeed in it. This is the thing about this whole program, [R.I.S.E. Academy] wants you to succeed. So, they will help you anyhow... to succeed in whatever you're doing. That's why I really like this program. So that's why it really means to me, a new experience to explore, to get experience on how to basically be an entrepreneur..."*

*Additionally, this program [is like] networking in the sense that I'm getting to meet people that can help me in the future. For example, like [names of staff members], or my mentors... are important people that if ever I need anything that's related to this, or maybe someone else is interested in it, it can be something that can help them. [R.I.S.E. Academy will] help me... in the future, you see... [you've] got to think ahead."*

*"Coming here with a good mood, nice energy, good spirit, elevating those around you, and just being a fun person overall... It was [the staff's] leadership that really puts us in place in the [program] [and their] charisma. It's [staff members] authority [that] really elevates us and makes us even better [people] than we are and in the [place in the program]."*

*"You know, I've learned that you should always be on time and that you should always... get stuff done. I've learned how to bake."*

*"At the beginning, I didn't really like it. I thought it was boring. But coming here more made me open my eyes... because I'm failing a lot of classes in school, but here I can earn a credit... I think it's annoying. It's really strict... to earn a credit is hard... Well, at first, I didn't really understand the [Impact NOW!] program... But then when I asked more questions to [staff], now I understand. At first, I didn't even know, like, [we were] getting credits at all... You know, we're creating [a] business..."*

*"I think that what could have been better is to meet up more than just Mondays, maybe twice a week instead, like Monday and Wednesday... just for those people who have those... businesses... but sometimes... they can't do it at home, so they have to come to the center to do it... because there's more space. Maybe more resources for them to do it. So, meeting up more than once a week, and maybe like a space, like an actual building for themselves for Impact NOW! like a designated place, location for the program."*

### **Inclusive (5)**

The following quotes convey that the program fosters a genuinely inclusive environment where youth from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed, connected, and engaged. Participants describe the space as community-oriented, fun, and supportive, allowing them to meet new people, make friends, and learn alongside peers with different cultures and perspectives. The growing number of participants further signals that the environment feels open and accessible to many. Youth also highlight how the program encourages collaboration, risk-taking, and shared learning, while staff create a culturally welcoming atmosphere that embraces diversity. Overall, the reflections demonstrate that the program builds a sense of belonging and encourages interaction among a wide range of young people, reinforcing its inclusive nature.

*"It gave me the opportunity to learn new stuff... open my eyes a little bit ... I did like the Expo, but we didn't sell anything... [However, I did end up] meeting new people [like] my friends... I think it's a great space... Especially [how Impact NOW! program] belongs to a community... It's a fun [activity] for kids in this community."*

*"The amount of people that were in the program. Because when we [started at R.I.S.E. Academy], there [were two students] always coming, and [another student] really [and] just for fun ... Now there's, like, lots of people that would come here, because before, the seats were never this full. There's always a good spot for me, now [the center is] always full, even the couches."*

*"You know, I feel like we've facilitated very well, not only because there's a lot of different cultures here, but because the way that [they] welcome those different cultures."*

*"Working with different groups, different types of people and stuff... It always helps to be open to that conversation."*

*"Yes, I would recommend this program first. Not all my friends, but certain. Because I recommend this program for people who are willing to learn, willing to take risks... Willing to work together. And some of my friends are not like that."*

### **Safe Environment (4)**

The quotes reflect that the program provides a safe, positive environment where youth feel comfortable, supported, and able to grow. Participants describe arriving without knowing anyone and quickly realizing the group was friendly, approachable, and easy to connect with, helping them open up socially. The atmosphere is consistently described as positive and far more relaxed and encouraging than school settings, giving students the confidence to try new things, such as learning baking skills or balancing personal challenges with program expectations. Youth also associate the space with meaningful opportunities—earning credits, gaining experience, and increasing job readiness—which reinforces that the environment is secure, supportive, and oriented toward their well-being and success.

*“My experience with the group is actually very positive, because firstly, I was here at [The Caldwell Family Centre]. I didn't know anybody, and so I was here to talk to people. But then after coming here every Monday, I realized these people aren't really that bad, they are chill. I can talk to them casually. You know, because we're all kind of the same age. So, it was like that, any difficulties that I faced... well, one of them identifies doing business on the side, plus having to balance it out with schoolwork.”*

*“Oh, just getting to learn new skills and learning how to bake stuff. So, I was never much of a baker until now.”*

*“I would say the community...The people that you are surrounded by. You know, it's a very positive vibe over here, and I feel like that is way different than if I was in a school setting.”*

*“R.I.S.E. is a great place... You get nice credits and... it's a nice environment. ... [Youth gain] lots of experience [and it's] easier to get a job if you work here.”*

## New Opportunities (6)

The quotes highlight that the program opens clear pathways to new opportunities by offering youth access to academic credits, income earning possibilities, and hands-on entrepreneurial experience. Participants emphasize that the chance to make money, earn credits, and learn business skills motivated them to join and stay engaged. They describe meaningful real-world opportunities that expand their confidence and future prospects, such as selling products at expos, gaining exposure for their businesses, and building online traction. The program also provides a space to test ideas, explore interests, and replace traditional courses with more practical, relevant learning. Overall, the reflections show that the program serves as a launchpad for personal, academic, and entrepreneurial growth, giving youth avenues they would not have otherwise accessed.

*"I thought it was so important... I heard [we] were making money and [we were going to] get high school credits."*

*"I joined the program because my sister recommended it to me and said it might be a good fit... I could learn some stuff and get [credits]... I think it's unique how they're teaching us about business... Like, how we can support ourselves in the real world..."*

*"You know, all these opportunities that I keep getting... for my personal business... are really great for me, and they're one of the really big factors that just keep me coming to R.I.S.E."*

*"[Attending R.I.S.E. has] led us to getting [into] [Black Business] expos [where] people [have been] buying our [products] and [hassled] us [to gaining] traction online... From the expo and people just leaving with smiles on their faces after we [prepped all our products]."*

*"I dropped accounting, so I'm just like using this business credit to fill that."*

*"I like the program. I recommend it to people that are not sure what they want to do. If they have like an idea of their own, they come here and like test out."*

### *Increased Entrepreneurial Skills (3)*

Participant quotes consistently highlight the program's role in building concrete entrepreneurial abilities. Youth describe gaining hands-on experience in areas such as business development, marketing, and financial management, skills they feel are rarely taught in traditional classrooms. The opportunity to learn how to start a business "from the beginning" helps demystify the entrepreneurial process and give participants a tangible sense of competence.

Real-world activities, such as participating in community markets, allow youth to apply concepts in practical settings, reinforcing their understanding of how business ideas evolve into functioning ventures. This experiential learning environment enables them to explore previously unrecognized interests, expand their entrepreneurial mindset, and build the confidence needed to take initiative on future projects.

*"Moi aussi j'ai appris beaucoup pour commencer un business. C'était un concept assez neuf pour moi, j'ai déjà travaillé pour beaucoup de business, mais j'ai Jamais commencé du début et c'était vraiment intéressant de voir et d'apprendre."*

*"Pour développer mes compétences en entrepreneuriat parce que je trouve que c'est très important comme delà de l'école d'apprendre comme un savoir faire aux jeunes pour savoir pour qu'ils puissent découvrir donc d'autres passions en eux."*

*"Je pense que pour moi, j'ai vraiment développé des compétences en entrepreneuriat aussi en apprentissage."*

*English translations (in same order):*

*"I also learned a lot about starting a business. It was a fairly new concept for me; I've worked for many businesses before, but I've never started one from scratch, and it was really interesting to see and to learn."*

*"To develop my entrepreneurial skills, because I think it's very important, beyond school, to teach young people practical skills so they can discover other passions within themselves."*

*"I think that for me, I really developed entrepreneurial skills as well as learning skills."*

## **Career Skills and Exploration (2)**

Youth quotes also emphasize how the program supports their broader career development. Many see the experience as a chance to think critically about their futures beyond high school and discover new interests that could inform their post-secondary pathways. Through exposure to mentors, professionals, and various business models, participants gain insight into potential career trajectories and learn how to navigate workplace expectations. These interactions help them envision what daily professional life might look like and clarify the types of roles and environments they might pursue. The program serves as a meaningful bridge between school and the world of work, expanding students' awareness of career options and motivating them to plan for long-term success.

*“Trouver des nouvelles opportunités. Et je pense que c'est quelque chose qu'on apporte à chaque session ici à impact now et ça a beaucoup impacté les jeunes.”*

*“On est maintenant impliqué dans un groupe de trois à cinq personnes et on prévoit commencer un autre business pendant l'été qu'on va continuer avec.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“Finding new opportunities. And I think it's something we bring to every session here at Impact Now, and it has really had a big impact on the youth.”*

*“We are now involved in a group of three to five people, and we're planning to start another business during the summer that we will continue with.”*

## Life Skills and Personal Growth (2)

Alongside entrepreneurial and career development, youth quotes indicate significant growth in foundational life skills. They describe becoming more responsible, open-minded, and capable of engaging with people from diverse backgrounds. The program fosters essential social competencies such as communication, collaboration, and the ability to navigate interpersonal challenges, skills that participants recognize as necessary for everyday life in society. Being encouraged to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them also contributes to their personal development, helping them cultivate resilience and adaptability. This holistic growth extends beyond academic or professional domains, shaping their sense of identity, confidence, and preparedness for future challenges.

*“Ce qui m'a personnellement motivé à me joindre, c'est comme au au delà des compétences que j'apprends pendant les cours ou à l'école Je pouvais être à développer d'autres compétences en dehors de l'école, faire la connaissance de nouvelles personnes de la société d'apprendre de ceux qui sont déjà dans le monde du travail comment ils font, comment se passer leur journée, comment se passe au quotidien apprendre un plus de gens.”*

*“Que le but principal c'est d'apprendre Parce que si tu ne si tu apprends, si tu as peur de l'échec, si tu ne peux pas réussir parce qu'il Faut qu'on réussisse pour savoir maintenant quoi faire la prochaine fois.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“What personally motivated me to join is that, beyond the skills I learn in class or at school, I could develop other skills outside of school, meet new people in the community, and learn from those who are already in the working world — how they do things, what their day looks like, what their daily life is like — and learn from more people.”*

*“The main goal is to learn. Because if you're afraid of failure, you can't succeed, since you need to fail in order to know what to do next time.”*

## **Leadership Development, Responsibility, and Youth Empowerment (2)**

A recurring theme in the quotes is the program's emphasis on giving youth genuine responsibility and decision-making power. Participants feel trusted to take ownership of their projects, mentor peers, and shape their learning experiences. This empowerment, they explain, played a key role in producing positive outcomes. Being responsible for real tasks motivates them to stay committed, work diligently, and develop leadership skills. Several youths describe becoming leaders in their groups, taking initiative, and even planning to start businesses together outside the program. This sense of agency is transformative, reinforcing their belief that they could achieve meaningful goals and contribute to their communities.

*“Ce que j'ai développé en participant à ce programme. Je dirais que c'est être ouvert d'esprit puis aussi d'être vraiment responsable.”*

*“Il faut juste tirer qu'une caractéristique plus importante du programme qui ont permis d'obtenir des résultats positifs. Je dirais que c'est La responsabilité à cause pour une jeune ou une jeune qui a 15 ans, 16 ans 17 ans la responsabilité.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“What I developed by participating in this program—I would say it's being open-minded and also becoming truly responsible.”*

*“If I had to highlight one key aspect of the program that led to positive results, I would say it's responsibility, because for a young person who is 15, 16, or 17, responsibility is really important.”*

## Youth Engagement (4)

The quotes demonstrate that youth engagement grows organically through peer influence, varied activities, and meaningful hands-on experiences. Participants describe joining reluctantly initially, becoming invested as friends encouraged them and as the program offered dynamic, changing sessions that kept things interesting. Guest speakers, creative choice in business projects, and real accomplishments such as launching social media accounts, attending vendor fairs, and earning profit, strengthened motivation and ownership. Youth also note that the program shifted their perspectives, helping them see new possibilities and become excited about turning hobbies into real ventures. Overall, the reflections show increasing enthusiasm, active participation, and a sense of pride, illustrating strong and evolving youth engagement.

*"At first, it was boring, we didn't want to be here. ... [Then] actually [name of student] would be like... come with us. [We] were not doing all that... [Student] was begging. Like when I say begging, I mean begging... us to come [join the program]"*

*"I think it's cool [when different speakers come in] ... I'd say it's like a great space. It's not the same thing, but every single time it's different... It makes people more engaged... First, it was just for the credit [but I opened] my eyes and [the program made me start] thinking about how to do stuff in different ways."*

*"What has our group accomplished thus far... I would say a lot, from creating our own Instagram, TikTok, Website and our Gmail... like our way [for others to] reach us ... We [also] went to our first fair or vendors' market... wow, that was an experience. Oh, my goodness. And I'm proud of us for showing up there, staying there until the end and seeing it through, because it was our first time. So of course, we [were] kind of nervous, but I'm so glad we accomplished that... I would say we made a considerable amount... I will estimate and say around \$100 in profit. I'm not sure, it might be more, or less... It was the Black Business Expo and then the child business [event]..."*

*"Getting to choose what you can do, like choose what business you want to create and stuff."*

### Diversity (3)

The quotes show that the program embraces diversity by creating a space where youth from different cultural, linguistic, and personal backgrounds can connect, learn, and collaborate. Participants highlight how they meet new people, interact across differences, and feel comfortable despite occasional language barriers because others can support them. Diverse interests such as business, marketing, and creative activities like clothing printing, are welcomed and accessible, allowing students to explore what resonates with them. Youth also describe how shared cultural backgrounds can strengthen teamwork, while exposure to different cultures broadens their learning and social experiences. Overall, the reflections illustrate that the program values and supports diversity, making it a welcoming environment where varied identities, skills, and cultures enhance the collective experience.

*"I joined the program because... my friend told me to come... [I get to earn] credit(s)... Also, because I noticed... I like Impact NOW! a lot ... [R.I.S.E. teaches] us to study business and [learn about] marketing strategy ... I would say... printing... the clothes printing... [That's one that I liked, it's] so creative... I see the way people do it... [and] I've always been curious ... So, finally I saw the machine [that] they use [to makes prints on shirts and I get to use] it ... The participation was so good ... The reason we keep coming back is because there's literally nothing to do at home and [we] benefit a lot from [the Impact NOW! Program] ... I kind of feel like if I miss a day... like a Monday... the next time I come back, I [won't] be lost, right. I [can] be [on]... the same track with others ... That's why I keep coming back, and lowkey, the food... The unique [thing] about this place, is it's more comfortable than school there's freedom and everything... You meet new people, the way you interact, [the way] you learn, [and] from different people."*

*"...it gives people the chance to get to know different backgrounds... there is... somewhat of... a language barrier, but... It's not too hard... You have other people that probably speak the same language."*

*"We're both [name of background], so we have kind of a similar culture, and [name of staff] has [the same] background, like jewelry making, because [she's had] her own jewelry business before, right before R.I.S.E... So, her experience, was a big contribution to our business together, you know... The fact that we are both [of the same cultural background] really... helps [us] work better together, because we have the same language, [come from the] same country, like where we were born. So that helps [us] agree more on things and not fight over certain decisions or certain important decisions."*

## Social Outcomes

### Peer-to-Peer Mentorship and Collaborative Learning (3)

Another prominent theme in the quotes is the importance of peer-to-peer mentorship and collaborative engagement. Participants value having the opportunity to learn from others and share their own knowledge, creating a reciprocal learning environment. They often describe the program as a space where diverse ideas could be exchanged freely, helping them refine their own business concepts and discover new interests. This collaboration is facilitated by small-group interactions and one-on-one learning structures, which many youths preferred over more traditional, large-classroom formats. The close mentorship fosters deeper relationships, stronger communication skills, and a sense of shared ownership over the learning process. Some youth take on mentorship roles for the first time and express pride in their ability to support others.

*“Je pensais que c'était une merveilleuse opportunité de connecter avec des jeunes qui étaient motivés d'apprendre quelque chose de nouveau et prendre des risques.”*

*“Je voulais aussi donner du mentorat aux autres élèves, puis aussi apprendre de nouvelles idées à chaque journée.”*

*“C'était mon 1<sup>er</sup> expérience comme mentor et je pense que j'ai beaucoup appris et j'aime beaucoup ça et ça m'a beaucoup aidé à voir ça et à changer mon approche.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to connect with young people who were motivated to learn something new and take risks.”*

*“I also wanted to mentor other students and also learn new ideas every day.”*

*“It was my first experience as a mentor, and I think I learned a lot. I really enjoyed it, and it helped me a lot in seeing things differently and changing my approach.”*

### Networking with Career Mentors and Professional Role Models (1)

In addition to peer mentorship, youth highlight the value of engaging with mentors who were already working in entrepreneurial or professional fields. These interactions allow insight into real-world career pathways, daily work routines, and the personal experiences of successful business owners.

*“La chance de quand même parler avec des personnes qui ont eu beaucoup de succès avec leur entreprise.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“The chance to still be able to speak with people who have had a lot of success with their business.”*

## Community, Social Support, and Sense of Belonging (4)

A strong sense of community emerges as a defining element of the program. Youth emphasize how supported they felt by coordinators, mentors, and peers who genuinely cared about their growth. This contrasts sharply with their experiences in the school system, where large class sizes and limited time often leave them feeling unnoticed. In the program, participants feel valued and believe that adults are invested in their success.

*“La communauté nous apporte son soutien, on a le soutien les coordonnateurs nous apportent leur soutien par leur connaissance. On a le soutien de plusieurs personnes.”*

*“Moi je pense aussi qu'il n'y a aucun classe à l'école eue j'ai participé où tu as été capable de rencontrer tellement de gens qui dans un sens s'en fichent de toi. Tout le monde qui participe ici. Ils veulent le meilleur pour leur étudiant et je trouve que ce n'est pas toujours le cas à l'école. En termes. Tu as souvent un éducateur éducatrice qui est responsable pour 20 30 jeunes et c'est Pas dans leur intérêt de traiter chaque jeune comme spécial et assurer que chaque étudiant a l'opportunité de succéder dans ce programme. C'est plutôt Ici j'ai l'impression que tous les étudiants qui participent et qui reviennent chaque semaine ont l'impression qu'on est ici pour eux et c'est notre job d'être là pour eux.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“The community gives us their support; we have the support of the coordinators, who share their knowledge with us. We have support from many people.”*

*“I also think that in no class at school I've attended have you been able to meet so many people who genuinely care about you. Everyone who participates here wants the best for their students, and I find that isn't always the case at school. Often, a teacher is responsible for 20–30 students, and it's not really in their interest to treat each student as special or to ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed in a program. Here, by contrast, I feel that all the students who participate and return every week feel that we are here for them, and it's our job to be there for them.”*

The location of the program within a familiar community center also plays a key role. Being situated in a place where youth already live and recognize one another reduced barriers to participation, strengthens trust, and makes it easier to engage in meaningful conversations. The shared community identity contributes to a sense of comfort and belonging, enabling youth to open up, collaborate easily, and form deeper connections.

*“Que la location ou que le programme se déroule c'est que dans l'église c'est dans une communauté où que les personnes vivent ferment l'approche d'eux. Donc quand ils arrivent que l'école, ils peuvent aller mettre ces affaires à La maison puis l'avenir ici puis aussi la grande majorité des personnes viennent de la communauté. Donc quand ils viennent ici au programme, je dirais qu'ils connaissent tout le monde qui vit ici dans les communautés. Donc c'est Un peu plus facile pour eux de s'engager dans les conversations avec d'autres Personnes ou bien même, je dirais un niveau personnel à cause que chaque personne connaît.”*

*“Et le fait que nous soyons encore proches comme nous venons de la même communauté faire en sorte que chacun on ne se sente pas comme quand on n'est pas comme timide à l'écart de l'autre. On cause, on échange, on partage ce qu'on ne comprend pas et ce qu'on comprend. Bon, on a les difficultés, on a une facilité à dialoguer entre nous.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“The fact that the program takes place in the church, in a community where people live nearby, makes a difference. When they arrive from school, they can drop off their things at home and come here, and most of the participants are from the community. So when they come to the program, I would say they know everyone who lives in the area. This makes it a bit easier for them to engage in conversations with others, even on a personal level, because everyone is familiar with each other.”*

*“And the fact that we are close, coming from the same community, makes it so that no one feels shy or left out. We talk, share, and exchange what we don't understand and what we do understand. Even with our difficulties, it's easy for us to communicate with each other.”*

#### **Teamwork, Diversity, and Learning Across Differences (4)**

Youth regularly highlight the diversity within the program as a major strength. Working with peers who have different perspectives, backgrounds and experiences challenges them to listen, negotiate, and integrate multiple viewpoints when developing group projects. Many participants feel that this exposure broadens their thinking and enriches their learning. Diversity is also framed as an opportunity to encounter new ideas daily, reinforcing that innovation often emerges from varied backgrounds and perspectives.

*“Pour moi la diversité pour compte c'est comme nous tous nous parlons pas la même langue prend sa diversité à terme de juste pas juste comme fonctionne la place mais comme ce qu'on apporte au programme ce sont nos expériences, nos perspectives, nos origines, nos langues, comme tu disais et comment être exposé à toutes les différentes personnes dans ce programme.”*

*“Pour moi, la diversité dans ce programme est quelque chose de très important parce que ça nous permet d'apprendre des autres.”*

*“Ils peuvent avoir des différentes idées chaque personne ici vient d'une. Donc on peut apprendre beaucoup des nouvelles idées dans une journée aussi.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“For me, diversity matters because we all don't speak the same language. Diversity isn't just about how the place works, but about what we bring to the program—our experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, languages, as you said—and being exposed to all the different people in the program.”*

*“For me, diversity in this program is very important because it allows us to learn from others.”*

*“They can have different ideas; every person here comes from somewhere different. So we can learn a lot of new ideas in just one day.”*

Intergenerational diversity also surfaces as meaningful; mentors expressed that they were learning from youth just as much as youth learned from them. This reciprocal exchange fosters humility, curiosity, and a shared commitment to continuous learning.

*“Je pense aussi en termes de personnel, ce qui vous ce qui nous unit, c'est vraiment notre pensée et notre approche à l'éducation. Donc de toujours vouloir apprendre quelque chose du nouveau et apprendre de tous les coins de notre sphère d'influence dans nos vies. Ce programme et tout ce que je fais me garde continuellement curieux et ça m'influence toujours à savoir un peu plus de tout ce que je ne savais pas d'avance. Et j'adore vraiment cet aspect de l'éducation et de partager cette curiosité avec plein de jeunes aussi curieux qui veulent savoir plus soit comment leur prendre soin de leur main ou sinon de partager des affaires positives dans leur communauté et changer leur vision du monde. C'est vraiment spécial.”*

*English translation:*

*“I also think that, on a personal level, what unites us is really our mindset and approach to education. Always wanting to learn something new and to learn from all corners of our sphere of influence in our lives. This program and everything I do keeps me continually curious and constantly pushes me to know a little more about all the things I didn't know before. And I really love this aspect of education—sharing this curiosity with many young people who are also curious and want to know more, whether it's how to take care of themselves or how to contribute positively to their community and change their perspective on the world. It's really special.”*

## **Community Outcomes**

### **Community Engagement and Visibility (2)**

Participants describe being involved in community-facing activities, such as open houses and interactions with local government representatives. These experiences allow them to showcase their work, gain recognition, and feel valued by the broader community. Youth note that these events attract interest from community members curious about the program and the businesses emerging from it. This visibility contributes to a sense of pride and collective accomplishment while also encouraging new participants to join.

*“On a fait comme plusieurs journées portes ouvertes. On a rencontré des nouvelles personnes. On rencontre parfois des membres du gouvernement qui nous partageaient l'expérience qui nous disent ce qu'ils pensent de ce qu'on fait.”*

*“Plein de gens de La communauté qui veulent savoir plus de ce programme et les étudiants les business qu'ils veulent commencer qu'ils ont commencé.”*

*English translations (in same order):*

*“We held several open house days. We met new people, and sometimes we even met government officials who shared their experiences with us and told us what they think about what we're doing.”*

*“Many people in the community want to learn more about this program and the students, as well as the businesses they want to start or have already started.”*

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS: FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW WITH PROGRAM STAFF AND YOUTH MENTORS

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R.I.S.E. Academy held one focus group with 9 (n=9) of 11 (n=11) Impact NOW! staff and youth mentors (81.81%). The qualitative themes that emerge show a program that blends entrepreneurship, mentorship, community involvement, and personal development. Students and program staff consistently described feeling supported, empowered, and connected, and reported gains in both practical skills and socio-emotional growth, experiences that differ distinctly from traditional school environments.

Collectively, the insights suggest that Impact NOW! builds confidence, agency, and a strong sense of community rootedness, extending far beyond the program itself. Youth interns and one staff member also shared specific personal outcomes from their participation, summarized below.

### *Individual Outcomes*

#### *Safe Environment (3)*

The quotes collectively emphasize that the program's greatest impact comes from creating a truly safe and welcoming environment where youth can be themselves. Being rooted in familiar community spaces enhances their comfort, sense of belonging, and emotional security, while accessibility and safety considerations remain essential as the program expands. This supportive atmosphere marked by caring relationships, flexible approaches, and one-on-one connection helps youth build self-esteem, express their emotions openly, and develop trust. As a result, students feel free to share their struggles without fear of judgment, creating a rare classroom dynamic where authenticity and vulnerability are not only allowed but celebrated.

*"Youth feeling more comfortable being themselves in their own community setting... Importance of accessibility and safety considerations when expanding beyond local community centres."*

*"An unintended consequence of this program is that youth are feeling better about themselves. Their self-esteem is improving, and they're speaking up more. In words and wellness, I see them learning to understand and manage their emotions, supported through one-on-one connection with a teacher. It's more than learning... it's about feeling cared for and listened to. Unlike the regular school system, this program offers flexibility and says 'yes, we can do that,' which is why youth and families are drawn to it."*

*"One powerful outcome of this program is seeing students feel completely comfortable in this space. Even though they come from different schools, they share this community... and here, they don't have to hide who they are. They can be honest about their struggles, including school. I've never seen a classroom where youth can be so open."*

## Appropriate Structure (2)

The quotes suggest that, while the program already supports, meaningful mentor and student interactions, introducing a more intentional structure, would enhance both program delivery and the overall experience. Issues such as oversized groups, and the lack of consistent agendas, mentor training, and prepared material materials, introduce logistical challenges that make it harder to maintain momentum and balance freedom with appropriate guidance.

At the same time, mentors express a clear willingness to plan and contribute more effectively when expectations are communicated in advance and embedded with a broader framework. Together, these insights indicate that a more defined structure, established prior to scaling, would strengthen coordination, sustain student motivation, and empower mentors to confidently support learners within an environment that remains safe, inclusive, and predictably organized.

*“Program size too large (25 students) creating too many moving parts for effective management... Lack of clear weekly agendas and mentor training leading to coordination issues... Need for better balance between freedom and structure to maintain student motivation... Need for better structure, mentor training, and lesson materials before scaling.”*

*“I think as a mentor, I would’ve been happy to make that planning part of my routine. If I had been more aware of it, I could have stayed on top of things, especially since I was working with just one student, it was easier to plan week-to-week and let them know what was coming. [...] It would be interesting to see how that fits into the bigger structure.”*

## Inclusive (2)

The quotes point to a deeply inclusive environment where youth who are often overlooked in traditional systems, particularly BIPOC and low-income students, feel welcomed, valued, and supported. The program not only seeks to address educational inequities by drawing on the strength of local communities but also empowers participants through meaningful opportunities, including paid roles that affirm their worth. Within this space, young people experience belonging: they are listened to, their needs are met, and they can express themselves without fear of judgment. This sense of care, representation, and community connection reflects a model of inclusion that validates their identities and ensures they do not get lost in the broader system.

*“Participants joined ‘Impact NOW!’ program to give back to youth and address educational inequities in the community... Recognition of strong community base in priority neighborhoods while providing broader exposure.”*

*“Probably just the fact that they're able to make money, there is that empowerment, like [name of staff] was saying, like, if school system is a little bit square, and if you're not like that... you're not [going to] fit kind of thing. I also think the fact that most of these kids are BIPOC and low-income... like they do get lost in the normal system. So, I don't know, I feel like it's, I feel like they feel more welcomed here. Their bellies are full, they're listened to. They feel like they can speak about it and be themselves and stuff.”*

## **Diversity (1)**

The quote highlights how diversity is fostered by blending the strengths of community-based programming with opportunities that broaden students' horizons beyond their immediate surroundings. By connecting youth with practitioners and skill-builders outside traditional school pathways, the program exposes them to a wider range of experiences, perspectives, and role models. This intentional mix of local grounding and external networks enriches learning, encourages students to imagine possibilities beyond their neighborhood, and reinforces the value of engaging with diverse people, ideas, and environments.

*"Discussion about balancing community-based programming with exposure to opportunities outside the neighborhood... Network building connecting students with skills practitioners outside the traditional school system."*

## **Positive Experience (1)**

The quote highlights how students' engagement is driven by genuine enjoyment, creating a positive experience that keeps them returning and participating fully. Through supportive one-on-one relationships, they build self-esteem, gain better emotional regulation, and feel personally understood outcomes that contribute to a sense of success and well-being. The program's focus on developing skills aligned with each student's interests and values, rather than a standardized curriculum, further enhances this positivity by making learning meaningful and relevant. Together, these elements create an empowering environment where students feel good about themselves, their growth, and their learning journey.

*"Enjoyment as primary motivation for attendance and engagement... Students showing improved self-esteem and emotional regulation through one-on-one teacher relationships... Students developing real skills based on personal values and interests rather than standardized curriculum."*

## Youth Engagement Challenges and Successes(8)

The quotes illustrate that meaningful youth engagement depends on a balance of intrinsic motivation, clear structure, and opportunities for hands-on, interest-driven learning. Students thrive when they can pursue projects that offer tangible progress, iterative exploration, and freedom to pivot, yet they disengage when outcomes feel distant, expectations unclear, or group sizes too large for personalized support. One-on-one relationships and community recognition strengthen commitment evident in students showing up early, staying involved, and gaining confidence through real-world experiences.

At the same time, effective engagement requires stronger communication systems, especially with parents, and better mentor preparation to guide youth through individualized learning paths. The reflections also show that partnerships with passionate community organizations expand opportunities and deepen youth investment, creating environments where experimentation, skill-building, and authentic motivation can flourish.

*“Student engagement challenges [are] when projects lack immediate gratification or clear outcomes... Cultural shift with community recognition and student commitment (e.g., grade 10 boys attending early mornings) Learning without attachment to outcome... Iterative learning based on student interest... One-on-one teacher relationships contributing to improve connection and commitment.”*

*“The biggest thing is learning without attachment to outcome. We prompt youth to learn based on what they want to do each week and over the semester. This model works when you know what you want to learn, you break it down, iterate, and keep refining until you’ve learned it or decide to pivot. That iterative, student-driven learning is huge.”*

*“In my group, the biggest challenge was a lack of urgency. Even though this was a high-school credit, many students assumed they’d get it anyway, and engagement dropped. Once they fell behind, it felt impossible to catch up. They need clear expectations and structure from the start... We also questioned whether we took on too much. While we wanted to encourage freedom and big ideas, some students needed more guidance earlier on, but there were too many groups to step in effectively. We saw the same with the clothing group, they stopped coming, lost momentum, and had to be pulled back in. Once they started printing, the hands-on progress motivated them again... Going forward, I don’t think we should host events. Instead, we should identify early who can realistically do product-based projects, and for others, offer a clear alternative like printing or clothing. That’s where a Makerspace makes sense—a place to experiment, try things, and discover what they actually want to pursue. Tangible results keep them motivated.”*

*“One challenge was keeping parents informed and managing weekly agendas. After that first information session where only one person showed up, I realized how hard communication can be. Once we moved out of a structured classroom, especially in the new summer setup, everything spiraled. Each student was in a different place, so creating one agenda for everyone didn’t work. We needed mentors to take on more of that role, but there wasn’t enough mentor training, and we were all kind of learning as we went.”*

*“That’s exactly what I want the mentors to be doing... and with parents, communication has to be simple and short, anything too long and they won’t read it.”*

*“I agree that the parents need to be involved. Absolutely, yeah, whether they want to or they don't like, give them an option, but they should have the option to cut, because you can't count on these guys going home and telling their parents what's happening. “*

*“We've already talked to Ottawa Community Housing, and, you know, to get the conversation rolling and to sign the partnership agreement, yeah, and, and we're absolutely, you know, aligned with them, and they're excited about that and talk to Community developers. So we'll just, you know, we'll see this was, this is a process, but if you think that these first kids are now working with invest Ottawa, that they're going to be going to the Parkdale market, and I have witnessed before, what happens when kids from a social enterprise start going out into these environments and talking to people that go to the park... It is quite, you know, exceptional. And from there, you know, there's all sorts of things that they can do.”*

*“I think that maybe the reason why this was so successful is that, you know, there's a big group of us that are really passionate about it and hoping that it's too so I think going again, off, like replicating it, we just need to continue to find, like, community partners that are just excited... Think that it [Impact NOW!] has a really big opportunity to expand and become like a huge thing. It's not going to be hard.”*

### **New Opportunities (2)**

The quotes show how the program creates new opportunities by filling a community gap offering youth access to high school credits, entrepreneurship mentorship, and experiences that broaden their horizons beyond their immediate environment. Through activities such as school visits, camping trips, and connections with external organizations, students gain exposure to pathways they may not otherwise encounter. Partnerships, such as those emerging with Ottawa Community Housing, further expand the program’s reach and open doors to future initiatives. As the program builds a strong reputation, interest from other communities grows, reinforcing its potential to meet students where they are while continually unlocking new possibilities for growth, learning, and real-world engagement.

*“Program fills gap in community programming by offering high school credits and entrepreneurship mentorship... Network affect, creating connections and opportunities beyond the immediate program... Examples of external experiences like Revel Academy visits and camping trips... Ottawa Community Housing partnership discussions underway for expansion... Goal of meeting students where they are while opening doors to new possibilities.”*

*“Over the next year, we're looking for funding here, but at the same time, talking to Ottawa Community Housing and to other people. What I've learned from experience is you do something really well in a place, and then other places are coming after you to say, what the hell do they have over there? I want that too.”*

### Connection to Community (1)

The quote reflects a strong sense of connection to community, emphasizing a desire to give back and contribute to the well-being of local youth. It highlights how the program serves as a pathway for individuals to invest their time, skills, and care into strengthening the broader community. This commitment demonstrates how meaningful engagement with young people can create a ripple effect supporting their growth while simultaneously helping to build a more resilient, connected, and thriving community for the future.

*"I joined the Impact NOW! program because it's a great way to give back and invest into youth in our community and eventually build a better community."*

### Sociopolitical Control (1)

The quote highlights how the program engages directly with broader sociopolitical forces by addressing systemic inequities and empowering communities to influence their own future. By focusing on poverty reduction and long-term community impact, it positions youth programming as a strategic tool for shifting power, improving social conditions, and challenging structural barriers that perpetuate disadvantage. This approach reflects a belief that meaningful change comes not only from individual support but from enabling communities to participate in shaping policies, resources, and outcomes that affect their lives ultimately fostering greater agency, equity, and collective control over sociopolitical conditions.

*"I'm interested in poverty reduction and helping our communities thrive ... R.I.S.E. [offers] a unique way of addressing inequities and creating a Poverty Reduction Strategy that really will make a long-term impact in these communities."*

## Access to Resources (2)

The quotes emphasize how access to resources both within and beyond the neighborhood plays a crucial role in expanding youths' aspirations and opportunities. Participants see the program as a way to gain exposure not only for themselves but also for siblings and peers who lack access to high-quality environments in traditional school settings. Experiences such as visiting professional, well-equipped spaces show students what is possible and help them imagine futures beyond the limitations of their surroundings. By meeting youth where they are while intentionally broadening their access to better facilities, networks, and pathways, the program helps bridge resource gaps and supports young people in envisioning and working toward improved life possibilities.

*"I joined the Impact NOW!... as a student, but also just because I like youth, and I feel that this program would be beneficial for myself, my siblings... in school for proper exposure and everything."*

*"I ... think it's important not to always keep the program in the same community location. One reason is that students need to understand that opportunities exist outside their neighborhood, and that exposure matters. For example, when they went to Rebel Academy, they saw media facilities that were far nicer than what we have. Experiences like that show them what's possible. When you grow up in the hood, you don't dream of staying there forever. You dream of improving your life, then eventually giving back and improving the neighborhood you came from. The goal is to meet students where they're at, then open doors to other opportunities. [...] There's a big difference between playing basketball in a dingy gym and later accessing a state-of-the-art university facility. That's one improvement I'd like to see... more exposure outside the community."*

## ***New Skills and Knowledge (2)***

The quotes show how the program fills a gap in the community by giving youth access to meaningful learning experiences earning high school credits, developing entrepreneurship skills, and choosing practical, self-directed skills that prepare them for the future. Participants gain knowledge that traditional schools and even universities may not offer, and families recognize the value of this hands-on, interest-driven growth. Overall, the program equips youth with relevant skills they can carry forward into further education, work, and life

*"I think the reason why we brought in R.I.S.E. and Impact NOW! into The Caldwell Family Centre is because there's a lack of this kind of programming in the community. In my opinion, there's a lot of after school kind of like drop ins, but there wasn't, there isn't really something where youth can come in and get a high school credit or, you know do have some entrepreneurship mentorships and stuff like that. So, I think that it's a unique program that is missing in the community. And I think the youth that join that have joined us, have really benefited from it. They've learned different skills and stuff like that. I speak to a lot of the families in the community during the day, and they seem to be pretty happy with having this kind of program in the community."*

*"What this group is doing is preparing youth with the skills they need for their future. skills even university doesn't always teach. In society, your opportunities often depend on the skills you can offer, and here we're giving students not just valuable skills, but skills they've chosen for themselves. That's incredibly meaningful. For us, the two biggest impacts are the cultural shift we're seeing and the fact that we're providing real, self-selected skills that youth can carry forward."*

## ***Academic Achievement (1)***

The quote underscores how academic achievement is deeply tied to addressing systemic inequities that contribute to high dropout rates in marginalized communities. It emphasizes that breaking cycles of poverty begins with ensuring youth feel supported, believed in, and equipped to graduate. By highlighting that a significant portion of students in certain neighborhoods are not completing school, the speaker stresses the urgency of providing the right encouragement and resources so youth can recognize their potential and succeed academically.

*"When I learned how high the dropout rates are in Ottawa Community Housing because of systemic inequities, it became clear that we don't adequately support equity-deserving youth. This creates a cycle of poverty, but we can break it by helping kids graduate and believe in themselves. Every student here can do great things; they just need people who believe in them. When 20% of youth in a neighborhood aren't graduating, that's a real problem."*

## Personal Growth (1)

The quote reflects a commitment to personal growth through reimagining education and learning alongside youth. The speaker joins the program to challenge traditional approaches, expand their own skills as a young educator, and grow through mentorship and hands-on experience. This desire to evolve, adapt, and learn from both the program and its leaders demonstrates how personal growth is driven by curiosity, reflection, and a willingness to engage in transformative practices.

*"I joined because, as a young educator, I want to disrupt traditional education and meet students where they're at. R.I.S.E. embodies that, and I wanted to learn from the program and from you as a mentor."*

## Adult Support (1)

The quote highlights the powerful role of consistent, caring adult support in helping youth build confidence, express themselves, and recognize their own strengths. By listening deeply and responding to students' needs, mentors create trust and provide the encouragement that fosters personal growth. The speaker's dedication, even on exhausting days, reflects a belief that each small act of support contributes to long-term impact, showing how meaningful adult relationships can guide youth toward self-belief, talent development, and a more hopeful future.

*"One day a student told me, 'You're the best mentor I've ever had,' because I listened to their needs. Now they feel confident to speak up and no longer shy away from expressing themselves. That's what we're trying to accomplish, helping youth be who they are and use their talents to build a life. It's priceless... This investment is worth every penny and every hour, even on exhausting days. We keep pushing forward because the long-term impact will come. Each small step we take every week moves us closer to our goals."*

## Community Involvement (2)

The following quotes highlight how the program fosters deep community involvement by creating a cultural shift that is recognized both by youth and by the surrounding neighborhood. As the community begins to see young people as committed contributors like students showing up early on weekends to participate, youth are increasingly viewed as changemakers with meaningful futures. This growing visibility and appreciation strengthens the bond between the program and the community, leading other neighborhoods to express interest in bringing the initiative to their own spaces.

*"We've seen a real cultural shift, both among participants and in the wider community. The Caldwell Family Centre now recognizes the program, and people walking by understand and appreciate what we're doing. Youth have truly bought in. Where else would you see a grade-10 student show up at 7 or 8 a.m. on a weekend to bake bread? That level of commitment is unheard of... This cultural shift is happening in the community, where youth are now seen as changemakers with a future, and within the youth themselves. And unintentionally, by offering education through entrepreneurship, we're actually offering skills rooted in personal values, something you don't see anywhere else."*

*"We already have communities that want it [Impact NOW!]"*

## Support / Monitoring (2)

The quotes highlight the importance of consistent support and careful monitoring to ensure youth can participate fully and safely. Challenges such as incomplete registration forms and communication gaps show the need for clear processes that remain accessible and free of barriers. At the same time, expanding program locations requires thoughtful consideration of transportation, safety, and the strong support networks already present in low-income and immigrant communities. Together, these reflections emphasize that effective support and monitoring, whether through helping families navigate paperwork or ensuring safe, accessible participation, are essential for sustaining youth engagement and meeting their needs.

*"I would say communication can be a bit of a challenge. I know for me next time when it comes to the registration form that, like, they must fill it out before they join the program. But I also don't want it to be a barrier. So, like, I know [name of staff] has referred somebody, so I know that [name of staff] can support them in getting that done. That was kind of the hope. We still have a few students who haven't filled out the registration form."*

*"I think expanding outside the neighborhood is great, but we also need to consider accessibility. If we're working in low-income areas and using community housing or community fields, that's valuable as long as we support students with transportation and travel accessibility... Safety is also important. For example, if we're in Britannia, we shouldn't have students walking around late at night. [...] Exposure outside the neighborhood is great, but we also need to recognize that these communities often have strong support networks. Keeping them connected to that isn't a bad thing... Many families are immigrants, and their sense of community is different from what you see in typical Canadian neighborhoods. So as long as we provide support especially with travel and accessibility expanding outward can work. But I think that's more of a long-term goal."*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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During the second year of The "Impact NOW!" initiative by R.I.S.E. returning students modelled positive behavior and helped integrate new participants into its foundational, stable, and supportive peer culture, demonstrating the impact of the first year of programming for them. From its October 2024 start date, and the significant momentum gained in the spring of 2025, "Impact NOW!" has shown promising results. The program's emphasis on creating a safe, structured, and inclusive environment has been instrumental in fostering youth engagement and positive experiences. Participants have highlighted the uplifting atmosphere and community-building exercises that make them feel comfortable and connected. This supportive environment allowed students to share their experiences and build trust, which is crucial for their personal and academic growth.

The approach of Impact NOW! has been effective in meeting the needs and preferences of the students. By involving community members in planning, the program ensured that it remained relevant and supportive. This method fostered a sense of comfort and familiarity, enhancing trust and collaboration within the group. The program's focus on teamwork and local knowledge has created a cohesive and well-organized environment where participants feel engaged and motivated. In Year Two, the program deepened these community-driven practices, integrating more structured feedback including youth-led discussions, session evaluations, and informal check-ins which guided facilitators in adjusting activities in real time. This responsiveness increased participant agency and reinforced the sense of shared ownership within the program.

Inclusivity is a key strength of the Impact NOW! initiative, addressing equity in education and providing a platform for marginalized voices. The program's efforts to remove barriers and accommodate diverse voices and experiences have made it more accessible and inclusive. The inclusion of multiple generations and the adaptation of activities to overcome language barriers further reinforced the commitment to inclusivity. The second year also saw strengthened partnerships with families and cultural community groups, enabling more targeted support and culturally relevant programming. These efforts contributed to increased attendance consistency and higher engagement from students who previously faced participation barriers.

By continuously leveraging the insights and experiences of everyone involved, R.I.S.E. expects to refine and enhance the program to meet the needs of its participants. In Year Two, the program expanded its evaluation framework to include goal-tracking tools, skill-development indicators, and attendance trends, enabling a more detailed understanding of student progress over time. These measures have already revealed increases in students' confidence, communication skills, and willingness to participate in group activities.

The program's success in creating a dynamic and inspiring environment where youth can thrive and succeed highlights its potential to contribute to the broader goals of equitable and quality education. With continued refinement, strengthened community partnerships, and enhanced data-driven planning, Impact NOW! is well-positioned to deepen its impact in the coming years. The growth observed in program stability, student leadership, and cross-community collaboration demonstrates that R.I.S.E. Academy is not only meeting its initial objectives but building a sustainable model for long-term youth empowerment and educational equity.

