Archived Information

Mentoring In Schools

Most adolescents are on the healthy path to productive adult lives. There is evidence, however, that 25 percent of adolescents are at significant risk of veering off that path because they frequently engage in behaviors with negative consequences, such as alcohol or other drug abuse, sexual activity with its potential for sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy, truancy, delinquency, or violence. Another 25 percent of adolescents, who engage in fewer of these behaviors, are at moderate risk.[1]

A 1992 study conducted by the Carnegie Foundation determined that only 60 percent of an adolescent's nonsleeping time is taken up by school, homework, chores, meals, or employment. Many adolescents spend the remaining 40 percent of their nonsleeping time alone, with peers without adult supervision, or with adults who might negatively influence their behavior.[2] A recent study found that 27 percent of eighth-graders spent 2 or more hours alone after school and that low-income youth were more likely than others to be home alone for 3 or more hours.[3]

Similarly, the Study of Causes and Correlates of Delinquency, sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), found the influence of peers and lack of supervision by parents to be strong risk factors in the causes of delinquency.[4] It is not surprising, therefore, that most acts of juvenile delinquency take place at the close of the school day, when opportunities for constructive activities are too often unavailable.

While these are disturbing trends, there is growing belief that

mentoring can, in many instances, help young people change direction and do better academically and socially. Mentoring has been defined as a sustained, close, developmental relationship between an older, more experienced individual and a younger person, with the goal of building character and competence on the part of the protege. Usually the relationship involves regular contact over a sustained period of time and involves mutual commitment, respect, and loyalty. Mentors need not be experts in drug prevention, remedial tutoring, antisocial behavior, or family counseling. Studies have shown that individuals who gain the trust of youth through interaction and time can have great influence on their lives.

Users' Guide to Establishing Mentoring Programs

The planning stages of developing a mentorship program are very important. Because mentor programs are built on shared trust and respect of the people involved, much care should be given to its implementation. The following steps are loosely based on those developed by the National Association of Partners in Education, a nonprofit organization in Alexandria, Virginia, which has extensive experience in school-community and school-business partnership programs.

Coordination and assessment. A small team or group of individuals or staff must work together to plan and execute an effective program. This group must assess the need for mentors and determine what resources are available in the community. In addition to volunteer mentors, assistance in the areas of training, sponsorship of travel, provision of meeting space, and media and communications could be helpful.

Setting goals and objectives. For a mentor program to be successful, it must have well-defined goals and measurable objectives. One of the first tasks for the team is to determine what the program's goals and objectives should be. These can vary from broad goals to specific, structured ones. For example, while many school-based mentoring programs focus on

upgrading social and academic skills, programs in the past have specified increasing career awareness or a greater understanding of civic responsibility.

Recruiting mentors and mentees. The focus of the program should determine the types of individuals to be recruited. Traditionally, there has been a shortage of mentors in most programs. To ensure an adequate number of mentors, they can be recruited through a school's volunteer office, a company's director of public relations, and community organizations that sponsor volunteer programs. Targeted recruiting in local colleges or universities, local newspapers, TV and radio stations, and local businesses is also a good tactic. Senior citizens can be exemplary mentors and may be contacted through senior citizen organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

Selecting mentors and mentees. Eligibility screening for participation in mentorship programs could include an application process and review, face-to-face interview, and a reference check for mentors with written eligibility requirements for program participants. It is a good idea not only to get parental consent, but to involve parents to the maximum extent possible by sharing the program's goals and objectives and keeping them informed of specific events. If the mentoring programs have activities off school grounds, careful history checks of applicants are needed.

Training mentors. It is recommended that each mentor be trained before he or she is paired with a mentee. Sessions should be used to clarify the program's goals and focus on providing insight into the way young people behave and communicate. Methods for effectively communicating with mentees and their parents and lessons on adolescent development are useful topics for training. Ongoing feedback sessions allow for targeted training and assistance, as well as provide mentors an opportunity to compare notes.

Pairing or matching. While most programs use surveys that explore shared interests and hobbies to determine which

individuals make good pairs, choosing a good match is as much an art as it is a science. Studies are inconclusive as to whether individuals from similar socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds make the best pairs. Flaxman and Ascher believe that more subtle characteristics like caretaking or nurturing styles, energy levels and approach to adventure, or rigidity versus a tolerance for ambiguity and conflict may be better indicators of why relationships flourish or falter.[5] When a bad match does occur, steps should be taken to reassign both parties. Organizers must be prepared to deal with other obstacles that may arise, including serious issues of behavior such as violence, drug use, extreme depression, or suicide threats by the young person.

Keeping enthusiasm alive. Many mentoring programs fail due to poor participation or absenteeism on the part of the mentor or the mentee. To minimize "dropouts," some programs have pooled mentors so that two or more sets of mentoring pairs meet together. Sometimes dropouts occur due to a lack of initiative on the young person's part or unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentor. Some of these issues can be solved by discussions with the mentor's supervisors or additional periodic training. Enthusiasm can be maintained by frequent interaction among mentors, public recognition ceremonies, positive publicity, and parental participation.

Evaluating the program. While program staff naturally prefer to direct resources into the operations of a mentoring program, rather than into its assessment, formal evaluations are an important component in determining which methods or decisions have been successful and should be replicated. They also serve as positive reinforcement to both volunteers as well as the coordinating team. Ideally, evaluations should be planned at the outset of a program and be completed by a third party. However, data that will be used as program variables can be collected along the way. Some examples are length of meetings, location of meetings, length of mentoring relationship, and significant events.

Promising Practices

There are numerous examples of mentoring programs throughout the country that are sponsored by schools, communities, social and religious organizations, and private corporations. The resource section lists several publications that include a variety of examples. The two mentoring programs listed below have proven effective over time and in evaluations.

"Bigs in Blue" is an innovative mentoring program developed by the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentor program of Warren County, New Jersey. It matches at-risk youth with police officer mentors. They employ prevention and intervention strategies to help youngsters from chaotic home environments cope with peer pressure, succeed in school, and make career decisions and sound lifestyle choices. Evaluations completed by parents, volunteers, and youth indicate reductions in delinquency and court involvement and improvement in school attendance, behavior, and grades.[6]

Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, Illinois, the largest public housing development in the country, has implemented a Mentoring and Rites of Passage program designed to assist adolescents in their transition to adulthood. Mentors meet with groups of 10 15 youths of similar ages at least twice a week and address such areas as self-concept, communications and decisionmaking, and cultural heritage appreciation. Evaluations of participants are conducted every 6 months to track their interpretation of standard social interactions and situations, self-reported violent behavior and self-concept, hospital visits related to violence, and calls to the police about violent events in the housing project.[7]

Research and Evaluation

A 1995 evaluation of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program conducted by Public/Private Ventures provides evidence that mentoring programs positively affect young

people. Those between the ages of 10-16 in the mentoring program were less likely to start using drugs and alcohol and were less likely to be violent. In addition, the study found that participants had improved their school attendance and performance, experienced positive attitudes toward completing school work, and improved their peer and family relationships. The impact was even greater among minority participants: Male and female minority participants were approximately 70 percent less likely to initiate drug use, and female minority participants were 54 percent less likely to initiate alcohol use.[8]

A 1990-1991 *New York City School Volunteer Program* evaluation found that participants in their program made significant progress in reading and math, as judged by both teachers and volunteers. They also showed improved self-confidence and a better attitude toward school.[9]

Resources

The Department of Justice, through OJJDP, is providing funding to 41 mentoring programs under the Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP). An evaluation of the JUMP is being conducted currently to determine its effectiveness and lessons learned in preventing delinquency. For more information on these mentoring programs and the evaluation, contact OJJDP at 202-307-5914.

U.S. Department of Education. *One on One, A Guide for Establishing Mentor Programs*. Washington, D.C., 1990. This guide discusses the nuts and bolts of establishing a mentor program, from needs assessment and working with parents to evaluating the program. It also includes examples of successful programs and suggestions on selection, training, and tracking mentors as well as on recruiting participants.

Bryan, Samuel; Ahoun, Nilofer; and Garcia, Jill. *Know Your Community: A Step by Step Guide to Community Needs and Resource Assessment*. Chicago: Family Resource Coalition, 1996. A practical guide for communities and program directors

that includes surveys, questionnaires, and focus group questions.

Flaxman, Erwin and Ascher, Carol. *Mentoring in Action: The Efforts of Programs in New York City*. The Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, April 1992. Examines the operation of 21 youth mentoring programs in New York City.

Walker, Gary and Freedman, Marc. Social Change One on One, The New Mentoring Movement. *The American Prospect*, July August 1996.

Endnotes

1. Dryfoos, J.G. 1990. *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention*. London: Oxford University Press.

2. Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development. 1994 (April). *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Out-of-School Hours*. New York: Canegie Foundation.

3. National Center for Education Statistics. 1990. *National Education Longitudinal Study if 1998: A Profile of an American Eighth Grader*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

4. Thornberry, T.P., D. Huizinga, and R. Loeber. 1995. the Prevention of Serious Delinquency and Violence: Implications From the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. In J.C. Howell et al., eds. *Sourcebook on Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

5. Flaxman, E. and C. Ascher. 1992. (April). *Mentoring in Action: The Efforts of Programs in New York City*. New York: Ford Foundation.

6. Barnes, L. 1992 (Fall/Winter). *Police Officers at Heart of Bigs in Blue Program*. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America.

7. Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 1996 (March). *Combating Violence and Delinquency: The National Juvenile Justice Action Plan*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

8. Tierney, J.P., J.B. Grossman, and N.L. Resch. 1995 (November). *Making A Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters*.. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

9. Klien, S. 1991 (October). *1990-1991 Survey of Program Effectiveness Among Volunteers and Teachers*. Prepared for the New York School Volunteer Program, Inc. Stockbridge, MA: Sue Klein Marketing Consultant.

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