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ACHIEVE!



An Update on Student Retention Issues

This newsletter, published periodically as part of the League's student retention study, provides information on various aspects of the dropout problem, legislative issues relating to the crisis, prevention programs, and ways to encourage student retention.

URBAN INFORMATION CENTER

DOES MENTORING MATTER? Mentors and At-Risk Youth

JAN 30 1991

Imagine you are a mentor in a local school's program, someone who has a long-term, probably one-on-one, relationship with an at-risk student. Your role is to encourage, listen, share information and experience, and to act as a role model for a kid who may not finish school...to someone, maybe, like this:

- Gilberto is 8 years old. He is usually withdrawn and doesn't like to be touched. You've noticed bruises on his arms before. Today, he has a swollen eye. *What do you do?*
- Frank is 13 and a real extrovert. He talks non-stop about his home life, especially about his father, who drinks and doesn't have a job. He asks you for money for something to eat. *What do you do?*
- Amanda is 15, and she has a steady boyfriend who dropped out of school. During your regular visit, she tells you she's afraid she may be pregnant. *What do you do?*


These may or may not be typical examples of children paired with mentors; it is a sure bet, however, that children like these are among those most at risk.

MENTORING IS A RELATIONSHIP

Mentoring at-risk children is first and last a relationship, and that means by its nature that both people in the relationship are subject to

confusion as well as certainty, and to setbacks as well as rewards. A responsible program prepares the student for this new and different relationship and gives the mentor careful training for situations just like the ones above. The truth is you can't do much in a lot of situations--you can't stop abuse in the home, you can't take on the problems of alcoholism in the family, you can't reverse the circumstances of pregnancy. What you can do is take these problems to the school counselor or a social worker or an outside agency, and be a navigator to whatever network of assistance exists for the child you're mentoring. Most of all, you can get behind the headlines about the crisis in education and become part of the solution.

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WHAT'S INSIDE 

- > What mentoring can and can't do.
- > Does mentoring keep at-risk students in school? The verdict is coming in.
- > Testimony from two mentors: the bright side and the not-so-bright side.

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WHAT MENTORING DOES

Mentoring, in the sense it is used in this article, is a type of intervention by business people or other adults, working or retired, who encourage at-risk young people to stay in school. The mentor is a bridge between the world of school and the world of work. The mentor's sharing of resources and support improve the chances for the student's success in school, and later in life. The students, it is hoped, identify with the mentors and become able to do for themselves (and eventually, others) what their older sponsors have done for them.

WHAT MENTORING DOESN'T DO

The power of mentoring to substitute for missing adult relationships in the lives of at-risk youth is limited. A mentor cannot be a mother or a father, or function as a social worker or school counselor. The relationship is a planned, almost professional, one with the mentor and student usually assigned to each other rather than choosing each other informally. Mentoring, even when it includes a tutoring component, cannot compensate for years of poor education or for a lack of basic skills. Bringing adolescents together with concerned adults can't make up for poverty or for unsafe neighborhoods. The relationship is also limited by the number of hours of contact scheduled each week or month, the student's level of trust, and the structures of the intervention program and the participating school.

HOW DOES MENTORING WORK?

Mentoring starts with the premise that a student can benefit from something an older person has, whether it's experience or skills, advantages and abilities, or a caring attitude. Aside from that, variations among mentoring programs are many.

Programs can be based in schools, on college or university campuses, or even at a corporate headquarters (such as Aetna Life and Casualty's *Project Step-Up* in Hartford, CN).

Mentors can come from business (especially from rosters of Adopt-A-School partners), education, government, or religious or community organizations. Most often mentors are asked to provide personal or career counseling; many

programs emphasize tutoring as well. In an unusual move, an Austin project for pregnant or parenting teenagers, *Stepping Stone*, trains mentors to serve as lay case managers, in addition to providing professional case managers and support groups to its teens.

Students may be referred by teachers, school counselors, parents, youth agencies, juvenile courts, or area churches. Most mentoring programs focus on at-risk or disadvantaged students; the targeted age group can be any of the elementary grades through high school.

The appeal of mentoring for adults is that it is essentially an individual approach, its boundaries are fairly well defined, and it relies on wisdom already possessed by the mentor. Once a mentor and a student are paired together, perhaps in same-sex or same-race relationships (or perhaps not, depending on the program), the teamwork begins. **Mentoring is teamwork: one adult can't change what's wrong in a child's life, but mentoring that child may change both of you. If mentoring works, it works because it's personal.**

HOW HAS MENTORING BEEN EVALUATED?

Does mentoring work? Few formal evaluations of mentoring programs have been conducted. Perhaps because of budget constraints or lack of staff trained in research and evaluation, most programs, if assessed at all, rely on anecdotal evidence from principals

The mentor is a bridge between the world of school and the world of work.

or teachers or the students themselves. Quantitative studies measuring possible improvements in attendance, discipline, grade point averages, or other factors are rare.

Citing this lack of research, Public/Private Ventures has announced that it is embarking on a \$4 million series of evaluations of mentoring programs around the nation. "We believe that creating constructive adult relationships for large numbers of 'disconnected' youth shows sufficient potential to require testing..." the non-profit, Philadelphia organization stated in its spring/summer newsletter.

TEXAS RESULTS

Some Texas programs do have indicators, even if tentative, of their holding power for at-risk students. *Project CARE* (Ysleta ISD, El Paso), for instance, offers strong anecdotal evidence for the project's success. Started by teachers and funded by grants, the project at present lacks money for a formal evaluation.

**RESULTS OF THE
"CAREER BEGINNINGS" SURVEY**
(Louis Harris & Associates, 1990)

Students named six benefits of having a mentor:

- career counseling
- improved grades
- greater ability to avoid drugs
- increased regard for people of other races
- improved relationships with family and teachers
- inspiration to succeed

Mentors also identified benefits to themselves:

- enhanced ability to fulfill other responsibilities
- strengthened family relationships
- increased regard for other races
- improved willingness to get involved in community

Short-term results for the *USAA (United Services Automobile Association) Mentor Program* in San Antonio indicate an improvement in student attendance and grades. USAA's long-term evaluation plans include surveys, attendance tracking, and a look at academic progress. Estimates for the four-year-old *I Have a Dream Foundation* in Dallas are that 80-92% of its students are still in school--despite an expected dropout rate of 60%.

Project Stepping Stone in Austin, whose mentors help find support services for pregnant or already-parenting students, reported solid results by the end of its third year (1989). About 75% of the teenagers served in *Stepping Stone* had graduated or continued in some form of schooling, and only 10% had subsequent pregnancies (compared to a national rate of 33%).

NATIONAL RESULTS

The only systematic evaluation of a national mentoring program has been a series of Louis Harris & Associates surveys for *Career Beginnings*, a program designed for high school juniors from low income families. Currently, 25 *Career Beginnings* projects operate in 22 cities around the country, typically from a sponsoring college or university campus. Students are provided quality work for the summer and are mentored during their junior and senior years, and also through the transition to college or work.

The Harris survey interviewed at length 400 high school students in their senior year and their mentors in 16 cities. An "Education Week" article (April 4, 1990) describing the survey reported that more than half of the students came from single-parent homes, 70% were black, and 20% were Hispanic. The adult mentors interviewed were college graduates in professional or managerial jobs; half were black, half were white; most were married with children.

For any intervention program with at-risk students the bottom line is always--did they stay in school? From that perspective, the most telling statistic in the survey for *Career Beginnings* was the retention rate. Of those who stayed in the program, 98% went on to graduate from high school.

MY MISADVENTURES AS A MENTOR

by a Texas Research League Intern

I first became aware of the mentor program through the newspaper. After my supervisor and I met with the district's at-risk coordinator, I signed on for mentor training.

New mentors met in November for a three-hour training session to develop listening skills and a better understanding of the students. We did case simulations to prepare us for some of the more extreme problems that might occur--a student being abused, taking drugs, or becoming pregnant, for instance. In almost all cases, the instructions were to notify the school counselor right away.

THE FIRST DISAPPOINTMENT

The first disappointment was not being assigned a student prior to the Christmas holiday, as promised. After Christmas

vacation, the executive-on-loan from the sponsoring company explained that some schools were slow to turn in their lists of eligible students. After another two weeks, she suggested I contact directly the assistant principal of my assigned high school for the name of a student.

THE RELUCTANT STUDENT

The assistant principal at the high school told me she would have to get back to me. A week later (by now the end of January) she notified me that after a brief orientation for mentors, covering instructions for signing in, and going over school locations and times for meetings (most likely during lunch), I could begin working with a student.

I was assigned a Hispanic freshman boy, David (the names of the students have been changed), and the assistant principal was to contact him so we could meet the next day. Unfortunately, the assistant principal failed to contact David so he did not show up at the appointed time. I wrote him a note explaining how excited I was to be working with him and set a date for the next day. He did not arrive the next day, either, so I contacted the assistant principal again. The assistant principal found David on campus and introduced us.

David had not been told anything about the mentor program or who I was. We talked for about 10 minutes and set up a time to meet again. He did not show up at the next meeting, though, so I sent him another note with a new meeting time. After he did not show up for that, I contacted the assistant principal for help. Eventually, she talked to David and told me that David did not want to be in the mentor program, because he didn't want to forfeit part of his lunch hour once a week for our sessions. The assistant principal told me she would get me a new student.

SIGNS OF A PROGRAM HAVING PROBLEMS

- It's not clear who's in charge--in the program, in the company, in the school.
- The timelines you've been given seem unrealistic.
- There doesn't seem to be a rationale for the pairing of students and mentors.
- Mentors or students are chronically late for their sessions, don't show, or drop out before the end of the year.
- There's no program accountability; e.g., no evaluations exist nor are any planned.

THE DELINQUENT STUDENT

After I was assigned James, a black male in the ninth grade, I asked the attendance clerk to send him a note to meet me. The note was sent to him during third period, which he had skipped, so he didn't get the note and wasn't there for our meeting. I wrote another note scheduling another meeting. I called the school to confirm this new appointment, but James skipped third period again, and when the attendance clerk tried to notify me I had already left for the high school. Another wasted trip!

At this point, I was pretty frustrated and I went to talk to the assistant principal. She said we should try one more time with James, but the next day she met me in the lobby of the school and informed me that James had stolen beer and cigarettes from the nearby convenience store and was being transferred to a special school. I would have to be assigned another student.

FINALLY, ANGELA IS ASSIGNED TO ME

Sometime in April, I was assigned Angela, a black female in the ninth grade. Angela was eager to have a mentor, which was encouraging to me. It was very late in the school year to try to begin a relationship with a student but since she was willing to try, we decided to go ahead. She was doing pretty well in her classes (making B's and C's), except in Algebra (where she was making D's). She lived with her grandmother and liked Pan-African dancing. She said she wanted to become a dermatologist. We arranged to meet the following week.

At the next meeting Angela opened up more about her family life. Her mother did not want her or her siblings so her grandmother was raising them. No one knew where her father was. Her grandmother had a limited income and was strict. Angela's brother had a drug problem. Angela was in a tutoring program that

appeared to be working well. We agreed to eat lunch together at our next meeting.

ANGELA AND I GET MORE ACQUAINTED

Lunch in the school cafeteria was really a good idea for us. Angela introduced me to her friends and was very talkative. She was excited because the school's literary magazine had accepted some of her poetry. I asked her to share her poems with me, and later gave her a journal. She expressed an interest in modeling in the future and I promised to find her information. We talked about how family life can be difficult. She was anxious about finding a summer job. Angela had looked at several fast-food restaurants, but they required that employees be at least 16 years old; she was only 15.

Our next meeting was brief because Angela had a string of tests. We talked about her classes and how she felt swamped with work. I gave her information on modeling in Austin, and also information on a local summer job program.

At our last meeting of the semester, we ate lunch off campus and I took her for a tour of the League's offices. Angela was upset because of a fight with her grandmother, but she seemed happy that she and her brother might participate in a work-study program on a college campus for the summer. Finally, we said we would try to keep in touch. We parted.

MY IMPRESSIONS OF THE PROGRAM

If I contributed anything to Angela's life, I hope it was to make her feel special and capable. I also hope that she got the message that people with bad family lives can turn out okay. As for the staff, the assistant principal seemed to have limited time to devote to the mentor program. The school counselor seemed to be overloaded, as well, and never returned my phone calls or responded to my visits in person. Like the assistant principal, she seemed overwhelmed.

I hope I made her feel special and capable.

"I THINK I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE"

From an interview with a Public Relations Manager for a large corporation

From my perspective, mentoring has been successful because it's raised my consciousness incredibly to see what these students have to deal with rather than just reading about it. I think, if even one student doesn't drop out, it's worth it.

Today I met with the principal and I asked her, "What do you think about the mentor program?" "It is wonderful," she said, "I can't say enough about it. We have students waiting in line to become mentees." The one thing the principal and others have noticed that they can attribute to the mentor program is improved attendance.

This is my third year. I began in my student's sixth grade and she is now in eighth grade. My plan is to continue with her into high school.

WHAT HOME IS LIKE

My mentee is being raised by her grandmother. Her mother died about four years ago. Her grandmother is not elderly, but there is certainly a generation gap. Her grandmother is also raising a young boy, a cousin of my mentee. Her grandmother appears to be very supportive and wants her granddaughter to do well, but I think there's no model for them to go by in the family. The grandmother doesn't work.

The principal said to me today that most of these students don't have anyone else in their homes getting up to go to work or to go anywhere in particular, and that the student may be the only one getting up, trying to get somewhere on time that day. Think about it: being 12 or 13 years old, everyone else is in bed and they don't really have anything to do...this

student has to want to get up and go to school. That's a problem in itself. And I know that's true in this household.

TO HELP HER REACH A LITTLE HIGHER

She is a very good kid, she does reasonably well in school, but she does not have high expectations of what she can do. That's part of my role, to help her reach a little higher than she might without some support. She's very outgoing, always has a smile on her face, a little bit timid, but once she gets to know someone she's very affectionate. Yes, I think she has some self-esteem problems.

She's taken me to each of her teachers and introduced me to them, and they seem to really like her. She's a very likeable child. When I meet her teachers, they say "Oh, we've heard so much about you," so I think she's proud to be part of the program.

One of the problems she has is just the physical environment she lives in. She is two blocks away from one of the most dangerous parts of town. There are some things my mentee is dealing with that no one should have to deal with. The worst thing I had to worry about at that age was, "What am I going to wear to school today?"

Once a year we bring the students to the company so they can see where we work. We use a school bus, we buy some hamburgers, and then let them go to their mentor's office. By bringing them, I think, we are saying you can work in a place like this if you stay in

school and pay attention to what you're doing. Coming to our offices gives them a better sense of who we are, as well.

The worst thing I had to worry about at that age was, "What am I going to wear to school today?"

ONCE A WEEK AT SCHOOL

I meet with my mentee once a week, at lunchtime, for 30-45 minutes. Wednesday is Mentor Day--it causes less disruption of the school day. Initially, when I started out with my student, she was uncomfortable sitting close to the other students so we sat in my car. We still do that. It gives us a very private place to go sit, and frequently I take lunch and we have lunch together and talk. A lot of times I'll stop and get us hamburgers, which is a treat for her.

Sometimes we walk around the school. If we go into a teacher's room, and she has an off period, we may visit with her for a minute. Because it's the lunch hour, and the school is

SIGNS OF A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

- A large percentage of mentors sign up for a second or third year.
- Students volunteer for the program as well as being recommended for it; younger siblings enroll, too.
- New mentors receive training.
- It is clear where to go if problems come up.
- Mentors get together to share problems and ideas.
- Evaluations show improved attendance or other indicators of the program's "holding power."
- Parents are involved in some way in the program.

close, it's something you can easily do and not have it interfere with the work day. I think that's one of the reasons it works.

I always try to ask how things are going in school and she'll usually go through her subjects with me. Sometimes we don't talk about school. There are times when she brings up a subject that may be pressing on her mind to do with home--that may be what we talk about that day.

For the most part these are upbeat meetings, and I come away feeling good and hope that she does, too. We don't see each other much outside of school during the school year, although I took her to the Globetrotters game last year. We do try to maintain contact during the summer. Several other mentors do this, too.

WHAT SHE MEANS TO ME

For me, mentoring takes a lot of energy, not so much time, but you really pour a lot of yourself into it. The continuity of this person, this child, in your life is one of the most important parts of it.

I have two daughters and she's met them. I have met the grandmother, and I have been in their home. I feel comfortable with her grandmother and I think she does with me. I think that's an important part of it, too.

My student is very open and she's not gotten into any kind of trouble; she's not into drugs; she doesn't date. Being a mentor has gone beyond being in a program. She's a friend that I'm concerned about. I think I can make a difference.

Even though she is a real good kid, the environment around her is a threat. Sometimes, I think the time I'm giving her is not enough; it can't make a difference. But you've got to try, you've really got to try. She's got a lot of potential.

She's not from an abusive environment; she's really from a very loving environment. I think her grandmother cares very deeply for her, but there're just limitations on what she's able to provide as far as her future.

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