



Education Policy Brief

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MENTORING STUDENTS

Efforts are currently underway to develop and expand mentoring programs in communities throughout the state of Delaware. Governor Carper's Office, the Delaware Mentoring Council, and the DHSS Office of Volunteerism are committed to the goal of increasing community participation in education and improving the educational outcomes of students.

Research on student mentoring reveals benefits for students, schools, and mentors. Barriers to effectively implementing mentoring programs include difficulty recruiting and retaining mentors, cost of programs, and inadequate social services to address the multi-faceted needs of students.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Defining Mentoring

For the purpose of this brief, mentoring is defined as a sustained relationship between a youth and an adult. Through mentoring relationships, adult volunteers and participating youth make a significant commitment of time and energy to develop relationships devoted to educational, career, or personal development. While some mentoring relationships may include providing youth with academic assistance, mentoring programs typically have a broader focus than tutoring programs. Even those mentoring programs not specifically focused on educational development have been associated with academic benefits for the youth.

Most mentoring programs serve early adolescents and operate through a university, school, or a private organization such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters. While mentoring programs can involve any youth, most focus on youth growing up in difficult circumstances. Research indicates that children who feel alienated from their family, school, or community are more at risk for alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school failure, depression, and suicide. Mentoring is viewed as one strategy for protecting youth and preventing these negative consequences.

The Benefits of Mentoring

Research on the effects of mentoring is scarce, but some studies and program evaluations of school-based and private mentoring programs suggest that mentoring is associated with a number of benefits for students, schools, and mentors. The benefits for students include:

- **Academic benefits:** Higher report card grades and standardized test scores, higher college enrollment rates and educational aspiration;
- **Behavioral benefits:** Better attendance, fewer discipline problems; less likelihood of dropping out of school, initiating drug and alcohol use, or becoming a teen parent;
- **Attitudinal benefits:** Better attitudes about school, enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence; and,
- **Social benefits:** Improved relationships with parents, teachers, and peers, and enhanced social skills (i.e. communication and decision making skills).

Schools also benefit from mentoring programs through lower dropout rates and increased opportunities to develop partnerships with businesses and community organizations. These types of partnerships can help to improve the image of the school within the community and increase community support for the school.

Mentors also benefit through the mentoring process. Adults who have mentored report benefits such as increased personal satisfaction that comes from contributing to their community and greater opportunities for enhancing personal strengths and developing new skills.

Characteristics of Effective Mentoring Programs

Several reviews of the research on mentoring reveal a number of characteristics common to effective programs. These characteristics include the following:

- Clearly defined services that are well-coordinated with the regular school program;
- A careful screening process to find committed volunteers while at the same time taking the necessary steps to ensure the safety of the child;
- Training for the mentor that includes communication and limit-setting skills, tips on relationship building, and recommendations on the best way to interact with a young person;
- Matching procedures that take into account the preferences of the child, their families, and the volunteers;
- Frequent contact between the mentor and child (i.e. several meetings each month with each meeting lasting at least an hour);
- Supervision and support from a case manager who has frequent contact with the parent, volunteer, and child and who provides assistance as difficulties arise; and,
- Follow-up and evaluation of the program to make necessary improvements and gauge the impact of the program.

Common Pitfalls to Mentoring

Research also indicates that there are a number of pitfalls associated with mentoring. The three primary pitfalls include:

- **Believing mentoring can do it all:** While the research is scarce, some evidence suggests that mentoring can be a useful but *modest* approach for addressing students' needs. Mentoring alone cannot address all of the social and environmental factors that contribute to poor student achievement, self-esteem, and behavior. The student may have certain problems that require additional resources (i.e. special instruction, drug rehabilitation, housing, etc.).
- **Recruiting and retaining mentors:** Finding volunteers to mentor children is one of the biggest challenges. States can encourage mentoring by providing leadership, creating incentives for mentoring, and developing a network of information about mentoring projects. Retaining mentors is best achieved through regularly scheduled personal contact among project staff and the mentors.
- **Supporting and funding programs:** Mentoring is not cost-free, it takes resources and coordination. For example, in a 1997 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Bulletin, it was reported that the cost of employing a caseworker to recruit, screen, match, and support volunteers was approximately \$1,000 per year per match. Whether program funding comes from the school district or in the form of grants from foundations and local businesses, it needs to be stable and adequate to cover costs for the duration of the program.

DELAWARE SITUATION:

In 1998 Governor Carper established the Delaware Mentoring Council. This council of more than 30 members was designed to promote programs in which adults interact one-on-one with children in need of academic assistance or who require encouragement from a positive role model. The council works to support the efforts of schools, businesses, and community groups that are involved in mentoring programs. The council has also developed guidelines for starting and operating mentoring programs, screening volunteers, and training mentors. The Governor's fiscal year 2001 budget provides funds to train mentors, create a statewide resource library housed within the Delaware Mentoring Council, and provide technical assistance to schools, businesses, and individuals.

Staff support for the Delaware Mentoring Council is provided by the University of Delaware's Office of Community and School Volunteers. This office has conducted a survey of mentoring programs that operate throughout the state's public school system. More information about this survey can be obtained by contacting Theresa Clower, director of the Office of Community and School Volunteers [tclower@udel.edu].

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- Delaware's leadership and many community organizations support student mentoring. How are the mentoring programs throughout the state being monitored and coordinated?
- What is being done to ensure that the programs offered are aligned with the current needs of students and schools?
- How are mentors in Delaware screened, trained, and supported?
- What incentives currently exist for attracting mentors and funding for mentoring programs?
- How are the programs currently evaluated? What is the impact of the programs?
- How do mentoring programs compare to other strategies (alternative schools, summer school, smaller class size) designed to assist under-performing students?

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