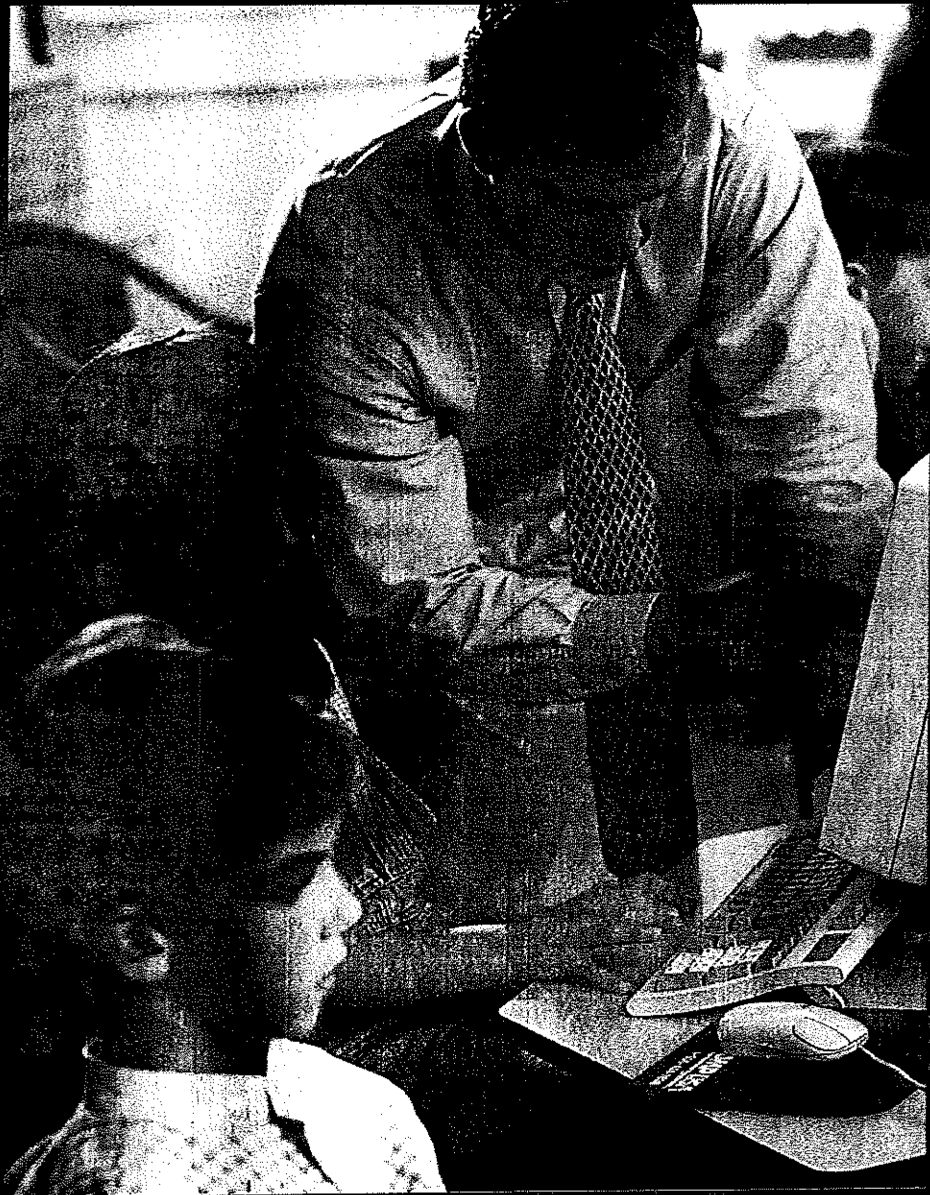
Preventing SCHOOL Failure



Special Education Student Teaching Practices

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Developing a Student Mentoring Program: Building Connections for At-Risk Students

LEON D. DAPPEN AND JODY C. ISERNHAGEN

ABSTRACT: Though mentoring has a long history, it has just recently begun to mature as a field to provide a research base of "best practice" for program development. Today, professionals are looking for ways to better connect with students, particularly those at risk, and mentoring programs are one way to do so. Mentoring programs are expanding rapidly, particularly in schools. In this article, the authors describe the development and implementation of an adult–student mentoring program, identify some cautions, and provide specific direction for program support.

KEY WORDS: adult–student mentoring, at-risk mentoring, mentoring implementation

Many of today's families face a myriad of economic and social stressors resulting in parents being uninvolved or overwhelmed with their children, leaving their children without the help of the caring adult they need (Herarra, 1999). Not surprisingly, there is growing interest in initiating student mentoring programs (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002) as professionals look for ways to better connect with these at-risk youth (Mecca, 2001). This interest is also reflected in recent federal budget planning. The proposed 2002 Education Budget included $100 million for mentoring and was approved at $17.5 million. In his 2003 State of the Union message, President Bush proposed $450 million for student mentoring programs, and Congress is considering supporting $150 million.

Background

The history of mentoring can be traced to Homer, the ancient Greek poet, who first coined the word "mentor" in his epic poem "The Odyssey." The great warrior, Odysseus, left for a year and chose a man named "mentor" to be the guardian/tutor for his son (The Mentoring Institute, 2001). The theoretical base for mentoring is linked to the importance of a significant adult in a child's development as described by Bandura (1977) in his identification of the importance of adult role modeling and Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his description of the importance of unconditional love. Benard (1991) asserts that an adult role model that can demonstrate unconditional love facilitates development of resiliency in children, which, in turn, serves as the basis

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for adult–youth mentoring. As stated by Benard (1995):

> The presence of at least one caring person—someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child's behavior, the child is doing the best that he or she can given his or her experience—provides support for healthy development and learning. (p. 1)

Work relating to resiliency suggests that a caring adult can be the difference in a young person's success (Benard, 1991). Mentoring can provide the caring person that is often lacking, particularly in the lives of at-risk youth.

Research Support for Adult–Student Mentoring

There is a growing body of research that indicates mentoring can positively impact youths and target many at-risk behaviors. For example, Tierney and Grossman (1995) found that both improved students' grades and relationships with others and a reduction in drug and alcohol use were linked to a student-mentoring program. Mecca (2001) reported that mentoring can increase the likelihood of students staying in school, deter teen pregnancy, and lessen the probability of gang membership. Curtis and Hansen-Schwoebel (1999) found that mentoring resulted in a young person who is more likely to trust teachers, acheive a more positive attitude toward school, maintain better attendance, perform higher academically, posses higher self-confidence, express feelings, and experience improved relationships with adults and peers. Jekeilek et al. (2002) found that young people involved in mentoring programs had fewer incidences of hitting and violence towards others, less drug and alcohol use, reduced likelihood of becoming a teen parent, and improved relationships with parents. Others have found mentoring to be equally effective in rural and nonrural (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2002a), as well as urban and nonurban settings (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2003a), and with boys as well as girls (Isernhagen & Dappen, 2003; Reed, McMillon & McBee, 1995, Tierney & Grossman). In reviewing a number of studies, Herrara (1999) emphasized that school-based mentoring results in "strong relationships that can develop within the school context and these relationships can make a difference in the lives of youth" (p. 16). Although some have criticized the research of mentoring programs because of the lack of rigorous peer-reviewed studies (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, Bogart, Roffman, Edelman & Galasso, 2002), a meta-analysis by DuBois, Holoway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) of peer-reviewed articles meeting specific evaluation criteria provided support for the effectiveness of mentoring, particularly when best practice is followed and strong relationships are formed.

Program Growth and Shift to School-Based Mentoring

Manza (2001) found a 40% growth in mentoring programs from 1996 to 2001, with 70% of that growth in school-based programs. Herrara (1999) also stated that school-based mentoring is the most rapidly growing aspect of mentoring programs. She estimates that Big Brothers Big Sisters, the largest and historically community-based mentoring program, is expanding into schools with a goal that one-third, or 100,000, of Big Brothers Big Sisters mentors will be in school settings. In describing student mentoring programs, Manza stated that currently 39% of the programs in the United States are community based; 29% are school based; 19% are community-organization based; 2% are business based; and 1% are e-mail based. Although it is estimated that there are 15.7 million students in America who could benefit from having a mentor, only 500,000 to 700,000 currently have a mentor (Manza). Even so, the shift to school-based mentoring programs has been a focus of recent discussion (Herrara; Jucovy, 2000). Isernhagen and Dappen (2001) summarized the reasons for this shift as follows: (a) if programs are going to serve significantly more students, they will have to be where the youth are, which is in schools; (b) parents are frequently uninterested or unwilling to refer their child for a mentoring program; (c) the "umbrella" of the school provides a comfort to some mentors who would not otherwise volunteer; (d) school-based mentoring programs are more cost effective than community-based programs (community-based programs are estimated to cost $1,000 to $1,200 per mentor match, whereas school-based programs are estimated at $480 to $600 [Herrara]); (e) the availability of students of diversity and general support of the school setting facilitates cross-gender, cross-racial, and special-needs student matching; and (f) school-based programs frequently have links with other community resources, enabling all to be used more effectively.

Program Resources

Persons seeking to initiate a mentoring program will find many resources available to help in developing and implementing a student-mentoring program. Many states have established a mentoring-partnership support network as well. To learn if your state is part of the network, contact the National Mentoring Partnership (www.mentoring.org). General information is available from the National Mentoring Center (www.nwrel.org/mentoring), The Mentoring Institute (www.tmistl.org), and the National Association of Partnerships in Education (www.partnersineducation.org). Related publications and research summaries are available through Public/Private Ventures (www.ppv.org). Once a program has started, the greatest resource for improvement is feedback from the students, mentors, staff, and parents who are directly involved with the program.

Stages of a School-Based Mentoring Program

Various authors have identified research-based best practices that contribute to a successful school-based program (DuBois et al., 2002; Herrara, 1999; Weinberger, 1992). The process can be summarized in two stages. The first stage (Stage I) is developing the program; the second stage (Stage II) is implementing the program. Program cautions surrounding these stages are also included.

Stage I: Developing the Program

The first stage of building a successful school-based mentoring program is developing the program. The following steps should be addressed:

1. Seek the involvement and support of the board of education, superintendent, administrators, and staff before embarking on the development of a school-based mentoring program. Many programs require a letter of understanding to clarify the role of all parties and to assure that the necessary capabilities and resources are present to support the program.

2. Identify general program parameters, including a plan that outlines the program purpose, goals, grade levels, qualifications of students, and resources (human and financial) to implement a program. As students mature, many are at risk in some way, as evidenced by declining grades, irregular attendance, and high-risk behavior. Building trust with a caring adult can help these students to cope with these challenging times. According to Rhodes (2002) the building of a relationship of trust that fosters resiliency is the key to the success of any mentoring program. Without trust, progress on other program goals may be unsuccessful. Other possible goals that build on this trust include: improving academic grades, reading skills, and relationships with students, parents, or other adults; and improving students' self-image and self-confidence. Clear goals provide direction in recruitment of students and mentors, the selection of activities in which they are involved, and evaluation of program success. Attention also must be given to identifying measures for goals. School records, for example, could provide much information in areas such as grades, attendance, office referrals, test results, and other school-related goals. Valid and reliable surveys are available that could be used to focus on goals such as self-concept, relationships with parents and others, and attitudes towards school.

3. Explore the community to determine other partners that may be involved. If the decision is made to partner with a mentoring agency, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, or any other agency serving youth, it is important to examine issues of differing cultures, policies, and procedures. This ensures that any possible conflicts are addressed prior to them becoming an issue that might hinder the development of the program (Herrara, 1999).

Stage II: Implementing the Program

The second stage of the process of building a successful school based mentoring program is implementing the program, which includes the following steps:

1. Student recruitment information must clearly reflect the goals of the program. A plan to share this information with those who may refer students (teachers, other professionals, and parents) must also be developed and implemented. School-based programs must obtain informed consent from parents for their child to participate, as well as permission from parents for the school to share information regarding their child with mentors. One aspect of best practice is maintaining parent support and involvement throughout their child's involvement (DuBois et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002). In reality, this support will vary widely. Programs, however, should provide feedback to parents, periodic involvement with some activities or programs, and encouragement for parents to build a relationship with the mentor.

2. To recruit mentors, target audiences such as businesses, retired workers, and service organizations should be considered. Contact community leaders to identify other groups or individuals who may be potential mentors. Once a program is established, many mentors will share positive stories with colleagues (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2002b), which can be effective in recruiting and retaining mentors. The final step in recruitment is to screen potential mentor candidates, which includes a written application, reference check, and finally, a formal background check. Issues of safety for students and protection for mentors have resulted in the need for more formal background checks of all mentors participating in school-based mentoring programs. The background check will vary in each community but may include driving records, credit references, and any available child abuse and neglect registries and/or criminal records. Some states require fingerprint record checks and some require tuberculin tests. Local law enforcement agencies can frequently assist with the screening process. Some organizations, for a fee, may carry out some background check activities. A well-designed process addressing local district and state requirements for mentors who work with youth is vital to ensure the programs' credibility and success.

3. To provide training and support for mentors, mentors will need an overview of the program goals, their role, and general information on skills related to working with youth. They also need specific information regarding school practices and procedures, and names and/or titles of school personnel to contact should any questions or concerns arise. Mentors need guidance on how to respond to sensitive topics such as possible child abuse or neglect. Training can be especially effective if they employ role-playing and modeling techniques. Mentors also need ongoing training opportunities that address the changing role of the mentor as the relationship develops and a clear understanding that significant changes in youth behavior take time and may not be visible to the mentor for several years. Research indicates that problem behavior, relationship instability, and feelings of inadequacy are manifested by some teenagers, tapering off in their early 20s (Steinberg, 1999); accordingly, maintaining student academic achievement and positive relationships with others can be interpreted as one measure of program progress.

4. When matching mentors and mentees, specific criteria need to be developed that relate to the program goals. Issues dealing with special interests or needs must be addressed when matching adult mentors with students. Children with disabilities need to be matched with adults who understand and are comfortable working with them. For some students (physically disabled, autistic, behaviorally disordered), this may require specific training relative to that child's disabilities and occasional contact with a case manager. Research has demonstrated that cross-gender (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2003b) and cross-racial (Rhodes, 2002) matches are equally successful, but discussion with the mentor, mentee, and parents is necessary to assess their comfort level and to address any possible concerns.

5. Regularly scheduling mentoring sessions that have clear agendas and expectations are critical to the success of any

mentoring program. Some mentors have found it helpful to maintain a written log of activities and discussion topics, which provides them with a reference for review when planning for the next session with their mentee. Written records can also provide a reference to help mentors identify times when their mentees feel most at risk (e.g., if anxiety occurred when the student was anticipating a visit with a non-custodial parent) and aid in preparation for a mentoring session. Although adult mentors frequently have work obligations, travel, or other activities that may conflict with mentoring sessions, mentees are particularly vulnerable and may interpret these absences negatively. Therefore, it is important for the mentor and program staff to keep the mentee informed regarding any changes to the mentoring schedule. Program coordinators can support mentors by providing structured large group activities for mentors and mentees that build peer and adult relationships around positive leisure time experiences. This may include such things as sports activities, theater, school programs, and other community activities. Careful planning and organization, which ensures that mentors and mentees are always in pairs or groups, addresses the liability concern of one adult being alone with one youth.

6. Year-end celebration, recognition, and retention activities are important aspects of program success. These activities build strength in the program as well as encourage mentors to continue their work with mentees. The longer the mentor–mentee relationship is maintained, the more it will yield positive growth (Rhodes, 2002).

7. Program evaluation, though often ignored, is critical to sustaining a quality mentoring program. Many programs are supported by grants that require an evaluation component. This evaluation data provide evidence of success, identify areas that can be improved, and substantiate that the program is meeting its intended goals. Evaluation must include quantitative data regarding original goals, such as academic grades, reduction in the failure rate of participants, and decline in office referrals and suspensions, all of which may vary on a student-to-student basis. It is also important to include qualitative stories describing life-changing events for students and mentors alike. These are particularly important in recruitment of mentors and in building program support.

Program Cautions

Drawing on our knowledge of the literature and our own experience, we feel there are some cautions to be considered in developing a school-based program. Although the accumulated research is consistent in support of student change as a result of participating in a mentoring program, some studies indicate that mentoring relationships of short duration (6 months or less) may do students more harm than good (Grossman & Rhodes, 1999). Program coordinators need to be cautious in situations of high student mobility and with mentors who cannot make the necessary time commitment. A second caution relates to the location of activities. For example, all meetings with mentors and mentees may or may not be limited to the school setting. If after-school or weekend meetings are a part of the program, insurance and liability issues will require strict protections to prevent any possible abusive situations. As discussed earlier, this may be addressed by implementing group activities in which a mentor would pick up another mentor and then pickup both of their mentees so that mentors are not alone with their mentee during transportation.

Conclusions

There is modest but growing evidence that student mentoring is beneficial for students (Curtis & Hansen-Schwobel, 1999; DuBois et al., 2002; Jekeilek et al., 2001; Mecca, 2001; Rhodes, 2002; Tierney & Grossman, 1995). Federal funding to support the growth of mentoring programs is more readily available and is likely to increase. Not only does mentoring have a rich history base and research has identified "best practices" in mentoring (DuBois et al., p. 2), there are a number of resources to provide school personnel with direction in developing and implementing a successful student-mentoring program (Jekielek et al., 2001; Mecca, 2001; Rhodes, 2002; Weinberger, 1992). Schools may develop their own program or team up with an existing model such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, HOSTS, or TeamMates (Mecca, 2001; Rhodes, 2002; The Mentoring Institute, 2001). The process of developing a quality mentoring program can be defined in two stages: The first is developing the program and the second is implementing the program. In the first stage, program development, the literature supports the importance of developing organizational policy support, a program plan, and assuring human and financial resources. One particular importance in this step is a program plan that supports building a trusting relationship between mentees and mentors, characterized by them wanting to be together and to share personal information. The resulting resiliency (the mentee achieving success despite being at risk) is the key to a successful program. Within the second stage, program implementation, it is important to ensure that the aspects of best practice are present, including recruitment of mentees and mentors, mentor training, matching criteria, regular mentoring sessions, year-end activities, and program evaluation. One key in this second stage is ensuring that mentor–mentee relationships be of sufficient length, not shorter than 6 months. Students at risk need significant adults in their lives whom they do not perceive as leaving them again. In all, an adult–student mentoring program based on emerging best practice can be an important factor in increasing the likelihood of student success both in school and beyond.

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