Mentoring:  
A Parent/Community Partnership That Works

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ABSTRACT: Most of the new growth in mentoring programs is occurring in schools. TeamMates, a statewide, school-based, one-to-one mentoring program has shown positive change in students' lives. This article explains how the TeamMates program has most directly benefited the students and their families. Benefits to the adult mentors, their families, work life, and their employers, as well as to the school and community at large, are explored. School-based mentoring is truly a parent–community partnership that embodies the popular phrase "it takes a village to raise a child."

AN OLD GUITAR

A TeamMate mentor in rural Nebraska had been meeting with his youth TeamMate for most of the school year. The man, who plays in a band, had been giving his mentee guitar lessons which the boy seemed to enjoy. Since TeamMates are discouraged from giving gifts, he had loaned the boy one of his old guitars as long as the boy gave his best efforts in school. As time passed, the boy's effort in school declined and his grades plummeted. After lengthy soul-searching, the TeamMate shared with the boy what was needed and that, maybe, someone else could reach and inspire him. He also said that according to their arrangement, the boy would need to return the guitar. Some time later the man took out the old guitar to take
on an outing and found a note in the guitar case from his mentee that said, "Don't give up on me."

The TeamMate called the boy and told him that he valued their relationship. They corresponded over the summer and resumed their mentoring relationship the next fall. While the mentor takes no credit for the change, the boy's mother responds that her son is attending school more, completing homework, and getting better grades. The mentor states that "good or bad, if something has happened, he calls to share that with me. . . . I believe in the TeamMates Mentoring Program . . . and I'm glad that old guitar brought the two of us back together." (TeamMates Newsletter, Spring, 2002, p. 2)

The young man in the story above has a distinct advantage in surviving the trials and tribulations of growing up at-risk. His mother has established a partnership with a non-parental adult role model that has influence on her son and she sees clear and specific evidence of his positive response. Research has demonstrated that nonparental adult role models (mentors) fill an important positive niche in the growth and development of youth. The strength of this positive benefit is related to the support and involvement of parents. Programs are expanding rapidly in schools, which is a natural and comfortable location for parents and community partners to come together. This article explores a particular parent/community partnership, TeamMates, a statewide mentoring program.

**A Unique Partnership**

A unique partnership has developed in the state of Nebraska where Tom Osborne, former University of Nebraska football coach and current U.S. Congressman, has initiated TeamMates—a statewide, school-based, one-to-one mentoring program for at-risk youth with community/business mentors. Dr. Osborne envisioned a program supported by adult mentors from many walks of life that would serve at-risk young people from early adolescence through high school
graduation. While many mentor programs focus only on attendance, grades, social competence, and discipline, the TeamMates program also includes high school completion and post-high school education as program outcomes.

Tom Osborne (2000) often refers to mentors as an "anchor" for children. He states that the most important thing a mentor does is to affirm a child. Young people need someone that they can count on and who will make a commitment to be there when they need them. Osborne (2000) stated, "I saw it in my former job; a player 'plays' down to a lower expectation if told they won't make it. Instead they need to hear, 'I see some possibilities."

TeamMates was initiated informally in the 1991–92 school year by Osborne asking for players to volunteer to mentor local youth. Twenty-five student athletes volunteered to mentor seventh- and eighth-grade students in a large school district. The program grew slowly until a grant was obtained in 1999 to develop the program into a formal statewide model. As of December 2002, 61 Nebraska schools with approximately 2,100 student mentor matches were involved in the program with the farthest location being 425 miles from the TeamMates office.

Mentors participating in the TeamMates program are volunteers that come from all walks of life including business and industry, civic and community organizations, colleges and universities, and retirees. They meet with students once a week for approximately an hour during school time. The primary tasks of a mentor are to establish a positive, personal relationship with the student; help the student develop life skills; assist students in obtaining additional resources; and help students in their ability to interact with others. Mentors work with students beginning in early middle school through high school completion, with the goal of post-high school training/education. Local school coordinators provide ongoing support and monitoring of the program in keeping with the TeamMates program manual (Mentoring Institute, 2001).

Parental involvement is integral to the TeamMates program. Parents may refer their children to the program, and
parental permission is required for a child to participate. The parent permission process includes an agreement to demonstrate a supportive attitude toward the program. Parents are also asked for information regarding their child’s interests, special needs, and preferences to aid in identifying the best possible mentor match. From the TeamMates program perspective, mentor and staff training includes a goal of constantly working toward an open and supportive relationship with parents (Mentoring Institute, 2001). Parents are involved in periodic group activities with the mentors and mentees and complete surveys regarding evaluation of the program.

BACKGROUND

The ancient Greek poet Homer first coined the word “mentor” in his epic poem, the “Odyssey.” The great warrior Odysseus knew he would need to be away from home for many years, so he chose a man named Mentor to be the guardian and tutor for his son. Thus, mentor came to mean any trusted counselor or guide (Mentoring Institute, 2001).

The psychological theory base for the importance of a significant adult in a child’s development is 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. This has resulted in the concept of developing resiliency in children (Benard, 1991), which is the basis for adult–student mentoring. As stated by Benard:

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. (1995, p. 1)

The field of resiliency has shown us that a caring adult can be the difference in a student’s success (Benard, 1991).
Susan Weinberger (2000) identified five of the most prevalent problems faced by young people today as: (1) Negative feelings about themselves; (2) Poor relationships with family members; (3) Poor grades; (4) Hanging out with the wrong crowd; and (5) Getting in trouble at school. Some of the issues surrounding these problems as identified by Weinberger were: peer pressure, substance abuse, sexuality and teenage pregnancy, child abuse and family violence, lack of moral development; school safety and violence, depression and suicide, loss of communication, lack of support-system safety net, loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. Mentoring has been identified as one way that the needs of at-risk youth can be met.

**Research Support for Adult-Student Mentoring**

There is a growing body of research documenting positive effects of mentoring programs with youth. In personal/social growth areas, students who have participated in a mentoring program are reported to have experienced a reduction in alcohol and drug use (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002), likelihood of becoming a teen parent (Mecca, 2001; Jekielek et al., 2002), incidence of hitting and violence toward others (Jekielek et al., 2002), and likelihood of joining a gang (Mecca, 2001). They have also shown improved relationships with others in general (Grossman & Tierney, 1998) and with peers, adults, and parents specifically (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). They were more able to express feelings and had increased self-confidence (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). In relationship to school, they showed an improved attitude toward school (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Jekielek et al., 2002), fewer absences (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999), higher academic achievement (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999), and were less likely to repeat grades (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). They were
more likely to stay in school (Mecca, 2001), to graduate and enroll in post-high school training and education, and more hopeful about the future (Mentoring Institute, 2001). While research regarding success of mentoring programs has been criticized for lack of peer-reviewed rigorous studies (Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes, Bogart, Roffman, Edelman & Galasso, 2002), a metanalysis by DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper (2002) of 55 programs meeting specific evaluation criteria provides support for the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs, particularly when "best practice" is followed and strong relationships are formed. One aspect of "best practice" that was identified was to provide mechanisms for parent support and involvement (DuBois et al., 2002).

Mentoring has been a focus of public attention over the past decade (Rhodes, 2002). This attention has resulted in many types of mentoring programs in K–12 public schools, community agencies and organizations, and higher education settings (Guetzkoe, 1997). Manza (2001) reported that approximately 39% of the mentoring programs in the United States are community-at-large-based; 29% are school-based; 19% are community-organization-based; 2% are faith-based; 2% are business-based; and 1% are e-mail-based. She further stated that while 15.7 million young people want or need mentors, only 500,000 to 700,000 currently have them. From 1996 to 2001, there was a 40% growth in mentoring programs. Seventy percent of that growth is in school-based programs. Sipe and Roder (1999) reported that newer programs are smaller, 80% having fewer than 50 students and only 12% having more than 100 students.

While research supports the benefits of mentoring, and there has been growth in numbers of programs, many of these programs tend to serve small numbers of students. There is a need for programs with the organizational resources and structure to provide the needed mentors to reach significantly more youth (Grossman & Garry, 1997; Manza, 2001). This could best be met by developing
programs that serve more students in school settings. The National Mentoring Center (2000) has described "The Top Ten Reasons Why Agencies Should Begin School-Based Mentoring Programs," providing evidence to support the likelihood of growth in school-based mentoring programs. The authors have adapted this as:

1. School is where youth are.
2. A teacher may refer youth who may not be referred by parents.
3. School-based mentoring attracts volunteers who may not be comfortable in community-based programs.
4. School-based mentoring programs are more cost-effective than community-based programs ($556 per match versus $1,543).
5. Cross-gender, cross-racial and intergenerational matching can occur more comfortably in the controlled school setting.
6. School-based programs have established processes for public information and, therefore, increased opportunities of finding volunteers and gaining financial support from the community.
7. Schools provide a hub for partnerships from the larger community including: business and industry (facilitating adopt-a-school or other programs in which employees are given paid time to be in schools), other schools and colleges, community organizations, churches, retirement homes, public sector volunteers, and general community volunteers.

Herrera (1999) stated 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). An indication of the general community support for mentoring comes from a U.S. News and World Report article stating that "discovering mentoring is the greatest policy insight of the century" (as cited in Grossman, 1999, p. 5).
**DOES THE TEAMMATES MENTORING PARTNERSHIP WORK FOR YOUTH?**

A program evaluation survey is conducted annually. Students, parents, mentors, and teachers rate each of the items for the three program outcomes. The survey used for the program evaluation was adapted from a Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (2001) survey used to evaluate their mentoring program.

The program has demonstrated positive perception of change in student behavior as rated by students, parents, teachers, and mentors (Isernhagen & Dappen, 2001). In examining student survey responses about their own behavior, their strongest responses (very good or good) were in “ability to avoid early parenting,” “substance abuse,” “maintains interest and hobbies,” “shows trust,” and “maintains personal hygiene and appearance.” The relatively weakest categories for student responses (although still average or above) were identified as “attitude toward school,” “academic performance,” “school readiness,” “able to express feelings,” and “the use of community resources.”

In survey results from mentors commenting about their mentees, the strongest responses (very good or good) were that they were “able to avoid early parenting,” “able to avoid substance abuse,” “shows trust,” “respect for others,” and “maintains personal hygiene and appearance.” The relatively weakest areas (although still average or above) were “school preparedness,” “using school and community resources,” and “and sense of future.”

The strongest responses (very good or good) from parents about their child’s behavior were similar to those of the students. They were “able to avoid early parenting,” “able to avoid substance abuse,” “shows trust,” “relationships with other adults,” and “maintains personal hygiene and appearance.” Their relatively weakest responses (although still average or above) were also very similar and included “school preparedness,” “academic performance,” “class participation,” “attitude toward school,” and “use of community resources.”
Parent overall ratings of behavior change as a result of participating in the program were not significantly different from those of students, mentors, or teachers.

Each student is also rated by their language arts teacher and their strongest responses (very good or good) were "maintains personal hygiene, appearance," "shows trust," "able to avoid early parenting," "having interests and hobbies," and "classroom behavior." The relatively weakest responses (still average or above) by teachers were "school preparedness," "academic performance," "attitude toward school," "sense of future," and "class participation."

There were three items that were in the highest-rated groups (good to very good change) for all populations that rated students. They were "able to avoid early parenting," "maintains personal hygiene, appearance," and "shows trust." There were two items that were the relatively lowest (still average or above) for all populations that rated students. These items, both school related, were "academic performance" and "school preparedness." Teachers tended to rate students lower than other populations on all items. Students tended to rate themselves higher than other groups rated them. Parent ratings were not significantly different from other groups. All groups were seeing similar and positive change in student behavior.

**What Is in This Partnership for the Mentors?**

Too often the focus on mentoring is only on the benefits to students. Mentoring is frequently described as an adult continuously and selflessly giving in a one-sided relationship. Unless there is benefit to mentors, they will likely either not be as effective as they might or stop participating completely. Rhodes (2002) describes the heart of mentoring as an emotional connection, which underscores its reciprocal nature—if you give, you'll get. Adults that invest in the relationship will gain as much as the young person. Erickson (1994) describes the importance of "generativity" in people—
a need to give love and care to others and make societal contributions—as necessary for healthy development, particularly as people reflect on their lives. Many adults that participate in mentoring have been parents. Mentoring offers them the opportunity for intimate contact with a young person again. Further, particularly with the elderly, working with young people can offset feelings of stagnation and loss and result in more satisfaction with life and improved physical health.

Mentoring may also be understood as contributing to the adult involved as described by Reisman (1965) in “help-therapy.” A person’s sense of efficacy and pride from being admired and helpful has often been described as the driving force for positive change in mentors’ lives. Rhodes (2002) describes benefits to mentors as including improved health, higher self-esteem, insight into one’s own childhood or children, and positive public recognition.

**What Is in This Partnership for Parents?**

The research is clear, there is benefit to youth to have a relationship with nonparent role models. One aspect of this benefit is that youth are more likely to build better relationships with their parents. An important aspect to consider in this result is the prevailing Western society view that children are considered the responsibility of their parents, and the involvement of other adults may be met with suspicion and discomfort; it may even be seen as threatening to parents (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Parents sometimes fear they may be judged or that their power may be usurped (Rhodes, 2002). There is, however, research support for the involvement of nonparent adults in the lives of youth. Nonparent role models allow for objectivity and less emotion, away from the parent responsibility role. This allows youth to more comfortably explore adult identities, new capabilities, and how they may integrate them into self (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). As stated by Liang, Tracy, Taylor, and Williams
(2002), "mentors facilitate transition from adolescence through adulthood through the instrumental provision of information, advice, skill-building, change, and role modeling" (p. 272). Another concern expressed by many parents during the adolescent years is a change in their relationship, with youth and peers having increased significance. Mentoring is described as filling in the niche between parents and peers so that parents and youth can continue to relate (Rhodes, 2002). As one parent put it, "the edge just seems to be off—we can talk." The mentor seems to help the parent/youth relationship to be closer (Rhodes, 2002). Adolescents are able to recognize the important influence unrelated adults can have on them and accept mentoring from them (Darling, Hamilton, Toyokawa, & Matsuda, 2002). It is important to note, however, that parents remain the most important adults in adolescents’ lives (Rhodes, 2002).

Changes in families, work demands, and communities have left adolescents bereft of adult supports that were somewhat more available just a few decades ago (Rhodes, 2002). This further reinforces the importance of formal mentoring programs. One example would be a comment from a single-parent father: "I don’t know what I would do without our mentor, and I see such a change now that my teenage daughter has an adult female to talk with."

**How Do Employers, Schools, and the Community Benefit From This Partnership?**

As well as having workers that have a higher self-esteem, there are other benefits related to employers. Weinberger (2000) states that 75% of adults involved in mentoring reported an improved attitude at work. Rhodes (2002) also explains that mentors report a better understanding of those less fortunate or less privileged in society. Schools benefit from having community members in the school setting on a regular basis to gain an understanding of the school perspective and operation. Many mentors comment that they had no idea of the challenges faced by schools on a daily basis. In summary, the view that it is the responsibility of
the village to raise a child is based on the importance of that task to the long-term well-being of the community.

WHAT IS THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOME FORMER MENTORS IN THIS PARTNERSHIP?

A survey of former mentors provides some insight into the value of mentoring (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2001). It was completed by a number of former mentors who were not able to continue with the program. The mentors still feel very connected to their mentees, 25% are still in touch with their mentees, another 26% would like to be but situations prevent it. Comments made included: “felt I was making a difference,” “provided insight into the younger generation,” and “enjoyed it, I keep a picture on my desk of my mentee.” The primary reasons mentors do not continue in the program are: the mentee or mentor moves (45%); work conflicts (13%); never having been matched (8%); and health problems (6%). Other reasons given that are informative to program administrators include: child abused/problems too serious; not seeing progress; needing a younger mentor; or just needing a break. Mentors see the program as positive and made many positive comments (91%). Those not seeing the program positively (9%) base it on specific negative occurrences.

Mentors would recommend TeamMates to a friend (87%) and list many positive reasons, including: “very rewarding,” “helps me think young,” “nothing more positive than a caring adult in a child’s life,” and “great opportunity.” Although this study involved a limited sample of mentors, it provides insight of those that no longer work in the program and the importance it has for them.

CONCLUSIONS

Interest is at an all-time high in initiating student mentoring programs (Jekielek et al., 2002). This is likely due to a number of factors. Recent school violence has everyone looking for ways to better connect with at-risk students (Mecca, 2001). Many
families are uninvolved or overwhelmed, leaving students without the caring adult help they need (Hererra, 1999). Most of the new growth in mentoring programs is occurring in schools. Schools provide a “center” for the community to best use all available resources that might be needed as well as provide a supportive setting to operate mentoring programs. Schools are also familiar and comfortable settings for parents to become involved with community resources that they might not otherwise come in contact with.

Mentoring most directly benefits the young people involved. However, there are certainly great benefits for parents and community, too. Parents may experience a better relationship with their youth and another adult to aid them in supporting their child. Benefits also accrue to the mentor’s family, work life, and their employer as well as to the school and the community at large. The proposed 2002 Education Budget included $100 million for mentoring, $17.5 million was approved. In his 2003 State of the Union message, the president proposed $450 million for mentoring. This is an indication of increased support for parents involved in community school-based mentoring partnerships.

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