Dr. Mentor's

16 Steps to Effective Mentoring

Mentoring is a concept that has existed, formally and informally, since the beginning of time. All of us who are successful can think back and remember those individuals in our own or extended family, as well as in the community, at work, or in our churches and synagogues who have been there for us. These special people have guided us, provided us with unconditional love, protected and nurtured us, and sent us a very important message: "You count and I will always be there to support you." These individuals are mentors.

Over the past two decades, site-based mentoring has emerged as a most popular approach to improve the self-esteem, attitudes, attendance, and achievement of school-aged children. Its instant success can be attribute to the program's basic principles. It matches caring adults in the community with youth who could benefit from the attention and long-term relationships. The time commitment is often as little as only one hour a week in a safe, monitored, and supervised environment. The site can be a school, community center, church or agency in a town or city. Mentors like the safety factor, and the one hour spent with the youth is very doable. Together, the mentors and youth, often know as the mentees, decide on the activities in which they will engage.

This initiative has now become a critical intervention across this country. And the benefits are not one-directional. The mentors benefit as much from the experience as their protégés. Site-based mentoring is one of the most powerful initiatives I have ever witnessed in my 38-year career in the field of education, as a teacher and central office administrator.

It is impossible for a volunteer mentor to walk into a school or other site location with no preparation or training-no matter how good his or her intentions-and expect that the mentoring experience will be a positive and meaningful one. It is equally unfair to presume that a program will be successful unless a well-organized infrastructure has been established to monitor and evaluate the effort.

I am asked frequently what are the most critical factors that will enable a site-based program to flourish over time rather than fizzle and die. After almost two decades in the field of mentoring, I believe that the two most important components are: (1) a strong infrastructure at the location (school, community center, agency, etc.) that embraces the program, and (2) reliable mentors who show up when they say they will. I offer the following 16 steps to ensure optimum success in establishing, maintaining and evaluating a site-based program...

1) When establishing a mentoring program, make sure that everyone in the community involved with youth is part of the planning. The "table" should include members of the school board, superintendent, all school staff, parents, top officials in business and civic groups, union officials, parent-teacher organizations, advisory councils, churches and synagogues, and all programs in the community that are involved with youth.

2) If the program is going to take place in a school, selecting the first school to begin the program is critical. Make sure that it has an outstanding principal, a cohesive staff, and a friendly secretary. Unwilling schools should be put on a waiting list! The school board should craft a written policy on mentoring and have it approved at a public meeting. Make sure to check and see if the school district has any strict requirements to become a volunteer. Does the district have an insurance policy that covers all volunteers in a school building? Do they require a tuberculosis test to work with kids?

If the program is taking a place at an alternative site in the community, ask similar questions before you begin.

3) Gather demographic and dropout statistics. Conduct focus groups, interviews, surveys, and meetings with Teachers and youth providers to determine the right grade level target audience to begin a program.

4) When recruiting mentors, do not forget those dedicated volunteers from business who are already involved in active partnership programs in their community. They should be approached first to consider becoming involved as mentors. They may be part of a school-business partnership or involved with their local Chamber of Commerce or United Way. They already know the importance of volunteering.

5) Recruit only mentors who are caring, committed, and patient. They should be good listeners who keep appointments, like kids, have an outstanding employment record and a good sense of humor. They should also be free of alcohol and drug problems. All others should not apply! Mentors can be recruited from many different sources. A few that come to mind include corporations; retirement communities or other senior citizen groups; fraternal, social, and civic organizations; church and synagogue groups; government, fire, and police agencies; institutions of higher education; health agencies; the IRS and FBI; United Way; mass media; and labor organizations.

6) Conduct a thorough screening on all prospective mentors. This includes criminal background checks, reference checks, personal interviews, and examination of employment history. Many school districts pay for background checks on new teachers and will include mentors in the budget. Other schools and community agencies do not have the money to cover the cost of the background checks. When this is the case, other options are available. In some communities, the chief of police works closely with the organization sponsoring the program and offers free or reduced cost for the checks. In other communities, businesses will pick up the cost for their own employee mentors. If none of these options are available to you, ask the mentors to pay for the check. It will be their only out-of-pocket cost.

7) All mentors must be trained before beginning in the program. School staff- particularly guidance counselors, psychologists and social workers-should participate in the training even if the site of the program is not the school. After all, they see and know these youth very well. Offer volunteers the skills to become good mentors, including strategies for building self-esteem in children; instruction in being a good listener; familiarity with the policies and procedures of the school district, agency or organization, including mandated reporting of abuses; strategies for each session to assist them in their role; and insight into the typical profile of the child with whom they will be working. In school-based programs, invite the superintendent of schools to address and thank the new mentors. At the end of the session, give new mentors a table tent to put on their desk that says: "I am proud to be a mentor." It is also a great recruitment tool for new prospects.

8) Parental permission must be obtained for all minor children who enter the program. If the family speaks a language other than English, make sure the permission form is in their first language.

9) School principal, teachers, and support staff comprise the committee that recommends and matches mentors and mentees for school-based program. Community-based programs will include experts from each agency on the team. It is very important to match a diverse group of youngsters as the program begins. Typically, the kids who are selected have poor self-esteem, are hostile and angry, do not take risks or get along well with their peers, are socially and emotionally detached at school, and lack a safety net and support system in their lives. The youth selected should include those from one parent as well as from two-parent families; those who are rich and those who are poor; those who are minorities and those who are not. These deliberate matches send a critical message to the community from the beginning of the program. Mentoring benefits all kids in a program, not just a few. If we label just a certain few for the program, we will lose in the end.

10) Identify one person at each school or community site who is the liaison for the program. The individual is typically a youth worker, guidance counselor, social worker, nurse, psychologist, or teacher. Each business or organization identifies one person to be their company or agency liaison to work with the program staff to ensure success of the program.

11) Weekly sessions include activities that mentors and mentees decide together. For elementary aged youth, these may include reading, working on the computer, doing an arts-and-crafts project, writing stories or poems, playing basketball in the gymnasium, learning a foreign language, or just walking outside or sitting under a tree and talking. For middle and high school aged youth, activities might include doing a community service project; taking a career-interest inventory; or learning how to interview, write a resume, and dress appropriately for a job. It also could include searching the want ads and exploring careers, post-secondary education, and financial aid and career opportunities.

Program staff and youth understand and must be flexible if a mentor has to cancel a meeting. If mentors are unable to make a scheduled meeting, calling the school or agency liaison is one way to communicate the change and to reschedule. Another is to fax the youth at school and have the message delivered straight to their classroom. In my experience, the kids like this fax almost as much as the real live person!

12) Mentors cannot work in a vacuum. At regular intervals in the program, schedule brown-bag lunches. The mentors come together to discuss how they are doing and what additional assistance they require from program staff. Allow mentors to communicate with teachers and program coordinators by notes and telephone calls. Input from staff provides ongoing support and feedback, which mentors require in order to stay the long haul.

13) At year-end, the program hosts a recognition event to thank and encourage mentors. You may wish to consider awards in various categories: to the company that has recruited the most new mentors; the company liaison who is the most enthusiastic supporter of the initiative; the school principal who is the greatest proponent of the program; and the teacher, school liaison or youth worker at the agency who has dedicated him or herself to the program. It is a good idea to recognize and thank a devoted school secretary who assists with the mentoring program, too!

14) The family can play an important role in the partnership. Invite the family to participate in events at the program site three or four evenings a year. Mentors and mentees join the youth's family for potluck dinners, a square dance, or other activities. The best way to ensure that the family will be there is to offer them free transportation, food, and childcare for younger children.

15) School-based mentoring takes place during the school year only. Many mentors would like to stay in contact with their mentees during the summer months. Mentors should address and stamp a few envelopes and give them to their mentees. Ask each to write mentors a note or draw a picture and drop it in the mailbox. Mentors can do the same. Swap photos before the end of the school year to remember each other during the summer months. Examine a calendar and determine how many weeks it will be until you see each other again. Of course, if this is a program that meets during the summer, it will simply continue throughout the year.

16) All programs should be evaluated frequently to measure outcomes. Mentors, teachers, agency staff, parents and the youth themselves can all be administered pre and post surveys to determine success. The nature of each survey and the questions asked will be determined by the program's goals and objectives. As an example, teachers can be asked about growth in students in areas such as self-esteem, taking risks, getting along with peers, communication skills, work habits, school attendance, attitudes and interest in and mastery of subject areas.