Mentoring
Makes a Difference

How can we reduce discipline problems and raise achievement? How can we give our students the emotional support they need for academic success? These were glaring questions for Minneola Elementary. The students who visited our offices for discipline over and over needed more than a warning or a suspension. They needed us. They needed to talk and to be heard. They needed to feel valued.

To tackle these issues, we developed a mentoring program. According to the Making a Difference impact study on Big Brothers Big Sisters by Public/Private Ventures, boys and girls involved in a mentoring relationship feel more competent in school and are less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and to skip school. They also report more positive relationships with their friends and family. Our hope in developing a mentoring program was to guide our troubled students back on track.

Our Elementary Mentorship Program began as a partnership with a neighboring elementary school and our local community college.

We started in the 2008-2009 school year after a discussion with our principal, our guidance counselor, educators at other schools, a school board member, a community college representative, and our social worker. Minneola and our neighbor school began laying the groundwork. After gathering information from the California Governor’s Mentoring Partnership, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, and our own district, we developed criteria for participants, a screening process, application forms, a training protocol, a brochure, and a marketing plan. Our big challenge was getting community members to commit to our program. We hoped that if we could get mentors trained and match them with students, they would be hooked. We were certain the mentors would get just as much out of mentoring as the students gained from being mentored.

We started recruiting mentors from the community with help from the community college. We spoke at a chamber of commerce breakfast, were interviewed by the community college’s news program and the local paper, and placed ads in the newspaper. We handed out our brochure wherever possible, and sent letters to some of the “active living” senior communities in our area. We didn’t have long to wait! From the first phone call, our program took off.

Nuts and Bolts
The community college also helped with the planning and implementation of the program. As our mentors come on board, we require them to attend a 30-minute training session in which we cover what to expect, discuss how to handle potential situations, and answer questions. We also provide mentors with talking points to get them started. We encourage our mentors to focus particularly on academics and overall school performance, and remind them to avoid asking probing questions that delve into a student’s personal life.

After mentors are trained and pass a background check, we match them with students. We ask mentors to make a one-year commitment to eat lunch with their mentees for 30 minutes once a week. Some of our mentors have asked to mentor more than one student or have more than one lunch a week, and we are always willing to accommodate them.

Our mentees come to us through teacher and parent requests, usually out of concern over academics, behavior, or both. On some occasions the school’s intervention team requests a mentor for a student. Mentees must have parental permission to participate; very seldom does a parent deny
permission. We provide parents with information on what to expect from the mentoring program and details about the mentor who will be working with their child.

We have learned some lessons along the way. Mentors are valuable resources; however, they too need a support system. We have to remember that many of them do not come from an education background and do not know about the inner workings of schools. They are not aware of how today’s students are different from those of years past. Therefore, training is essential.

It has helped to have one or two staff members available to answer mentors’ questions. At our school, we have two staff members at one central location where mentors sign in, obtain a name tag, and wait for their mentee. One of our personnel emails the teachers, reminding them to send their students to meet their mentors during lunch. It is also important to notify a mentor when his or her student is absent, and to notify the student when the mentor is going to be absent.

Make sure you have a place for mentors and mentees to meet that is quiet enough for conversation yet not isolated from school personnel. In our foyer we have tables that have checkerboards on them. There, mentors and students can eat lunch and play checkers or another game while they talk. One of our mentors has a hearing impairment, so putting him in the foyer with other people present made it difficult for him to carry on a discussion with his mentee; we arranged for them to meet in a conference room or one of our offices.

Results and Rewards
We soon saw positive results. Most of our mentored students went from receiving multiple disciplinary referrals to no referrals at all. I can’t say that all of our mentees stopped having issues, but I can say there’s been a drop in negative behavior. More importantly, the mentees changed as students. They developed confidence, became excited about school, and walked with an air of self-esteem we had not seen before. They knew someone cared about them and was coming to spend time specifically with them.

At the end of every school year, we survey our mentors, students, and teachers about the program. Here are just a few of their comments:

- From a third-grade teacher: “He was much more relaxed and could let things go because he had someone to talk to.”
- From a fourth-grade teacher: “I noticed the student tried harder and was more receptive in class.”
- From a third-grade student: “I like having a mentor because it helps me be a better person.”
- From a mentor: “I love the opportunity to perhaps make a difference in someone’s life.”

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- From a mentor: “I love the opportunity to perhaps make a difference in someone’s life.”

A testament to the success of our program is that each year our mentors have returned. Some have even followed their mentees to middle school. One mentor had to move, but said she would return for the child’s fifth-grade promotion ceremony because she wanted to share that special moment with him. We discovered that members of the community want to be involved. All we have to do is ask.

Our district has recognized the value of mentorship and has pushed for mentoring to take place at all levels. In the 2010-2011 school year, officials put out a call for 1,000 mentors to work with 1,000 students. They are not far from meeting that goal, a shift that underscores the importance of mentoring for student success.

Sherry Watts is assistant principal of Minneola Elementary School in Minneola, Florida.

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