School-based mentoring programs can boost children’s learning and self-worth.

Businesses are an untapped resource for volunteers. Some companies release employees for part of the day to engage in community service activities.

Volunteers who feel welcomed, valued and supported become invested in the school and in the education and wellbeing of “their kids.”
NURTURING STUDENTS AND VOLUNTEERS

As principal of a school with a substantial population of students from low-income homes, Barbara Shirley faced the stark reality that many Alta Vista parents could not provide the at-home learning support their children needed because they were struggling just to make ends meet. So, she and volunteer coordinator Lisa Thole appealed to the Sarasota community for help, recruiting volunteers to meet with students one-on-one during school hours for tutoring in math and reading.

Inspired by the phrase “If we build it, they will come,” Shirley envisioned a dedicated room in the school—a warm, safe, nurturing space—where students and mentors could meet. Here, the volunteers were welcomed and received the support and training they needed to work with at-risk students. And, this was where the parents who wanted to become more involved in their children’s education could learn how to become coaches. Shirley’s idea became the Eagle’s Nest Volunteer Center.

IMPLEMENTATION

To get the Center up and running, Thole recruited more than 100 volunteers from different sectors of the community: parents, retired persons, high school students and working adults whose employers released them during the day to engage in service activities. Volunteers were taught how to use instructional materials; they attended workshops to gain insight into the home lives of the children they served; and they were shown strategies for becoming more effective mentors. Dream funds paid for supplies, educational materials and equipment.

Monday through Friday, from 8:30 to 3:15, the Eagle’s Nest Volunteer Center became a hub of activity. Students struggling with schoolwork were identified by their teachers and referred to the Center, where they were matched with a volunteer and received extra help in reading, mathematics, study skills and test preparation. Principal Shirley reports: “Throughout the year, attendance at the Volunteer Center was fluid as students gained skills and were successful and other students needed support.”

RESULTS

Two-hundred and fifty children in grades K–5 attended the Center twice a week. Students commented, “I love the Volunteer Center; it’s really fun to go there,” and “My volunteer is fun and makes me smile.” Academically, students made gains in reading fluency and writing competence. Seventy percent of participants in grades 2–4 showed growth on the Spring Scholastic Reading Inventory. Since opening, the Center has received media attention and numerous awards, including a PTA Parent Involvement Award.
Looking back on the year, Shirley was not sure who got more out of the program: students or volunteers. One volunteer, a staffer with the Sarasota Herald-Tribune newspaper, said, “I got hooked on mentoring because spending an hour once a week with two first-graders reminded me how important children are and how simple it can be for adults to help motivate them.” As the Eagle’s Nest volunteers built relationships with students, they saw needs they could fill. They organized a jacket fund to provide children with cold-weather wear, and reached out to their professional networks during a book drive, collecting four times the number of books the school had anticipated.

NEXT STEPS

Plans are in place to continue the Eagle’s Nest Volunteer Center indefinitely. Recruitment efforts have been stepped up, and the team analyzes and refines the Center’s services on a regular basis, tailoring instruction to meet current students’ needs. Inside the district and beyond, the program has become a model to replicate. Schools have approached the Eagle’s Nest team for ideas and guidance on starting their own centers. “It’s been a wonderful opportunity to share our success and experience and support other schools in their quest to help students achieve,” Shirley said.

RESOURCES

Corporation for National and Community Service
AmeriCorps and Senior Corps
www.nationalservice.gov

MENTOR
Provides the support and tools that mentoring organizations need to effectively serve young people in their communities.
www.Mentoring.org