E-mentoring: A Partnership that Works!

Several years ago, while we were looking for ways to build a face-to-face mentoring program at our school, we received help from an unexpected source. Our school had been awarded a financial gift from the General Mills Box Tops for Education program, and when the General Mills sales manager came to our school to present the check, he asked how his department could support our school. I mentioned my difficulty in finding adult mentors who could spare the time to provide personal contacts with our students and he came up with an interesting suggestion: How about mentoring through e-mail?

We quickly agreed to assemble a steering committee, consisting of representatives from General Mills, our technology integration collaboration teacher, and myself, to develop and implement an e-mentoring program for the following school year. The committee examined an existing e-mentoring model and made adaptations to fit our needs and goals: To improve student writing skills; expose students to the business world; and provide a caring adult to show interest in each student’s personal life and writing development.

How It Works

Each fall, more than 100 staff members from General Mills volunteer to serve as e-mentors for every sixth grader in our school. (This year we have 113 sixth graders.) Every two weeks, from October through May, each sixth-grade student e-mails his or her mentor. The first week, each student completes a teacher-directed writing assignment, usually one paragraph, and adds a personal note to his or her e-mentor. Prior to sending the e-mails, our technology integration collaboration teacher sends each e-mentor a description of the writing assignment and the criteria to meet the writing objective.

The e-mentors read the assigned paragraph and respond within 48 hours, giving suggestions for improvement and replying to the personal notes. The students are then responsible for revising the writing assignment and submitting it to their e-mentors. To maintain security, students use a central e-mail account. Each student’s name is put in the subject line of the e-mail. Because computer lab time is at a premium, e-mails are printed for students to read and revise.

The e-mentors and their mentees meet at least three times per year—twice at our school and once at the General Mills headquarters. The introductory fall visit is devoted to fun activities and getting acquainted. The spring visit is an ice cream social celebrating the end of the school year. When the students visit General Mills, they are introduced to marketing strategies, participate in product evaluations, and tour the facility, including their e-mentors’ work areas.

On other occasions throughout the year, e-mentors visit the school to have lunch with their mentees and attend school events, including our sixth-grade musical. All e-mentoring activities take place during the school day or during school-sponsored events.

How It Pays Off

Our school’s unique partnership with General Mills has truly made a difference in our students’ writing performance and social development. Their writing skills have improved; more than 80 percent are ranked proficient on state tests. In addition, each student has a caring adult who provides friendship while building a personal relationship and serving as a powerful role model.

During the past several years, there have been many examples of how this program has impacted children on a personal level:

- One student, who was in our “strategies” program for students with severe emotional and/or behavioral disorders, would wear a suit each time he met his mentor; for the student, that relationship was very special and he wanted to look like a businessman. This student’s behavior was positively impacted due to his relationship with his e-mentor.
- A quiet, shy student for whom English was not her first language, developed a very close bond with her e-mentor and became a more fluent writer during the e-mentoring experience. She also began to smile more often and looked forward to her contacts with her e-mentor.
- One of the e-mentors is wheelchair-bound and it has been very rewarding to watch his mentees over the years interact with him in a very caring and accepting manner.

Thanks to dedicated and caring teachers and volunteers, we have an e-mentoring program that has made a powerful difference in the lives of our students.

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