



Middle School Mentors Mean Business

How peer mentoring can increase academic engagement

By Janet Layne

Trying to get middle schoolers to care about academics is an uphill battle. Middle school students care deeply about their connections with peers, but not nearly as much about turning homework or classwork in on time. This led me to think: *Could students' desire for peer approval be used to*

increase academic engagement?

The answer, we found, is a resounding YES.

Peer Review Teams Tackle Underachievement

Rather than relying on adult-led interventions, our school created

peer review teams to assist with academic engagement. The peer review team is composed of peer mentors who are selected based on certain characteristics, including good attendance, class leadership abilities, work ethic, and a positive attitude. We have one peer review team of three to five

Peer programs provide growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees.

students for each grade level, grades 5 through 8.

Peer mentors helped establish norms for the peer review team. Mentors must follow the rules and guidelines and sign a confidentiality agreement, promising to never discuss the issues we deal with in peer review outside of scheduled meetings or they will be dismissed. This is a great opportunity for a lesson in ethics as well. With the principal or a faculty facilitator, the peer review team reviews “the cases” of students who are struggling, and defines the reasons why they are having trouble academically, and they create action plans to implement with each individual student. Faculty members foster trusting relationships between these mentors and the students they are assigned to help.

Action plans are based on each individual child’s needs. For example, if a student has fallen behind due to absences and is struggling with completing missed work, peer review mentors are assigned responsibilities such as calling or messaging the student the night after the student misses a day at school, meeting the student upon return to go over homework/classwork expectations, and even helping the student set up a planner that lists required makeup work to stay better organized. Mentors can also be assigned to the struggling students during labs, study group time, partner times, or test prep times.

Each week, mentors meet with their mentees, as well as with the rest of the peer review team and the principal, to celebrate successes or to revamp things that haven’t worked well. This typically lasts about 15 minutes per grade level. We often have many celebrations to report out for the groups in regard to

success stories the kids share. This is very uplifting and rewarding to both the mentors and the mentees.

When students are consistently experiencing success with the aid of the peer mentors, the principal and teachers meet to determine whether the student is ready to “graduate out” of peer review status or if they should remain in the program for continued support.

Getting Student and Family Buy-In

Our teachers were excited by the potential of peer-review teams. However, we were not so sure that students and families would go for the idea. I was actually dreading those conversations and wondered how we would convince parents and the students that this process would offer beneficial assistance.

However, I was pleasantly surprised. The parents welcomed the idea and were thrilled we had devised a new support system for students. When we met with the struggling students—individually, with their parents and school administrators present—to explain the peer review process, the idea clicked and was well-received. Students liked the idea of answering to their peers and being able to go to them and get assistance. We also assured students and families that teachers would assist the mentors if they ever needed resources or help.

The Power of Peers

At first, I think students thought their peers would allow them to skip out on obligations, turn in assignments late, and neglect to obtain parent signatures. This was not the case. Peer mentors took their responsibilities seriously and adhered to the rules they had formulated.

Students who are being mentored do not want to let their friends down or disappoint their mentors by not meeting the criteria set forth in the action plans. As a result of the peer mentoring, their attendance improves, they turn in their makeup work and class assignments on time, submit higher-quality work, stay late for tutoring sessions, arrive early for morning tutoring, and diligently keep their academic planners in order so they are ready for each day.

Initially, I think it surprised both sets of students to learn how successful this process was. Mentors and mentees implemented the steps of the process with fidelity and passion and developed a sense of competence, success, and pride.

Peer influence is a key factor of school engagement, and the influence of peers is greatest at times of transition to a new environment or when students face increased responsibilities in a middle school or high school setting. Middle school and high school peer programs provide growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees, resulting in a “double positive impact” that is very appealing to schools and districts attempting to support students with limited financial funding or community resources.

One young man in seventh grade, who often struggles with math, recently told me, “Mrs. Layne, I want to thank you for being willing to step outside the box and let us have kids our age help us get back on track with school.” I smiled, hugged him, and thanked him for being so willing to accept this idea. □

Janet Layne is principal of Monteagle Elementary School in Marion County, Tennessee.