



Education Commission  
of the States

# The Progress of Education Reform 2006

## Mentoring

Vol. 7, No. 2, September 2006

### What's Inside

- An overview of different types of mentoring programs
- Benefits and potential adverse effects of mentoring programs
- Mentoring as part of schoolwide reform efforts

## *Access to Supportive Relationships is Critical for Students at Risk of Underachievement*

Parents are the central source of emotional, financial and social support for their children. Many young people also have the benefit of relationships with adults other than parents – including teachers, coaches, grandparents, older siblings, neighbors and employers – who serve as informal mentors. These relationships provide youth with extra attention, affection, guidance and a sense of direction and self-worth – all of which are increasingly important given the wide array of outside influences, not all of them positive, that face young people today.

Once viewed as a natural process that took place in the immediate or extended family, mentoring has become an increasingly popular strategy for enhancing the academic, social and emotional development of middle and high school students, particularly those at risk of underachievement.

Today, there are nearly 5,000 volunteer-based youth mentoring programs operating nationwide, sponsored by government agencies, school districts, businesses, universities, professional organizations and nonprofit groups. Such programs give students stronger incentives for staying in school, avenues for exploring education and career paths, exposure to positive social norms, and access to the guidance and support of a caring adult.

But research also provides evidence of the potential adverse effects of programs targeting at-risk youth that are poorly designed and managed. Mentoring relationships cut short by unclear or conflicting expectations, lack of support and other problems “may do more harm than good.”

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* summarizes several recent reports that shed light on how – and to what extent – young people benefit from:

- “Naturally occurring” mentoring relationships involving adults other than parents
- Volunteer-based mentoring programs, typically targeting economically and educationally disadvantaged young people
- Innovative strategies that call for involving all school personnel – not just counselors – in supporting, advising and mentoring students.

On page 3 you'll find links to several Web sites that provide a wide array of information on mentoring, including research findings; tools for designing, managing and fine-tuning programs; and details about mentoring initiatives and programs in all 50 states.



### *Natural Mentoring Relationships and Adolescent Health: Evidence from a National Study*

(David L. Dubois and Naida Silverthorn, American Journal of Public Health, 2005)

[http://www.mentoring.org/program\\_staff/research\\_corner/DuBoisSilverthorn\\_AJPH.pdf](http://www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner/DuBoisSilverthorn_AJPH.pdf)

“Naturally occurring” mentoring relationships – involving grandparents, older siblings, neighbors, teachers, employers and other nonparent adults – account for roughly two-thirds of all such relationships reported by young people.

Clinical psychologists Dubois and Silverthorn, of the University of Illinois at Chicago’s School of Public Health, analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to determine the impact of mentoring relationships on young people’s health and well-being. They found that:

- Natural, or informal, mentors serve as “critical education and support figures, promoting learning and competence, providing exposure to positive social norms, and helping to heighten self-esteem.”
- Young people who reported being in a mentoring relationship were more likely to “exhibit favorable outcomes with regard to education and work (completing high school, enrolling in college, holding a part-time job), reduced problem behavior, psychological well-being and health.”

But they also found that the effects of negative influences in a young person’s life generally outweighed the positive effects associated with mentoring.

“Even under ideal circumstances, mentoring alone will not likely be sufficient to fully address the needs of at-risk youth,” Dubois and Silverthorn conclude. “The cultivation of mentoring relationships within comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions offers the greatest promise.”



*Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review*  
(David L. Dubois et al, American Journal of Community Psychology, April 2002)  
[http://datatrends.fmhi.usf.edu/Summary\\_64.pdf](http://datatrends.fmhi.usf.edu/Summary_64.pdf)

This report, synthesizing the findings of 55 empirical studies, offers considerable insight into the nature and extent of the benefits of volunteer-based youth mentoring programs. Programs found to have produced the best results were those that:

- Trained and supported mentors on an ongoing basis
- Provided structured activities for mentor and mentee
- Encouraged parent support and involvement
- Recruited mentors with a helping background – teachers, for example
- Continuously monitored and fine-tuned program implementation.

The research on mentoring programs, Dubois and his colleagues conclude, provides evidence of “an overall positive effect on the emotional, behavioral and educational functioning of participating youth.” These benefits are relatively modest for “average” young people, and substantially greater for economically and educationally disadvantaged students.

But the authors also note the potential adverse effects of programs targeting at-risk youth that are poorly designed and managed. Mentoring relationships cut short by unclear or conflicting expectations, lack of support and other problems “may do more harm than good.”

“Mentoring is a complex, inherently interpersonal endeavor,” the report says. “As a result, it is especially susceptible to obstacles and difficulties that can arise when those targeted for intervention have significant personal problems. Many youth are in need of relatively extensive amounts of specialized assistance – a situation that is not necessarily well-suited to the primarily volunteer and nonprofessional status of most mentors.”

The report concludes with a number of recommendations for improving mentoring programs, particularly those serving at-risk youth. They include:

- Greater adherence to guidelines for the design, development and management of effective programs
- Greater efforts to adequately screen, train and support mentors, and match individual students’ needs with an appropriate level of expense and intervention.

## Useful Web Sites

The **National Mentoring Center**, a project of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, is a leading provider of information, training and technical assistance for mentoring programs across the nation.  
<http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring>

Check out the **National Mentoring Partnership's** online tool kit “How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice,” available in English and Spanish. <http://www.mentoring.org/eeptoolkit>. The Partnership's Web site also features up-to-date information on mentoring programs and initiatives in all 50 states.  
<http://www.mentoring.org>

The **Public/Private Ventures** Web site provides a wide range of information and analysis on one-to-one, group and school-based mentoring, and on programs targeting high-risk youth, including those with incarcerated parents.  
[http://www.ppv.org/ppv/youth/youth\\_initiatives.asp?section\\_id=7](http://www.ppv.org/ppv/youth/youth_initiatives.asp?section_id=7)



***Breaking the Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform***  
(National Association of Secondary School Principals and The Education Alliance,  
Brown University, 2004)

[http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes\\_2005/documents/Ollarvia\\_executive\\_summary.pdf#search=%22breaking%20the%20ranks%20II%22](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/institutes_2005/documents/Ollarvia_executive_summary.pdf#search=%22breaking%20the%20ranks%20II%22)

Despite widespread recognition of the unique role and value of school counselors, student-to-counselor ratios remain unacceptably high. Expanded access to vocational and academic counseling – and help in understanding and dealing with social, behavioral and personal problems – would benefit all students, particularly those at risk of underachievement.

In the face of continuing budget constraints, there is growing interest in innovative strategies that call for involving all school personnel – not just counselors – in advising, supporting and keeping track of each and every student in the building.

One such schoolwide model is *Breaking Ranks II*, a program developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and The Education Alliance that has been implemented in dozens of high schools across the nation over the past several years.

The program handbook offers high school principals detailed strategies for creating a school environment in which “anonymity is banished,” and reviews the successes, challenges and results of schools implementing the program model. Recommendations include:

- Making each teacher involved in the instructional program on a full-time basis responsible for contact time with no more than 90 students during a given term
- Providing every student with a “personal adult advocate” and an individualized learning plan
- Making more flexible use of time and space
- Expanding students’ access to learning opportunities and experiences that span the border between high school and postsecondary education and training.



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