Strengthening Mentoring Opportunities for At-Risk Youth

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Bottom Line

- Mentoring programs for young people have proliferated rapidly in recent years and now serve more than 2 million youth in the U.S., most of whom are from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds.

- The overall record of success for youth mentoring programs is encouraging but uneven.

- Recommended next steps include:

  – Measured expansion of programs with strong evidence of effectiveness

  – Careful evaluation of newer, innovative approaches that may increase both the reach and the impact of services

  – Federal leadership in the areas of quality assurance, evaluation, and support for mentor recruitment and retention

What Do We Know?

Too many young people lack strong and sustained relationships with caring adults, putting them at serious risk.

- An estimated 8.5 million youth (about 20%) do not have caring adults in their lives. Those from disadvantaged homes and communities are over-represented in this number.

- Young persons who lack a strong relationship with a caring adult while growing up are much more vulnerable to a host of difficulties, ranging from academic failure to involvement in serious risk behaviors. Research finds that resilient youth—those who successfully transition from risk-filled backgrounds to the adult world of work and good citizenship—are consistently distinguished by the presence of a caring adult in their lives.

About this Policy Brief...

Mentoring the next generation of youth is critical to the future health and prosperity of our nation. Yet, millions of young people are currently growing up without the guidance and support from parents or others that is needed to prepare them to become well-adjusted and contributing members of society. Making progress in addressing this need will require substantial commitments of time and resources at all levels—from individuals to communities to government. These investments must be made carefully and strategically.

For guidance, this brief summarizes the latest research on youth mentoring. Several new directions for programs and policies aimed at connecting young people with caring adults are outlined that build on current knowledge. We hope in doing so to stimulate dialogue and, ultimately, actions that strengthen the foundation for success that we provide to our nation's youth.

More than a decade of research has revealed mentoring to be a viable intervention strategy that holds considerable promise. Yet, programs face myriad challenges and appear to be well short of reaching their potential.

- Mentoring programs are capable of making a positive difference in multiple domains of youth behavior and development:
  - Improvements in self-esteem
  - Better relationships with parents and peers
  - Greater school connectedness
  - Improved academic performance
  - Reductions in substance use, violence, and other risk behaviors

- Extrapolations from existing data indicate that high-quality mentoring programs have the potential to produce a sizable monetary return on investment. Such analyses presume that mentoring has long-term educational and vocational benefits for participating youth, however, an assumption that is largely untested.

- Barriers to widespread effectiveness include:
  - Inability to recruit, screen, and train sufficient numbers of mentors to meet program demands
  - Inconsistent benefits across programs
  - Positive outcomes not being reliably sustained after program participation ends
  - Harmful effects for some youth because mentors are unreliable, end relationships prematurely, or model deviant behavior or authority-undermining attitudes

Collectively, these trends underscore a need for great care when seeking to "go to scale" either by expanding existing programs or by funding newer, start-up programs.

- The most successful programs incorporate evidence-based "best" practices, which include:
  - Targeting youth most likely to benefit from mentoring
  - Using rigorous approaches to screen and train mentors
  - Clearly articulating program goals and expectations
  - Arranging activities to facilitate mentor-youth relationship development
  - Providing ongoing support for mentors to strengthen relationships and minimize early match closures

- Supporting and involving parents
- Coordinating linkages with other programs and services
- Using systematic monitoring and evaluation to engage in continuous quality improvement

Good intentions and a ready corps of volunteers are not enough to deliver an effective youth mentoring program—a solid infrastructure is essential.

● Initiatives to promote program quality are occurring in many sectors of the mentoring field. For example:

- MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership has developed the Elements of Effective Practice and a network of state and regional partnerships to support the adoption of these guidelines

- Big Brothers Big Sisters is piloting and evaluating an extensive set of evidence-based enhancements to its school-based mentoring program

- Friends for Youth has published a resource, *Screening Applicants for Effectiveness*, that offers tools designed to screen out potential child predators and prevent child molestation

Such initiatives require a professional, well-trained workforce to staff youth mentoring agencies. Several new education and training opportunities are emerging to meet this need, but sustainable support is key.

● Innovation is also plentiful. Programs are experimenting with:
- Alternative delivery formats and structures, such as e-mentoring and peer, group, and team models
- Embedding mentoring within specific community settings such as after-school programs and the workplace
- Tailoring services to specific populations and cultural groups, such as children of prisoners
- Alternative sources of mentors, such as "natural" mentors from within youths' own social networks as well as paid paraprofessionals
- Long-term commitments to youth from elementary school to high school graduation
- Integrating mentoring within larger programs that offer extensive arrays of other services and supports

Recommended Next Steps

Policies that strengthen families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities—especially those that cultivate a strong ethic of collective responsibility for mentoring our next generation—are vital for ensuring that young people receive guidance and support from caring adults. Yet, for many of our most vulnerable youth, there is an urgent need for access to high-quality mentoring which is made possible through more formal and targeted programs. Future priorities should include:

● Intensifying support for the most promising current mentoring programs and organizations, including:

– Local, state, and regional programs that demonstrate strong alignment with best practices, with funding carefully structured to ensure quality is maintained while pursuing measured growth goals

– Intermediary organizations that can provide the technical assistance needed to ensure that essential elements of infrastructure are in place across all programs

– National programs that have rigorous evidence of positive impacts and capacity to expand their reach to underserved communities and youth

● Investing in ground-breaking studies of mentoring young people, including:

– A long-term, in-depth investigation of the formal as well as informal mentoring experiences of a large, nationally-representative sample of youth and how these may contribute to future success

– Comparative evaluation of differing program models, including newer, innovative approaches, using a consortium of researchers working at multiple sites

● Mounting new strategic initiatives at the Federal level, including:

– Better systems of coordination to promote common standards of excellence and shared methods of evaluation across the numerous agencies involved in supporting mentoring

– Policies to increase the supply of committed mentors for programs, such as college tuition reimbursement, employer partnerships and tax credits, and other incentives

Reference

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