

Lessons Learned

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Planning a School-Based Mentoring Program

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School-based mentoring (SBM) has exploded in popularity in recent years: Today approximately one fourth of the youth mentoring programs in the country use a school-based format (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007).

In SBM, a K–12 student is paired with an adult from the community or an older (usually high school) student in a supportive one-to-one relationship at the school site. The enthusiastic growth of this model has been fueled, in part, by some of the widely reported successes of community-based mentoring in the mid-1990s (Tierney & Grossman, 2000), which indicated adult mentors could have a positive impact on many aspects of a youth's social and academic life. Naturally, both youth-serving nonprofits and school districts wondered if similar impacts could be achieved by delivering mentoring at the school site, capitalizing on existing school infrastructure and staffing to help manage the program and support the mentoring relationships.

While some studies have questioned the efficacy of SBM (Bernstein,

Rappaport, Olsho, Hunt, & Levin, 2009; Herrera et al., 2007), the experience of Education Northwest's National Mentoring Center (NMC) indicates that such mentoring programs can work well. Further, they have tremendous potential to help students in a number of academic and psychosocial domains, provided programs follow the emerging guidance provided by recent research.

The NMC has been at the leading edge of the expansion of SBM since 1999, serving as a training and technical assistance provider for national mentoring initiatives funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

This *Lessons Learned* taps into NMC's experience to focus on what we consider the critical ingredients of successful SBM programs, as well as common pitfalls to avoid. These "lessons" will be most valuable to schools or districts that are contemplating starting a SBM program, although sites with existing programs may find this information

helpful in the restructuring or refining of their mentoring services.

Lesson #1 Develop a logic model that specifies how mentoring works for your students.

One of the most important aspects of a mentoring program (school-based or otherwise) is alignment of program activities with desired outcomes. Many school-based programs promise funders that they will impact areas like grades and test scores, drug and alcohol abuse, and family and peer relations, without ever really articulating how the intervention of mentoring is designed to achieve those results. Some who are new to mentoring assume that providing a mentor to a youth "automatically" produces a wide range of positive outcomes.

The truth is, mentoring is more complex. Even if the goal of the program is "youth development" in the broadest sense, the matches will still wind up focusing on certain goals and aspects of the young person's life. To ensure actual mentoring activities, the structure of the program, and the stated outcomes are aligned, we recommend programs start with a logic model (see next page) that establishes these connections. This alignment of program structure and goals doesn't mean highly structuring every minute of

Lessons Learned in Planning a School-Based Mentoring Program

1. Develop a logic model that specifies how mentoring works for your students.
2. Make sure your model has appropriate short-and long-term outcomes.
3. Build a solid infrastructure for implementing the program.
4. Plan for the issues that the school year itself presents.
5. Prepare for the long haul from day one.

What is a logic model?

The most basic logic model is a systematic picture of how you believe your program will work. It uses words and diagrams to describe the sequence of activities that are intended to bring about change and how these activities are linked to the results the program is expected to achieve. When a logic model is used as a tool for planning programs and services, the result becomes the framework for program implementation, evaluation, and future planning.

Need	Resources/inputs	Activities	Outputs	Intermediate outcomes (1–5 years)	Impact/long-term outcomes
	→	→	→	→	→
The problem(s) your program will address	Program ingredients, such as funds, staff, volunteers, partners, etc.	Specific activities and services the program will provide	Specific evidence of services provided (numbers)	Positive changes that will take place as a result of services	Lasting and significant results of your program over the long term

Be sure that your logic model is as specific as possible when it comes to the types of activities planned, evidence of services provided, and the outcomes you expect to achieve. A model that offers enough specific information can help drive the evaluation process because the items you need to evaluate—and their measures—are already identified.

mentor and mentee engagement—in fact, there is a large body of evidence supporting the promotion of purely “fun” or recreational time in SBM programs. But it does mean that if your SBM program is going to promise to reduce disciplinary referrals, there must be a rationale behind that goal, and program practices that lead to that outcome.

Lesson #2 Make sure your model has appropriate short-and long-term outcomes.

SBM programs sometimes focus too much on big picture, long-term outcomes at the expense of more immediate, and measurable, short-term ones. While your program may have long-range goals such as increased college attendance or improved graduation rates for participants, keep in mind that they may be quite a ways off. As well, many factors can impact those eventual outcomes *other* than your mentoring program. So, we encourage SBM programs to focus on more immediate returns on investment: improved attendance, teacher-reported improvements in

classroom behavior, and improved study habits.

Mentoring is an intervention of caring and support, even within the school context, and a program’s desired immediate outcomes should reflect that focus. (See the sidebar on page 3 for a discussion of what youth outcomes the research indicates SBM programs can expect to achieve.)

Lesson #3 Build a solid infrastructure for implementing the program.

SBM programs have the advantage of building on existing school resources, facilities, and staffing, but that does not mean that they are inexpensive to set up, or inherently easy to manage. When designing your program, consider the following:

- Staff roles—We encourage SBM programs to have a dedicated program coordinator who manages all aspects of the program at the school site. If this coordinator is managing a program across multiple campuses, assign

a liaison at each site to help with management tasks.

- Staff communication—Recent research (Karcher & Spencer, in preparation) indicates that communication among program coordinators and other school staff, including front office personnel, is key in SBM. Teachers, counselors, and administrators can all share important information about students, help mentors feel welcome on the school campus, and provide enrichment opportunities for the mentoring relationships.
- Staff stability—Staff turnover often makes or breaks a successful program. Hiring the right person matters, but so does retaining that person—especially through the first few years to bring consistency and continuity to the program.
- Program partners—Who can you involve from the community to enhance the program? Find partners who can provide mentors, expertise in managing the program, or access to fun and educational activities for your mentoring pairs.
- Program materials—Before you begin your program, make sure all your policies and procedures are

spelled out in a manual that clarifies how the program functions on a day-to-day basis. Include all forms needed to administer the program, such as participant applications, background check paperwork, mentor training materials, and recruitment brochures. Staff turnover is somewhat inevitable, and you don't want the wisdom of how to run your mentoring program walking out the door when your coordinator moves on.

- **Match activity structure**—We recommend that SBM programs have a blend of instrumental activities (in which pairs work together toward some goal, ideally youth-led) and developmental time, where the pair engages in a fun activity that helps develop trust. Research on SBM relationships indicates that they need both instrumental and developmental time to satisfy participants and reach their full potential (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). Whether you use a set curriculum or a more free-form approach, be sure to allow for that developmental bonding time (and provide youth with a voice in match activities). Matches that focus exclusively on task-oriented interactions are less likely to form a close bond and may never fully engage the student in a way that supports program goals.

Lesson # **4** Plan for the issues that the school year itself presents.

Several major research studies point out that the nature of a typical school year is one of the more difficult aspects of implementing a SBM program. Short duration and a limited number of meetings hinder the development of many mentoring relationships in the school environment. Successful mentoring is all

about quality interactions that take place consistently over long periods of time, and both the daily school schedule and the annual calendar of the school year can get in the way.

In many programs, mentors are usually not recruited until school starts, meaning matches are often made right before the Thanksgiving or Christmas breaks. Other holidays and the long summer break can result in matches that meet only a handful of times during the course of a year. This weakens the intensity of the intervention and negatively impacts program outcomes.

Programs can do a number of things to maximize the amount of mentoring youth receive during the school year:

- Start mentor recruitment in the summer so that you have fully screened and trained mentors in place when the school year starts.
- Reach out to parents early and often during the school year so that they can sign up their children and return those all-important permission forms.
- Provide opportunities for matches to meet (or at least communicate) during the many breaks throughout the school year and summer.

If matches will not be continuing on to the next year, programs should prepare youth (and their mentors) for that circumstance well in advance. Build in opportunities for the match to say goodbye in a positive way. Remember that mentoring relationships that end under bad circumstances or without an opportunity for closure have more negative effects than not providing a mentor in the first place.

Lesson # **5** Prepare for the long haul from day one.

One challenge we've witnessed is the number of programs that ramp up under a particular funding cycle only to

What can school-based mentoring achieve?

There has been some compelling recent evidence that school-based mentoring (SBM) can promote a number of positive outcomes for youth participants. A new meta-analysis (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010) of three major SBM studies found significant positive program effects in the areas of:

- Reduced truancy
- Increased youth perceptions of scholastic efficacy
- Decreased school-related misconduct
- Improved peer support
- Reduced absenteeism
- Youth self-reporting that they have a caring nonparent adult in their lives

These impacts were somewhat modest in terms of effect size, compared to other school-based interventions, such as tutoring or social/emotional learning programs. But those interventions are often much more focused and resource intensive than SBM programs.

SBM works best when it is focused on goals such as increasing connectedness, improving youth self-esteem and self-efficacy, and simply encouraging the student to grow personally and academically. If what your school or district needs is improved test scores, a tutoring program will be a better fit, because that's what it is designed to do. But, if you are looking to provide students with reasons to connect to school, and work on their personal goals and challenges, then a mentoring program may be a great fit. Keep this framework in mind as you select goals for your mentoring program.

close when that initial funding ends. These program closures are often quick and difficult, leading to prematurely closed matches—which research indicates harm youth more than if they never had a mentor in the first place (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). This situation also frustrates volunteers, parents, program partners, and the school administrators and staff. A failed mentoring program can sour an entire community on mentoring for a long time. While many programs are started on initial “seed” funds, you must plan for alternative sources of support once that initial grant runs out.

What will it take for the program to be fully self-sustaining? How could staff be reconfigured to save costs? Could new partners help keep the program going? Can you build in a consistent stream of revenue? Programs that we have seen close often put off answering these types of questions until it is too late.

Summary

In many ways, SBM can provide a frequently missing element to the modern K–12 experience—the element of compassion and unconditional support. SBM can bring community members and students together in a way that many other school-based services cannot. As one of our favorite training consultants says, “The relationship is the intervention, the intervention is the relationship.” If you think that personal relationships with role models in the community can help your students connect to a brighter future, then there is plenty of potential in starting a mentoring program for them.

Resources

The NMC offers more than 100 downloadable resources on school-based mentoring at <http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/647/>.

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- For more than a decade, the National Mentoring Center (NMC) at Education Northwest has worked with federal and state agencies, as well as schools and districts, to develop and implement school- and community-based mentoring models around the country. For more information on services and resources, contact NMC Resource Advisor Michael Garringer at Michael.Garringer@education-northwest.org, or 503.275.9647.*

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