



CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING

Making a Difference on a Shoestring Budget

Evergreen School
Lunch Buddies Program

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Introduction

In mentoring circles, there is ongoing concern over the sustainability of mentoring programs. Given budget constraints and a very challenging economy, the conversation usually turns to budgets, fundraising, and full-time equivalents (FTEs). Money is certainly important—but programs should also consider delivery models that are less cumbersome, more streamlined and, therefore, easier to fund. Evergreen Elementary School did just that. Although they did not receive special funding to launch a mentoring program, the school's leadership felt strongly that mentoring was an effective way to better serve their student population and decided to take action.

Situated north of Seattle, Washington, in the Edmonds School District, Evergreen Elementary is a small school serving 278 students grades K through 6. The Lunch Buddies mentoring program was started at the school in 2007 to provide support to children who want and need a mentor. The school has a transient population and serves a number of special needs students on the campus. In January 2009, 48 percent of the student body—including nearly all the children in the Lunch Buddies program—qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

A Shoestring Budget and a One-Week Window for Application to Match

It's no surprise that Evergreen Elementary School's Lunch Buddies program has had great success engaging community volunteers and supporting student learning. The program was initiated by school administrators determined to help students who needed and wanted to spend time with a mentor one-to-one—without losing valuable instructional time in the classroom. The Lunch Buddies program provides a meaningful one-to-one encounter during students' lunch break and subsequent recess time. Volunteers visit with students on a weekly basis, offering a consistent meeting regimen.

The program is unique in two key areas that contribute to sustainability: 1) simplified volunteer intake processing turnaround, and 2) low cost of operations. At Evergreen, a volunteer who submits his or her application materials and receives orientation on a given Monday, will likely be matched by Monday of the following week. Over 95 percent of volunteer candidates experience this speedy turnaround, according to Debbie Johnsrud, Evergreen's Volunteer Coordinator. Because matches meet only on site and are always closely supervised by school staff, the program can streamline and simplify their screening process without increasing exposure to risk. And by using the school's existing volunteer application and screening system, the program cuts down on both time and cost.

Keeping costs low is vital to the ongoing success of the Lunch Buddies program. At its inception, more staff hours were necessary to develop systems for processing volunteer applicants and overall program infrastructure. The first year, the cost per match was much higher than current figures, but has decreased as systems have been put in place to make the program as efficient as possible. Today, Lunch Buddies is truly on a shoestring budget with an annual cost per match ranging between \$45 and \$50, based on the 28 matches in 2008–2009 and approximately 2.5 hours per week of Ms. Johnsrud's staff time. When people ask how this can be done while adhering to best practices, Ms. Johnsrud's answer is simple: "Find people with a passion and commitment to serve the kids!"



There's a Champion of Mentoring at the Site

It all begins with a committed coordinator who believes in the power of mentoring. Johnsrud is that champion and the face of the Lunch Buddies program at Evergreen. She administers all the paperwork, interviews, and background checks and she's able to efficiently process volunteers, knowing that there are plenty of students ready to be matched. The school principal, Susan Ardissono, appreciates the work done by Johnsrud and the many community volunteers: "We couldn't enjoy the success and improved performance of these students without the commitment of those who volunteer to serve our kids. They're making a tremendous difference in these children's lives. The Lunch Buddies program has helped struggling or underachieving

students turn things around simply by providing a meaningful connection with caring adult role models.”

Ms. Johnsrud admits that the project is challenging at times: “We have so many children who ask for a lunch buddy after they see their classmates enjoying time with a mentor.” And the number of youth waiting to be matched is no different from other programs—there are always more children than there are mentors. But the numbers she’s most concerned with are the matches and success they represent.

There Are Champions of Mentoring in the Community

If the on-site mentoring champion is the heart of the program, then volunteers are the lifeblood of Lunch Buddies. Recruiting volunteers is certainly a major contributor to the overall success of any mentoring program; Lunch Buddies is no exception. In the fall of each school year information packets are sent home for parents and guardians to review. Several volunteer opportunities are presented in the packets—including Lunch Buddies; there are also ongoing appeals in newsletters throughout the school year. The newsletter and the school’s Web site feature photos of matches and stories of student success (with permission, of course).

Beyond the school community, Evergreen administrators reached out to a local church with an established faith-based mentoring program called mission2mentor. When mission2mentor volunteers agreed to help with Lunch Buddies by recruiting volunteers from the church, match numbers more than doubled. The church provides mentors who attend the school’s orientation and complete the Evergreen (Edmonds School District) volunteer application packet. There is no duplication of effort; it’s simply a partnership that helps to match more children with a caring adult.

Local businesses feed volunteers to the school as well. A group of mentors from Costco Wholesale come once a week and work with students who need academic support. For a time, Costco

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Other volunteers have been recruited by word of mouth through relationships that current mentors have with folks in the community. In fact, once volunteers are established in the routine of being lunch buddies, they’re encouraged to recommend friends or coworkers that may be able to make the time once a week to visit with a student at the school. “It’s amazing to think of the people I know who could be doing this,” says one volunteer who recently started as a lunch buddy. Having raised her own children who have now moved out of the home, she feels great to have a chance to interact with youngsters. “I was always busy running my kids from place to

place and making time for PTA meetings and kids' sports. Now I have time where I can choose to be involved and mentoring allows me to spend quality time with a child that is measured and meaningful. I'm happy to share the need for more mentors with my friends and family."

Under-Promise and Over-Deliver

Managing expectations is very important to the success of any mentoring program. There are programs across the country maintaining waiting lists that run into the hundreds--and to be honest, many waiting-list youth never get matched! Rather than maintain a waiting list, Evergreen staff make their assessments based on the volunteers available. Students are identified and invited to be matched with a mentor based on the talents, skills, interests, and background of the newly processed volunteer. Once a student has expressed interest and received a review of the Lunch Buddies expectations, a letter is sent home to the parent/guardian explaining that the student is joining the Lunch Buddies program. The letter provides a brief explanation along with Ms. Johnsrud's contact number for any questions. This process allows matches to be made quickly.



Volunteer expectations are equally important. Many programs lose prospective volunteers due to the time it takes from application to match. Evergreen's model is simple: application, orientation, and interview at the time of the first visit. Then, unless you hear otherwise, return the following week on the day you've selected and you'll be matched with a student.

Admittedly, there are several streamlined processes in place to move applications along quickly. Each school in Washington state has instant access to the State Patrol Criminal Database through a secured Web site. This allows immediate feedback for the school to move forward. Volunteers are screened in the same way that any supervised school volunteer such as a tutor, playground monitor, or classroom helper is screened--and child safety is not compromised.

Ongoing support for mentors is built into the structure of the Lunch Buddies program. Because several volunteers meet with their mentees during each lunch hour, they are available to support one another with student issues. And the support of Ms. Johnsrud is very much a benefit. Johnsrud's schedule includes time during the lunch hour to run the Lunch Buddies program—time to meet and greet volunteers as they arrive and to also coordinate any new matches being made. In fact, the success of the Lunch Buddies program in reducing disciplinary problems allows her to spend more time providing positive support to matches.



Mentoring Made Easy in Room 24

Students who receive a school lunch bring their tray to the Activity Room—room 24. Mentors often bring their own sack lunch to eat while visiting. The room has plenty of puzzles, games, books, and craft materials, but many mentors come with a bag of games, cards and other craft projects. Matches engage in conversation while playing chess or checkers. Others work on a craft project while sharing how school is going. The children simply enjoy having someone to talk with: someone who will listen. And if the weather cooperates—sometimes a challenge in the Northwest!--some matches venture out to the playground for the remainder of lunch recess. It is amazing how popular these kids become when they have their mentor in tow. Every kid on the playground takes notice--and those on the basketball court want the mentee on their team, hoping to get a 2-for-1 deal and land a tall grown-up. Some mentors have been seen climbing monkey bars and playing kickball; others have been seen on the field playing sharks and minnows.

The lunch buddy volunteers report that the experience is surprisingly rewarding, and nearly all of the mentors recruited in the first year returned the following fall to be matched again. The youth, according to teachers, are becoming better students and they've also noticed a reduction in behavioral problems. Administrators feel that the program offers a bridge to engage the community at large with the school, which helps all its students.

Make the Volunteer a School Hero

Mentors are people. People enjoy being appreciated. It's a part of the school culture to thank volunteers on a regular basis with notes, e-mails, and special volunteer appreciation events. If you add the hours, the gas, managing the personal schedule, and sacrifices mentors make to ensure that there is a consistent pattern to the weekly visits, these mentors are heroes! The easiest way to grow your program is to take care of the volunteers you have. They will become your greatest advocate to recruit more volunteers. Conversely, if they're finding a lack of support and low regard from school staff, they may be telling their friends, coworkers, and acquaintances that the program isn't such a great deal. You can never thank them enough.

Replicability

Although robust and diversified funding is an important goal for mentoring programs, the Evergreen Lunch Buddies program reminds us that quality mentoring strategies can thrive with just a little money and a lot of commitment and creativity. Here are some tips for programs seeking to start or maintain a “program on a shoestring”:

Start with a straightforward model that makes sense for your budget and setting. The Lunch Buddies program grew out of a clear need for students to have positive role models to enhance their school experience. They knew funding was minimal so they developed a simple lunch-time program that could draw on existing resources.

Make sure you have strong commitment from school, community, and business partners. Without a major funding stream, mentoring programs must rely on the passion and commitment of school staff and leadership, their local community, and business partners. The Lunch Buddies program had these “champions” at the school even before it began operating, and the passion of the coordinator led to an outpouring of local community support.

Build an infrastructure that draws on existing resources and systems. Tapping into what is already in place in your school or agency keeps costs low. The Lunch Buddies program relies on the school’s resources to enrich the activities matches can do together, and uses the school’s volunteer application processes to select and screen volunteers.

Find ways to use volunteers to carry out program support activities. Since labor is the greatest single line item for programs to cover, any work that is shifted from “paid time” to “volunteer time” will result in greater savings. Replication begins by finding these opportunities and building partnerships that engage groups of volunteers from the surrounding community. Consider applying for an AmeriCorps member who can take the lead developing and implementing the program at minimal cost to your school or agency.

Provide constant match supervision to allow for streamlined volunteer screening, selection, matching, and orientation processes. A key component of the Lunch Buddies program is its ability to get volunteers working with kids as quickly as possible. The program knows that safety is vital, so it adheres to the same screening requirements of any school volunteer and makes sure that the matches only meet during school hours in a supervised setting. Programs that allow matches to meet in less supervised situations need to spend more time upfront making sure their mentors are thoroughly screened and receive more in-depth training.

Support and reward volunteers. The Lunch Buddies program has had remarkable success finding and keeping volunteers. They know the value of providing ongoing support and recognition to mentors. Saying thank you can take many forms and doesn’t have to be costly. Find many ways to let your mentors know you appreciate them, from simple notes and warm greetings to making sure there are adequate supplies and activities available during match meetings.

Remember that there is no substitute for quality when it comes to matching adult volunteers with youth to develop positive relationships. Mentoring research over the past 20 years has led to the formation of important standards and effective practices that should guide the development of all youth mentoring programs. Programs like the Evergreen Lunch Buddies can provide a simple, safe, and positive experience for the youth they serve by keeping those mentoring “bottom lines” in mind as they develop their policies and procedures for screening, selection, and site supervision. With everyone on board committed to its success, a program like Lunch Buddies can have an important impact on a shoestring budget.

Additional resources

Oliver, B. (with MacRae, P.). U.S. Department of Education mentoring program's guide to screening and background checks. Folsom, CA: Mentoring Resource Center. <http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/screening.pdf>

Elements of effective practice. MENTOR, National Mentoring Partnership. http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_411.pdf

For more information on AmeriCorps visit: www.nationalservice.gov

About the author and disclosure of participation

Juergen Kneifel serves as a consultant to MRC. His background includes work as Director of Marketing and Recruitment with Big Brothers Big Sisters of King and Pierce Counties. Kneifel currently serves on the BBBS Snohomish County Board and is the Founder and Director of mission2mentor. Kneifel serves as a lunch buddy at Evergreen Elementary and assisted with the recruitment efforts to grow the Lunch Buddies program.

Note: Evergreen Elementary is scheduled to close at the end of the 2008–2009 school year as the student population will be split between two nearby elementary campuses.

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