

2009

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Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Programs in the School Setting for Grades 7-12

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Introduction

Peer-to-Peer School-Based Mentoring (SBM) for students in grades 7-12 is intended to offer students a supportive peer group and provide academic assistance, while also increasing self-esteem and friendship. This one-on-one attention is hopefully a way to help equip students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and assistance so that they will be better prepared academically and socially in their lives (Big Brothers/Big Sisters, 2009). Students themselves could arguably be the greatest resource a school district already has available.

United South Central Schools is a rural public school district serving students in grades K-12. Students entering high school begin in seventh grade. This transition can often be a significant undertaking for these students, with its accompanying adjustment, academic pressure, and peer and social expectations. In order to assist students in moving into the high school setting, it was suggested to research evidence-based peer-to-peer mentoring programs in the hope that this might be able to assist students both academically and socially.

Research Question: What program components make a school-based peer-to-peer mentoring program more likely to produce good student outcomes in a rural school district?

This Capstone project will provide a complete literature review on peer-to-peer mentoring programs; summarize findings; review evidence-based research regarding existing mentoring programs; compare and contrast the review findings; address potential limitations, and make recommendations to the school administration of United South Central School District #2134, regarding design and implementation of a research-based peer-to-peer mentoring program.

Literature Review

A Literature Review was completed to find out why mentoring programs are viewed as a positive intervention for both students who are considered at-risk or who would potentially benefit from one-on-one services. Mentoring is one resource utilized to help students increase self-esteem and positive peer and family collaboration, as well as to create a positive environment in the school system (King et al., 2002). One of the most significant reasons for school-based mentoring involves the amount of time students spend in this environment. School systems are concerned about anti-social behavior because it can result in peer and teacher rejection, academic difficulties, absenteeism, delinquency and dropout issues (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009). To counter these concerns, mentoring can be a positive option. Students receiving mentoring services have shown an increased sense of school membership, community connectedness, goal setting, and positive academic effect (Portwood, et al., 2005).

Research on SBM programs has uncovered different factors which are believed to help increase the positive outcome for a mentoring program. One reason for the increased attention to SBM comes from the option of having school staff supervise mentoring matches, which allows for increased structure in the program (Karcher & Herrera, 2009). More significant results stem from programs with more specific structure incorporating clear expectations, goals, and support (Rhodes, 2008). There is also evidence that the mentoring relationship is not only beneficial to the mentee, but that the mentor also receives positive results (Karcher, 2009). Consistency in the mentoring meetings (at least weekly) results in a more positive view by mentors, and is considered a key factor for successful mentoring programs (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009). Peer mentors are also more effective when trained in the methodology that supports inclusion of all students in such programs (Dupp & Block, 2004). It is also believed that allowing the students themselves to have increased ownership and involvement in decision-making can help build a stronger program. Student leaders who were allowed to help create their own peer-mentoring programs showed pride and excitement in the programs (Dupp & Block, 2004). Diversity among student mentors and the ability to embrace all of the various skills and talents students possess is vital for program development. All students have the potential to mentor others, even when it appears they may be weak in certain areas (Dupp & Block, 2004). Students with disabilities can successfully tutor and provide academic support to peers in critical reading-comprehension skills, while also improving their own content-area learning (Mastropieri et al., (2003).

Summary of Findings

The evidence-based criteria for peer-to-peer mentoring programs in the school are based on findings from tutoring programs and peer-mediated interventions, as well as information from existing mentoring programs.

Research indicates that the potential for a more effective school-based mentoring program should include...

- Peer involvement in the program implementation and planning
- Matches should be made as early as possible during the school year
- Consistency of meetings between mentor and mentee showed more positive results
- Social activities should be utilized vs. academic assistance only
- Commitment of mentors for the entire school year
- Mentor training is needed prior to matching with a student
- Support for mentors and consistent communication is vital
- Building trust and support with parents/guardians and community members
- Continuing to keep open communication with key stakeholders of the program (i.e. parents/guardians, administration, school staff)
- Provide ongoing training for mentors
- Mentors allow the mentees to take some leadership by making decisions for their mentoring experience
- Diverse groups of students of all different cultures, backgrounds, and academic and social skill levels can benefit from both being a mentor or being mentored
- Utilize the peer's strengths in mentor matches
- Provide opportunities for youth to interact with other youth

School-Based Mentoring Program	Target Population	Peer Mentor or Adult Mentor	Goals of the Program	Limitations of the Program	Strengths of the Program	Cost of the Program
Big Brothers/Big Sisters School - Based Mentoring Program (BBBS)	Elementary, Middle & High School Students	High School Peer Mentor or Adult Mentor	Relationship development and academic support	Not a significant difference of support to high school mentors vs. adults	Considered an "effective program" from the SAMHSA registry	\$1000 per student per year (cost of program coordination by a facilitator outside of the school system)
Youth Friends Mentoring Program	Elementary, Middle & High School	Adult Mentor	*Reduce substance use and abuse *Improve attitudes and behaviors in school *Improve school connectedness *Create positive changes in attitudes (self, adults, future)	Not enough data to distinguish the "amount" of time required for positive outcomes Adult mentor vs. high school mentor	Consistency of mentor/mentee meetings s/b encouraged Attracts more diverse groups of volunteers vs. community – based programs School connectedness Increase of academic performance and attitudes towards self, adults & future	*Open to all students \$25 per toolkit per person (1-49) total cost for materials \$1225 2-day training (cost not available)
PAL (Peer Assistance and Leadership)	Elementary & Middle School Students	High School Peer Mentor	*Reduce substance use and abuse *Healthy decision making by mentees *Improve grades and attendance *Improve responsibility, planning, and behavior at home	Activities are designed for classroom or small group instruction	Intended for diverse groups of students comparable to the diversity of the student population	*At-risk students \$160 for training materials 2-day training cost of \$500 PAL manual and video \$149
Across Ages	Middle School Students	Older Adult Mentor (55 & over)	*Substance education *Community service *Life & social skills training *Family education	Program planning and start-up take 6 months Focuses only on older adult mentors	Considered a "model program" by the SAMHSA registry	*At-risk students \$1,001-\$5,000

Review of Evidence-Based Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Program and Compatibility with USC School District

The *Big Brothers/Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Program* is most closely related to the program needs of the USC School District. The program utilizes high school students as mentors with optional support from adult mentors. BBBS is a higher-profile program, which may help establish support from students, staff, parents/guardians and community members. There would be guidance in implementation by partnering with the existing BBBS Program. Youth reported outcomes from this program indicate feeling more competent academically and increased attendance (Herrera et al., 2007). Both academics and attendance have been primary areas of interest to administration in the district.

Youth Friends Mentoring Program also suggests effectiveness, however, it currently utilizes adult mentors vs. peer mentors. USC School is trying to capitalize on the student population as one of our already valuable resources.

Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL) utilizes high school students as mentors, focusing on at-risk students as mentees. Its objectives include improved health, school, and family dynamics. It does a nice job focusing on the diversity of students; however it does not extend to the high school setting or provide support to students in upper grade levels.

Across Ages was reviewed based on the status of a "model program." It has been replicated in rural settings; addresses community service and collaboration, but only utilizes mentors age 55 years or older.

Limitations

Although there are many positives that accrue to high school students who mentor, there are some challenges which need to be considered in this type of program implementation.

- High school mentors (vs. adult mentors) may not be as consistent in meeting with their mentee or in continuing the relationship for a second year (Herrera et al., 2008).
- A program's success in mentoring varies with the diversity in the amount of mentor support, structure and training provided to the mentors themselves (Karcher, 2009).
- Costs associated with mentoring programs in the school system also need to be considered. Although the school system is utilizing students as mentors, that does not suggest that there is no cost to the program implementation (Karcher, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Mentoring effectiveness has been proven when certain conditions or program implementation procedures are followed. A philosophy encouraging certain standards is suggested in order to increase the likelihood of success with such programs. This philosophy involves monitoring, screening of mentors, matching students based on some similar characteristic, training for mentors, supervision of the program, support for the mentor and parents/guardian, regular meetings between the mentor and mentee, and extended mentoring contact or duration (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006). Although there are many promising findings related to mentoring in and of itself, unfortunately there are limited peer-reviewed findings for school-based peer-to-peer mentoring programs (Portwood et al., 2005). Findings to date suggest school-based mentoring can be a positive intervention for the student population, but continued research needs to be conducted.

The recommendation for administration at United South Central School District #2134 is to incorporate a Big Brothers/Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring program.

- The program findings suggest that this would be a beneficial prevention and intervention program to help aid student success in a rural school system.
- The program focuses on peer-related issues, as high school mentors may have a better understanding of social dynamics with their mentee (Herrera et al., 2008).
- Findings also suggest utilizing both high school and adult mentors in the school-based setting, which coincided to more long-term involvement of the high school mentor in the program (Herrera et al, 2008).
- The current Success Through Adults Reaching Students (STARS) community-based mentoring program could be a potential collaborator to the school-based program. This collaboration may allow for additional supervision, expertise, financial assistance, and communication within the community itself. STARS is also mirrored after the BBBS community-based mentoring program; therefore both programs may have similar missions.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to USC School District #2134 for the opportunity to learn and grow in the school environment during this practicum experience. To Michelle Alvarez, MSW, Ed.D. and David Beimers, MSW, Ph.D., for their support and assistance during all facets of the Capstone Project. Also, it goes without saying, that a most sincere and heartfelt appreciation goes to Maurice Shoen, LICSW and Faribault & Martin County Human Services for providing supervision, guidance, and support in this endeavor.

Literature Review

A complete literature review is available upon request.

