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Dear Project Director:

We are delighted to be able to make this case study available to you to help you make your mentoring program a success. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools under contract with EMT Associates, Inc. Although this publication has not yet been officially released by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been authorized to make it available on the Web at this time to solicit your feedback.

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Sincerely,

Judy Strother Taylor  
Project Director



# U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center



## Case Study

## Building Sustainable Partnerships with Schools

By Belinda Basca

Case Study

Building Sustainable Partnerships with Schools

### Introduction

Mentoring programs, according to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), are one of the best means of bringing the guidance and support of a larger community into the lives of youth. A one-on-one relationship with a caring, supportive adult role model can help youth “overcome personal and social barriers, expose youth to new relationships and opportunities, and assist in the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills” (LoSciuto et. al., 1996, 117).

Often, these mentoring relationships are initialized and fostered within a school-based setting. Many schools see the value of mentoring as a strategy to fill gaps in the lives of children classified as “at-risk.” Schools and community-based organizations are increasingly working together to bring mentoring programs into schools, as either an in-school or after-school program. Although effective collaborations are needed between schools and the mentoring service provider, building and sustaining these partnerships can be challenging. Overcoming the demands of the educational system to become an integral part of a school’s culture is essential to building a partnership that will sustain a mentoring program over time.

Ferguson (2001) noted that in 1990, *PARTNERS IN EDUCATION*<sup>1</sup> conducted the

first nationwide study of partnerships in school districts. This provided important baseline data from which to compare growth, trends, and changes in partnerships between school districts and their communities between 1990 and 2000. Surveys were divided into three parts: the current status of partnerships; the sponsors involved in the partnerships; and the focus of partnerships in terms of their objectives and activities.

Results showed that partnerships expanded significantly in the ten years of the study. Data collected from 1,641 school districts indicated that school districts in 2000 were involving community partners to address key issues such as school safety, professional development, technology, standards, and literacy. The survey showed that 69% of districts nationwide engaged in partnership activities compared with 51% in 1990. Schools districts were also partnering to improve graduation rates, school-to-work transition, and citizenship. Some of their key findings included the following:

### *School partnerships support the nation’s education goals*

Partnerships continue to focus on the major areas of education reform. In the last decade, school partnerships have fully supported student achievement, technology, school-to-work, school readiness, family literacy,

<sup>1</sup> The National Association of PARTNERS IN EDUCATION is a national membership organization

devoted solely to providing leadership in the field of education partnership development.

community involvement, school safety, and systemic change.

### ***Partnerships encourage youth to stay in school***

Now, more than ever, the failure to complete school has profound, long term, economic and social consequences for young people. In the last decade, schools in well over 80% of partnering districts worked with others to improve student motivation, behavior, attitudes, and self-esteem. Partnerships that aim to improve attendance and prevent students from dropping out also increased significantly from 1990 to 2000, from 18% to 61%.

### ***Rural communities are uniquely challenged when organizing school partnerships***

Rural communities, in addition to complex education issues, have fewer school partnerships than their urban and suburban counterparts. Distance, poverty, small populations, and a lack of concentrated businesses all contribute to this deficit.

### ***School partnerships promote a circle of giving among communities***

School partnerships do more than bring much-needed goods and services into schools and communities; they teach students about citizenship and the value of “giving back” to their communities. In 2000, 78% of partnering districts collaborated on increasing citizenship skills, 70% on volunteerism and service learning.

### ***Drugs and safety are every district’s problem***

In the past decade, the proportion of school districts working with others on substance abuse prevention more than doubled. In 2000, 72% of partnering districts collaborated on substance abuse prevention, as compared to 30% in 1990. Increases are shown for all districts—suburban, urban, and rural. School violence, a new area measured in 2000, is also a focus of school partnerships, with 66% of partnering districts collaborating on violence prevention.

### ***Partnerships help schools and communities make the most of after school hours***

In the last ten years, an overwhelming body of research has shown the value of quality after- school programs. Unfortunately for most families and communities, keeping children engaged in safe, educational activities after school has become a major challenge. In 2000, more than half of school districts collaborated with partners to help ease this burden and provide after-school care for students.

### ***School partnerships provide academic support for youth***

Many children require academic support outside the traditional classroom. For some, this may mean additional tutoring, for others, remedial classes. Schools are more often partnering with others to provide these kinds of additional/ alternative academic support for students. Tutoring and mentoring were big growth areas in the last decade, with schools in about 71% of partnering districts providing tutoring for students; and schools in 75% of partnering districts providing mentoring.

### ***School partnerships help students see and experience their future***

Local businesses and community groups are uniquely qualified to help students learn more about life in the professional world. In 82% of partnering districts, schools worked with their partners to promote career awareness. These activities included tours and field trips (77%), job shadowing (76%), work-based learning (66%), and mentoring (75%).

## ***The Stages of Collaboration***

When a mentoring program first enters the school landscape, overworked school administrators and staff may see the program as another pressure placed onto their already overloaded day. This can lead to a sense of competitiveness between school staff and mentoring staff, particularly if school staff allow mentoring staff to remove youth from their classes to attend mentoring activities.

At the cooperation or coordination level, a nurturing, supportive relationship is established between the mentoring program staff and school staff. School staff are oriented to the mentoring program and begin to see the value of it to youth. During the entire process, there is continuous dialogue and support between the school staff, the mentoring program staff, and/or mentors. The competitiveness evaporates because the school staff realize the importance of the mentoring program, thus, they work collaboratively to accomplish its implementation.

As the relationship between the school and the mentoring program is sustained, the mentoring program becomes an integral part of the school. A true partnership is formed: the mentoring program is considered part of the school's mission, school staff are supportive of the services, and the school assists the mentoring program in securing funds for sustainable services.

How can mentoring programs reach this level of collaboration and partnership with schools? It is not an easy task. These principles are being successfully implemented by the Metropolitan Portland Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) Mentoring program and are the subject of this case study.

## ***Program Description***

The Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Columbia Northwest (formerly known as Metropolitan Portland BBBS) mentoring project's purpose is to expand or to implement the BBBS Mentoring program in underserved rural and low-performing inner city schools.

BBBS Columbia Northwest works with nine school districts in three counties to provide 300 greatest-need youths, in fourth through eighth grade, with caring one-to-one mentors. Because of the growing number of Latino children in these three counties, and the educational challenges faced by these

youths, at least 40-55% of the youths served are Latino.

Fourth through eighth grade youths are referred to the program by school teachers and counselors. School personnel are responsible for distributing permission forms to guardians and providing background information on referred youths. BBBS offers each school one-to-one school-based mentoring with an adult "Bigs in Schools" and/or one-to-one teen mentoring "Teen Bigs." Schools choose which program best fits their students based on need and volunteer availability.

Through the Big Brothers Big Sisters in Schools mentoring program, adult volunteers are matched with youths to form one-to-one relationships. All of the contact with the Little Brothers and Sisters occurs at the school during the school day. The mentors visit their Little Brothers and Sisters once a week and spend approximately one hour together, for a minimum of one year. Monthly group recreational or educational activities in the summer months continue the match relationship and promote additional growth. This allows the match to last at least one full year, and increases the likelihood that the match will continue into the next school year. The match may also stay in contact via email, phone, or letters (which go through the BBBS office) over the summer if both parties, the youth's parents, and BBBS school-based coordinator agree.

Through the Teen Bigs, 16-year-olds and up mentor at-risk fourth and fifth grade students in highly structured and supervised after-school activities for the duration of at least one school year. Matches meet once per week throughout the school year, and once per month during the summer months. The Teen Bigs program builds and nurtures relationships between the teens and mentored children through group activities that promote pro-social and educational learning such as art, hands-on educational experiences (i.e. trips to museum), guest speakers, and community service projects. Each match also spends thirty minutes together weekly focusing one-to-one on

academic assistance through tutoring, reading and playing educational games. This time together is customized to the developmental needs of the mentee and is not overly prescriptive. When feasible, guest speakers lead sessions related to post secondary education and career opportunities to enhance the youths' understanding of career choices and enhance goal setting skills.

Evaluation<sup>2</sup> of the BBBS Mentoring program showed that:

- Participants had improved self-confidence and exhibited more interests and hobbies.
- Participants had improved school attendance; for the 17 Littles that were matched for 12 months or more the average number of missed days dropped from 22½ in 2004-2005 to 15½ in 2005-2006.
- Participants had improved scores in reading, writing, and mathematics.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Best Practices and Strategies***

There are several key strategies that BBBS uses in building sustainable partnerships with schools.

#### ***#1 Begin on Common Ground ...***

Both schools and mentoring providers have the same ultimate goal: helping youth. This is especially the case for U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Program grantees whose initiative holds them accountable for increases in GPA/academic performance and reductions in truancy/unexcused absences. Programs are assisting schools to meet their own academic objectives. This immediately provides a common ground and purpose from which to build upon for mentoring program staff and school staff.

<sup>2</sup> The evaluation was conducted by Portland State University's Regional Research Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Only for students in district with a 4-point scale.

BBBS has a long-standing successful track record of professionalism and providing services that have positive outcomes for youth. As such, they now have schools contacting them for mentoring services. When this happens, BBBS builds a relationship with the school from the ground up. First, a meeting is planned with relevant school personnel including teacher(s), a school counselor, and the principal; stakeholders in the community; and BBBS staff. A common ground is set at this meeting so that BBBS can establish what the school is looking for in terms of mentoring services and the school can determine if BBBS is a good fit for them.

From there, a contract is approved from the overall school district (via the superintendent) and then BBBS goes back to the school to create a memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU details what BBBS will do and what the school will do. This MOU is the foundation of the relationship that BBBS will have with the school, and a key factor for school buy-in.

#### ***#2 Become a Valuable Commodity Rather than a Burden***

Overworked and underpaid school staff may see a mentoring program as a burden added to their already full day. The first step to overcoming this roadblock is to establish the common ground mentioned previously—that the ultimate goal of both the mentoring program and school staff is to help youth. By helping youth, the mentoring program will be viewed as a valuable commodity of the school, rather than a burden.

BBBS has effectively done this by setting up a liaison within each school (usually a school counselor) who is the critical link between the teachers, the administration, and the mentoring program. The school liaisons are then supported by BBBS school-based coordinators (one per county) who maintain regular contact with each school liaison. This infrastructure has been critical to the success of BBBS's school-based mentoring program.

As Amy Shorey, BBBS School-Based Program Manager remarked:

*“There is a lot of relationship building across many levels to take the burden away from school staff.”*

BBBS is thoughtful while working with schools. Their school coordinators visit each school once a month to monitor the program’s progress. They also emphasize the importance of school secretaries in understanding the infrastructure of schools. When adult mentors enter the schools, their first contact may be with the school secretary, so keeping the secretarial staff abreast of the program’s progress is important. This way, mentors have a friendly and informative source to greet them when they arrive.

All of these strategies implemented by BBBS have ensured that their program is viewed as a commodity of the school, rather than a burden.

### #3 Share Data

Data collection is common to both schools and mentoring programs. For many mentoring programs, this grant is the first time they have been required to have an evaluation component integrated into their programs. The learning curve in terms of data collection and evaluation has been steep for many programs! Sharing data between programs and schools is among the most challenging tasks of collaboration, but can be immensely beneficial towards sustainability of a program.

Initially BBBS was intending on using statewide academic performance data which would allow for comparability across schools/districts. However BBBS found that accessing this data was time consuming, and often the data was a year behind in terms of school performance, demographics, expulsion rates, and scores on math and reading. BBBS decided to not use this data, and instead get current “live” data.

The “live” data includes grades and attendance information from individual students in the program for the current year and the previous year. BBBS has overcome the logistics of this data collection with the schools by building this component into their contract with the district. Their MOU clearly states that teachers will release grades and attendance data on youth participating in the program—once parental permission has been received.

This data is most often acquired by the school liaison or school secretary, dependent on parental permission (which is built into the initial parent permission slips that parents sign for their child’s participation in the program). BBBS also conducts an annual satisfaction survey that is completed by the teacher, mentor, and mentee.

To access data without burdening teachers, BBBS is currently establishing a formal relationship with central office staff of the Portland School District. Moving forward, BBBS will provide a list of students in the program and copies of the parent permission slips, and the central office will provide BBBS with a printed list of data (attendance, grades, etc.) for each student.

BBBS actively shares performance data in many ways. They disseminate key findings from the national BBBSA school-based second year report on mentoring programs in schools nationwide. In addition, BBBS invites school principals and liaisons to BBBS events in which local data is shared. Their end of year report is also accessible online, and copies of it are sent to all schools and key stakeholders. In these ways, BBBS is constantly making efforts to share national and local performance findings with schools and community members to show the effectiveness of their program with youth.

## Program Replicability

The Metropolitan Portland Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BBBS) Mentoring program has strived to build sustainable partnerships with the schools in which their mentoring programs are a part.

In this last section, tips are provided to help begin to think about building sustainable partnerships with schools. Use these tips as a checklist to begin the important conversations necessary for building the infrastructure to ensure the long-term endurance of your program.

### *To Begin on Common Ground...*

- ✓ Find a “champion” for your program—someone respected in the schools that will help promote the program to other school personnel.
- ✓ Remember that district/administrative buy-in strongly influences how a program proceeds through the stages of collaboration towards an effective partnership.
- ✓ To establish common ground, remember to discuss what each side is looking for in the partnership and what resources each side can contribute.
- ✓ Show how your program will help achieve existing educational objectives. Use research findings to demonstrate the effects that mentoring can have on student attendance, attitudes, behavior, and grades.
- ✓ Consider creating a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to detail what the expectations of the partnership will be. Be sure to include the specifics of data collection in the MOU so that the school is clear in terms of what you need from them in terms of grades, attendance, etc.

### *To Become a Valuable Commodity Rather than a Burden...*

- ✓ Asking school staff to assist with identifying the most appropriate youth for services (referrals) and for assisting in

collecting school record data for evaluation purposes requires time and resources. It is important to acknowledge this. You might consider building in stipends for school staff or creating school site coordinator positions to assist with these logistics.

- ✓ Become aware of the dynamics of a school environment, in particular the school calendar, so that mentoring services do not conflict with other school services.
- ✓ Do not promise something that you cannot deliver. Consider holding off initiating a program in a new school until you are certain you have an adequate number of volunteers (at least 10) to provide mentoring to youth.
- ✓ Become part of the school’s Local Educational Agency Plan (LEAP). Volunteer to assist in drafting certain sections of the LEAP for the school, in particular those sections in which your services are a good fit. This is an excellent strategy for helping schools with a difficult task, while building sustainability for your mentoring program at the same time.

### *To Share Data...*

- ✓ Often, standardized test scores are not accessible in time for a program’s reporting needs. Programs may need to find other creative ways to access data.
- ✓ Use the summer as a time to reconnect with the school administration to find out what worked during the school year and what did not work to improve the program overall.
- ✓ Make sure to report back data findings in a meaningful way to the school. This may be as simple as providing them with copies of your evaluation report, or a more formal presentation to school staff.
- ✓ Consider the timing for data collection. Often the school year ends and a program may have a few days to gather data before staff leave for the summer. Be sure to allow adequate time during this busy period to ensure you get the data you need from school staff.

## ***Additional Resources***

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### ***About the Author***

Belinda Bell Basca (Ed.M. Harvard University) is a K-5 writer and curriculum specialist of Science Companion®, a hands-on learning program that takes advantage of children's extensive knowledge of--and curiosity about--how things work in the world. As a consultant for EMT and CARS, Belinda has assisted on a variety of mentoring projects and conducted site visits for Friday Night Live Mentoring and the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Community program. As a former researcher at Harvard Project Zero on The Understandings of Consequence Project, Belinda's work focused on complex causal science concepts and their application in the classroom. In particular, she studied how children reason about challenging topics in science at the elementary and middle school level. She developed science curriculum and conducted frequent classroom observations of teachers and interviews with children.

# Mentoring Resource Center

## Case Study Series

The Mentoring Resource Center (MRC) has been created to provide United States Department of Education Mentoring Program grantees with training, technical assistance, publications, research, and consultation, all in an effort to help their program staff design and implement the highest quality mentoring programs. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, the MRC is a collaborative effort between EMT Associates, located in Folsom, CA, and the National Mentoring Center, located in Portland, OR.

## Let's Hear From You!

*The MRC Case Study Series offers effective strategies and insights from successful programs on various topic areas. We are always on the lookout for successful programs and potential topics. Please contact us with your recommendations for future Case Study articles.*



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