Cross-Age Peer Mentorship Programs in Schools

> Cross-age peer programs provide growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees, resulting in a "double impact" that is appealing to schools and districts attempting to support students with limited financial and community resources.
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It is widely accepted that youngsters benefit from having a positive, caring, adult role model. At schools, there are a range of adults who can be such models. At the same time, it is clear that many students do not have a personal connection to an adult at school. This is where mentoring programs can help fill a critical gap. The benefits of mentoring programs are described not only as helping individual students but as contributing to establishment of a safe and positive school climate.

With this in mind, schools have welcomed mentor programs, and school-based mentoring has become the fastest growing form of mentorship in the United States. Estimates indicate that now more than 2 million youth in the U.S. have mentors (Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller, & Rhodes, 2009). Many of the mentees have been identified as "at-risk," and the aim is for their mentors to provide social and academic support in hopes of reducing dropout rates and improving attitudes toward school. The growing popularity of cross-age peer mentoring programs parallels the increasing focus on enhancing school climate and positive outcomes for youth.

The focus of this Information Resource is on: *What is cross-age peer mentoring? What are its potential benefits and limitations?* and *Where does it fit as part of a school's student and learning Supports?* Also highlighted are sources for mentoring guides and preparation.

What is Cross-Age Peer Mentoring?

Peer helping and tutoring programs and peer counseling have a decades-long history in the U.S. Cross-age peer mentoring has been distinguished from such approaches. Some peer-to-peer programs aim at enhancing academic performance; others focus on social and emotional functioning. As the term denotes, cross-age peer mentoring pairs an older youth with a younger student.

As described by Garringer and MacRae (2008):

> "... cross-age peer mentoring [is] a broad developmental intervention, as opposed to 'goal-oriented efforts aimed primarily at improving academic skills (tutoring), resolving interpersonal problems (peer education; peer assistance), or addressing personal problems (counseling).' The relationship may touch on these, but is not defined by these 'narrow goals' (Karcher, 2007). [The age difference allows] for effective role modeling and positions the mentor as a wiser and older individual, as with adult-youth mentoring."

> "The most common program structure involves high school youth working with mentees at a feeder middle or elementary school, although some programs draw both mentors and mentees from the same school.... Relationships tend to last for the whole school year, when possible, and some programs include summer break activities to keep matches engaged and help with school transitions. Ideally, these matches would continue across multiple school years. Matches ... primarily meet at the school site and often have access to school resources, such as the library, cafeteria, and gymnasium. Many programs also conduct group activities, both on campus and in the community. Because providing structured activities has proven effective in afterschool settings (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), many programs use a set curriculum or activity guide and most provide some planned activities in a youth-development context. Most often, however, the emphasis remains on fun and personal interaction."

Potential Benefits of Peer Mentors

Peer mentors have been described as knowledgeable guides for new students, facilitators providing access to people and resources, role models and advocates. They support transitions and help mentees navigate daily challenges.

Peer mentors often are matched with students seen as "at-risk" (e.g., those from low socioeconomic status, new to the country immigrants, students for whom English is a second language, students manifesting learning and behavior problems). A major emphasis is on potential school dropouts. While the term is controversial, risk factors are widely acknowledged as affecting a large proportion of students (Kominski, Jamieson, & Martinez, 2001).

In contrast to adult mentors, peer mentors are seen as able to connect better with mentees; they also spend more time with their mentees. In addition, some parents of mentees may feel more comfortable with a student mentor designated by the school rather than an adult volunteer.

Peer mentorships also have the potential benefit of generating a double impact (i.e., both mentors and mentees can benefit). While research is limited, positive results are reported for cross-age mentoring. Examples for mentees are feelings of connectedness to school, competency, grades, prosocial behaviors and attitudes, and self-efficacy. Positive results reported for mentors include enhanced personal and interpersonal skills and connectedness to school, increased confidence, self-esteem, empathy and moral reasoning, intrapersonal communication and conflict resolution skills, and relationships with parents. Mentor preparation is an added value to their education. And, for high school peer mentors, the activity can strengthen their college and work applications.

With respect to costs, the expenses needed for recruitment, operational infrastructure, and facilities of cross-age peers are relatively low.

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Some Related Cost-Benefit Research on Mentoring

Anton (2007) monitized benefits of a mentorship program in Minnesota over one year. With the assumption that school attendance was improved on average by one and a half days per year per student, the cost savings to the school was estimated to be $3,974. Adding other benefits such as reduction of juvenile crime, drug use reduction, and academic improvement, the overall returns were calculated to be $9,688. The operating cost of a program was estimated to be $3,562 per participant. Net gain equals $6,126.

Such benefits, however, are unlikely when mentoring is brief. A study of the U.S. Department of Education's Student Mentoring Program evaluated a sample of 2,600 at-risk students in 32 school mentoring programs (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094047/). The mentors met with students once a week for six months. Findings suggest no significant effects on academic or behavioral outcomes. McQuillin, Strait, Bradley, and Ingram (2015) also evaluated brief mentoring programs and noted little to no effect on academic, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes; some results even showed negative effects.

Taking students out of class also can be counterproductive. A study of approximately one thousand participants in Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentorships found no evidence of benefits for programs that pulled students from class. Indeed, some results showed negative effects on academic performance (perhaps because students missed out on instruction and got behind with assignments). In contrast, academically vulnerable youth benefitted from the extra support from mentors during lunch or after school (Schwartz, et al., 2012).

Future studies of benefits (vs. costs) need to examine duration as a process variable, additional immediate outcomes such as reduced involvement with the juvenile justice system, utilization of social services, need for special education, and a range of possible negative effects.

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Limitations of Peer Mentors

As the above findings underscore, there are caveats about the potential benefits of cross-age tutoring. Concern begins with the question "Is it effective?" Variability among mentorship programs with respect to curricula, student needs, duration of meeting times, duration of the program, and many contextual matters make determining the effectiveness difficult and a simple answer as to whether a school-based mentoring intervention is worthwhile "will inevitably remain elusive" (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010).

Below are a few other considerations suggested by researchers focusing on peer mentors.

Since not all students will benefit from mentoring and some may be at risk for negative effects, the selection criteria and process require careful planning and implementation. Of particular concern is how the decision will be made if a student doesn't want a mentor.

In a community-based program, the curriculum is focused on building strong relationships between the mentor and mentee. However given the nature of schools, the emphasis is usually more on academic tutoring. Academic as contrasted to relationship-focused discussions and social activities have been linked to less benefits and lower levels of mentor satisfaction (Herrera, 2007). And the reality is that forming genuine and connected relationships is a difficult process.

Clearly, matching mentors and mentees is a critical component. Matching is difficult. For example, the commitment of mentors and mentees are critical variables. Regular attendance is significantly related to positive outcomes. Inconsistent or low attendance has been reported as potentially doing more harm than good (Karcher, 2005). High school mentor's attitudes toward children also are significantly related to outcomes. For example, negative results were reported when mentors who had negative attitudes toward children were paired with academically connected mentees, while academically disconnected mentees working with mentors with positive attitudes toward children reported stronger relationships with their teachers at the end of the school year (Karcher et al., 2010). And it has been suggested that the outcomes for both mentors and mentees are likely to be better if high school age mentors are at least two-year older than their mentees (Karcher, 2007).

Other concerns are that the mentor preparation be well planned and implemented, activities be personalized (both in terms of motivation and developmental level), mentors properly supported and supervised, and that formative evaluations be regularly conducted to recognize positive outcomes, detect negative outcomes, and improve the work. School districts also are cautioned not to use mentoring as a substitute for professional intervention for youth with serious emotional, behavioral, or academic problems (although mentoring may be a useful adjunct in supporting such youth).

Where Mentoring Fits in a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

Key to positive outcomes are supportive policy and practices and an effective operational infrastructure for implementation and sustainability. In this respect, it is essential to resist "project mentality." Projects exacerbate the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and overspecialization that characterizes efforts to address student problems.

So, rather than pursuing mentoring as yet another discrete program, it is well to remember that

- students who are not doing well at school tend to have multiple problems (e.g., there is a strong interrelationship among learning, behavior, and emotional problems) and

- multiple problems require multifaceted interventions that can address both external and internal factors and enhance not only knowledge and skills, but also attitudes.

Given this, we suggest that the aim of schools should be to use interest in mentoring as a catalyst for taking the next step toward transforming student and learning supports. This means proceeding

in ways that embed mentoring and all other separate initiatives into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports so that each school can address a broad range barriers to student learning effectively.*

It is evident, however, that systemic changes are imperative in order to significantly enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school and beyond. Our analyses (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2006; in press) indicate the following changes are needed:

> (1) Expanding the policy framework for school improvement from a two- to a three-component framework. The third component coalesces all efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching (e.g., unifies them as a Learning Support Component); is prioritized and developed as primary and essential; is fully entwined with the Instructional and Management/governance Components.

> (2) Operationalizing the third component. Replacing fragmented practices that focus mainly on discrete problems requires reframing student and learning support interventions to create a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports in classrooms and school-wide. A prototype intervention framework has been developed that encompasses

>> • a continuum of school-community interventions consisting of subsystems (not just "tiers) for
>>> >promoting effective schooling and whole child development
>>> >preventing problems experienced by teachers and students
>>> >addressing such problems as soon as feasible after they arise
>>> >providing for students who have severe and chronic problems

> and

>> • a cohesively organized and delimited set of "content" arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students in the classroom and school-wide. These arenas encompass the range of concerns a school copes with each day. They also stress enhancing intrinsic motivation and resilience as protective factors. Mentoring embeds nicely into all of these arenas.

> (3) Implementing the third component. This involves

>> • reworking the operational infrastructure to ensure effective daily implementation and ongoing development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable systemic approach that enhances equity of opportunity;

>> • enhancing mechanisms and strategic approaches for systemic change in ways that account for context and ensure effective implementation, replication to scale, and sustainability;

>> • developing standards and expanding the accountability framework to account for the third component and to do so in ways that encompass both formative and summative evaluation

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*For details about a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports*, see
>*ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* –
   http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf

>*Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tinkering.pdf

>All this is discussed in detail in a new book that is in press entitled: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. For a preview look, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Concluding Comments

Mentoring is an increasingly popular adjunct for addressing persistent barriers to learning. It would be nice if the process of addressing factors interfering with school success could be handled solely by adding mentors. Given that teachers can't do it alone, adult and cross-age peer mentors and other volunteers are a valuable resource. But, multifaceted and interrelated problems and solutions require a comprehensive and broadly collaborative approach.

Teachers must establish regular in-classroom collaborative working relationships with other teachers, student support staff, and volunteers to enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed. And schools must transform how they connect with homes and communities so they can work together in pursuing shared goals.

As the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is implemented, tweaking current practices will not be sufficient to significantly counter the problems experienced by some students and enhance the well being of all students. Systemic transformation is imperative. School improvement decision makers and planners must address barriers to learning and teaching comprehensively, cohesively, and equitably.

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For more resources, see:

- *National Association of Peer Programs* – http://www.peerprograms.org
- *Peer Resources* – http://www.peer.ca/helping.html
- *Going the Distance: A Guide to Building Lasting Relationships in Mentoring Programs* – http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/going_the_distance.pdf
- *Ongoing Training for Mentors: 12 Interactive Sessions for U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Programs* – http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/ongoing_training.pdf
- *Preparing Participants for Mentoring: The US Department of Education Mentoring Program's Guide to Initial Training of Volunteers, Youth, and Parents* – http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/training.pdf
- *Peer Mentoring and Academic Success* (Fact Sheet #7) – http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet7.pdf
- *Building effective peer mentoring programs in schools: An introductory guide.* Mentoring Resource Center – http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/building-effective-peer-mentoring-programs-intro-guide.pdf
- *Tutor/mentor Institute* – https://mail.em.ucla.edu/owa/?ae=Item&t=IPM.Note&id=RgAAAAAQywnPTduxRYUvuDlFkqhwBwC7I8%2fqqvAVTb%2bVlB%2fW%2fgeJAAAAVxDhAAAHY2cRcMvMQInmNVKKBY94AAGTqpyvAAAJ