Background

School-based mentoring programs have become increasingly popular. Approximately 30 percent of mentoring programs are located in schools -- and such programs are continuing to expand at an unprecedented rate. In fact, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America has made nearly 300,000 mentoring relationships through their school-based programs.

Each program is different, but most involve weekly, school-based meetings in which mentors and mentees engage in a range of academic and nonacademic activities. This month, I will explore some of the advantages and disadvantages of school-based mentoring and review what current evaluation studies can tell us about the effectiveness of this approach.

Advantages of school-based mentoring

Reduced Cost

School-based programs tend to be about half as costly per youth, even when adding the value of in-kind school contributions.

Logistics

School-based programs are able to capitalize on the knowledge, referrals, supervision, and support of the many adults who are already in the school setting. This simplifies the program staff's task of forming and monitoring relationships.

Student benefits

Advocacy -- When mentors are integrated into school environments, they are better able to advocate on their mentees' behalf. For example, they can speak directly with the mentees' teachers and resolve problems before those problems escalate.

Status -- Having a mentor come to the school is seen by other students as an "enviable perk," shedding positive light onto the mentee and bolstering social standing.
Academic focus -- The school setting brings academic issues to center stage and provides a natural context for mentors to delve into school and learning issues.

Mentors

School-based mentoring programs tend to attract volunteers who—by virtue of their jobs, families, age, or other circumstances—are less likely to volunteer in community-based programs.

Universities/workplace -- School-based mentoring programs tend to attract more volunteers from colleges and universities than community-based mentoring program (9% versus 2%, respectively). Similarly, school-based mentoring programs tend to attract more volunteers from the workplace (14% vs. 2%).

Many universities and companies have partnerships with schools that provide natural linkages, staff incentives, sanctioned leaves and accountability.

Older adults - Because the weekly meetings between mentors and mentees typically occur on school grounds, many safety concerns are allayed. This is particularly true for older adults and others who may be concerned about their physical safety.

Minorities -- Initial research shows that school-based mentoring programs have been able to attract greater numbers of minority volunteers.

Spreading the wealth -- Since it is somewhat easier to recruit and screen mentors for school-based programs than for community-based programs, potentially more matches can be made.

Flexibility -- School settings are more tolerant of cross-gender matches, expanding the availability of mentors to the disproportionate number of males on waiting lists.

Mentees

Higher-risk -- In addition to reaching more students, school-based mentoring programs often reach different youth than those typically served by community-based programs. School-based enrollment procedures are less involved, and thus, the programs tend to reach youth who might never have made it to a community-based program—i.e., those whose parents lack the time, energy or inclination to involve their child in more intensive mentoring. This implies that school-based mentoring might, in some cases, be reaching higher-risk children and families.

Possible Disadvantages of School-based mentoring

Duration

Link to the academic year -- A downside of school-based programs is their link to the academic calendar. Most programs suspend or even terminate relationships during summer months.

This is shortsighted, particularly since program effects tend to accrue with time, and many behavioral problems and difficulties arise during unstructured hours. Indeed, there is evidence
that the effects of mentoring diminish over the summer.\textsuperscript{3}

Lack of continuity -- Because school-based matches are linked to particular schools, relationships are often terminated when students make transitions from one school to another.

Terminations during school transitions are particularly troubling in light of the difficulties involved in making transitions to unfamiliar school settings.

Similarly, high-risk youth, who often need the most support, tend to move more frequently than their lower-risk counterparts.

Intensity

Sipe and colleagues found that significantly more community-based mentors feel "very close" to their mentees than do school-based and work-based mentors (45 percent versus 32 percent, respectively). This relates to several factors:

Less time - Mentor-youth meetings tend to be shorter (generally, one hour as opposed to the longer meetings that characterize community-based programs) and, overall, school-based mentors spend about half as much time with youth as community-based mentors (6 hours per month, compared with 12). Moreover, the school-based structure tends to constrain the intensity and scope of meetings in ways that community-based relationships do not.

Academic focus -- School-based mentors' tendency to focus on school progress often comes at the expense of the kinds of social activities that help to build close bonds between mentors and mentees.

Class schedule -- Adolescents' needs for comfort and disclosure cannot always be contained neatly within the parameters of a class schedule. In addition, there are limits to what some youth will reveal in a public cafeteria or elsewhere on the school premises.

Context

Insufficient exposure -- A school setting may not offer a sufficient exposure and range of activities to youth who are hoping to develop their job-readiness skills, explore possible career opportunities, or engage in other experiences beyond the confines of school.

Administrative complexity--Sometimes a school, itself, starts a mentoring program. More commonly, the school collaborates with a community agency to operate the program. The school provides the access to the children and the local organization provides the volunteers and the administrative structure for the program. Under these circumstances, school-based mentoring often depends on the cooperation and collaboration of teachers, staff and administrators at the school. Although many benefits can be gained from this sort of partnership, gaining acceptance from the necessary gatekeepers (principals, PTO, school board, etc) can take considerable time and persistence.

Some evidence exists that school-based mentoring programs enjoy greater success in elementary schools than in the more administratively complex middle and high schools. Not only
do elementary schools have fewer layers of decision makers, they also tend to impose fewer scheduling constraints.

**Current studies on the effectiveness of school-based mentoring**

Several studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of school-based mentoring. In the following sections, I will review these studies and, where possible, provide links for additional information.

**Across Ages**

**Background**

Across Ages³ is a comprehensive, intergenerational mentoring program designed to reduce adolescent drug abuse and to help older adults (55+) maintain active roles in their communities. Approximately 400 6th grade students took part in the evaluation of this school-based mentoring program over a three-year period. Students’ classes were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: A curriculum and community service condition (Program Group), a curriculum, service and mentoring condition (Mentoring Group), or a Control Group. Youth in all three of these conditions completed questionnaires prior to the initiation of the program, at the conclusion of the program and six months following the end of the program.

**Results**

Results of this evaluation indicated that Across Ages mentoring contributed to significantly lower levels of problem behavior and substance use. At the same time, it helped boost self-confidence, self-control, cooperation and attachment to both the school and the family.

By the six-month follow-up, however, the benefits were no longer evident. The program’s benefits did not persist beyond the duration of the school year.

Andrea Taylor, and colleagues report on a similar evaluation in which Eight 562 6th grade students participated in a pre-test and post-test evaluation of Across Ages. Program Group participants showed significant improvement in their sense of well-being attitudes toward school and future, knowledge about elders, reactions to situations involving drug use and attitudes toward community service.⁴

**Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Programs**

**Background**

In a recent observational study, the progress of students who were involved in school-based mentoring at five different BBBSA⁵ agencies was observed by teachers, parents and the volunteer mentors. Each of those agencies followed the progress of 50 matches. During the year in which the match was made, report card data from the first quarter of the school year were compared to report card data from the 4th quarter. In addition, background information about the mentors and mentees, and the impressions of teachers, parents, volunteers and mentees was noted.
Results

According to teachers, they noted "substantial improvements" in students' school performance, attendance, confidence, attitudes, expression, trust, respect and relationships with adults. Because they correlated with report card data, these impressions appeared to be grounded in actual progress. Youth in longer-lasting relationships enjoyed additional academic benefits.

Comment

Although this study is not a traditional program evaluation, the findings provide preliminary support for the positive benefits of youth mentoring. In particular, youth who participate in school-based mentoring appear to show immediate benefits.

Public/Private Ventures Evaluation

Background

In a preliminary study of school-based mentoring, P/PV researchers visited two BBBS school-based programs, each for three days. At the sites, P/PV researchers met with BBBS staff, parents, children, mentors and school personnel involved in the programs.

Findings

The researchers observed that strong, influential relationships could develop within the school context and that the attitudes and behaviors of the students improved. Teachers noted improvements in the students' behavior (particularly academic), attitudes and self-confidence. About half of the parents interviewed reported that their children had made significant academic improvements subsequent to being involved in the program. Teachers noted that children improved in a range of subjects, including math, reading, social studies and citizenship. Three of the four teachers also mentioned increased confidence as a common area of improvement:

Comment

As the P/PV researchers note, this study represents a first look at school-based mentoring, not a rigorous program evaluation. Nonetheless, this study has advanced the field's understanding of the topic and has influenced a series of additional, influential follow-up studies by P/PV.

Other Published Evaluations of School-Based Mentoring

School-Based Program for Elementary Students

Background

In the article, "A Community/School Mentoring Program for Elementary Students," researcher Julie Terry describes a school-based mentoring program that was designed to foster supportive
relationships between children and adults that would: enhance children’s self-confidence; expose them to new experiences; and improve school-community links. Mentoring sessions took place at school once a week for approximately 45 minutes.

**Findings**

At the end of the school year, mentees (aged 7-11 yrs) stated that they:

- Enjoyed spending time with their mentors;
- Could count on their mentors;
- Learned new things;
- Participated in a variety of experiences; and
- Wanted to continue in the program for the following year.

Mentors noted that they:

- Enjoyed being with their mentees;
- Had learned from their mentees: and
- Believed the mentees had obtained new information regarding careers, higher education and problem-solving techniques.

**Comment**

As with several of the studies cited above, this study is more descriptive than evaluative. It relies exclusively on the post-program impressions of the participants, all of whom remained in the program. Although a need remains for more rigorous evaluations of school-based mentoring, this convergence of satisfaction among participants and mentors across different programs is encouraging.

**Mentoring At-Risk High School Students: Evaluation of a School-Based Program**

In the article, *Mentoring At-Risk High School Students: Evaluation of a School-Based Program*, Ellen Slicker and Douglas Palmer examined the effects of a school-based mentoring program on eighty-six at-risk 10th grade students. In examining outcomes, this study not only considers program involvement, but the quality of this involvement. Students were divided into one of three groups: those who were effectively mentored; those who were ineffectively mentored (as measured by evaluations of their mentoring experiences); and controls.

**Findings**

Relative to the controls, students in mentoring relationships did not have lower drop-out rates, improved self-concept or improved academic achievement. However, those who were effectively mentored, were more likely to return to school the following school year. Return rates for the control group and the ineffectively mentored group were 74% and 69%, respectively as compared to 100% of the effectively mentored group. Additionally, those who were effectively mentored showed greater improvement in achievement than in the ineffectively mentored group.
The Positive Effects of Mentoring Economically Disadvantaged Students

In an article, entitled, The Positive Effects of Mentoring Economically Disadvantaged Students, Jongyeun Lee and Bonnie Cramond investigated whether participation in a school-based mentoring program led to improvements in students' self efficacy, aspirations and ideas of what they could be - their possible selves. They also examined whether mentoring relationships must exist for a critical length of time before mentees show significant improvement. Mentored students were divided into three subgroups according to the length of time that they have been involved in the mentoring relationship:

1. students mentored for six months or fewer,
2. students mentored for seven to twelve months, and
3. those mentored for more than one year.

Students on the waiting list for mentoring served as controls. All students completed self-report questionnaires that assessed self-efficacy, aspiration and possible selves.

Findings

Results indicate that participation in the mentoring program fostered improvements in student aspiration. Only students mentored for more than one year, however, had significantly higher aspirations than students on the waiting list. None of the findings with respect to self-efficacy and possible selves indicated a significant improvement in mentored students, irrespective of the length of time they had been involved in the relationship.

Comment

These well-designed evaluations provide evidence for the benefits of mentoring programs while underscoring the importance of closely monitoring the quality and length of relationships over time. They show that lasting change tends to occur over a relatively long period of time, and its magnitude is proportional to the quality of the relationship. This observation is supported in other recent studies. In one study, my colleagues and I found that less intensive forms of mentoring (as measured by students' responses to a relationship questionnaire) led to smaller changes in the child.

Similarly, when Jean Grossman and I re-analyzed the Big Brother Big Sisters data, taking the quality and length of relationships into account, wide variations in program effects emerged. This variation in quality occurs across relationships, as well as across programs. For example, DuBois found substantial variation in the effectiveness of different mentoring programs. Program practices that ensured quality and longevity led to stronger effects. Such practices included:

- Providing training for mentors;
- Offering structured activities for mentors and youth;
- Having high expectations for frequency of contact;
- Enjoying greater support and involvement from parents; and
- Monitoring overall program implementation.
Implications

School-based mentoring programs hold considerable promise. The school-based setting provides an invaluable infrastructure and school staff possess insights into youth's lives that can simplify the process of forming and monitoring relationships. At the same time, school-based mentoring has some disadvantages: setting constraints, a strong focus on academics and the fact that it is linked to the academic calendar. These disadvantages may pose some barriers to establishing the same level of closeness between mentors and mentees as mentoring pairs enjoy in community-based mentoring programs. Despite such challenges, school-based mentoring is a promising response to the infrastructure problems facing community-based programs.

The big challenge will be to determine how to meld the flexibility, intensity and enduring nature of successful community-based approaches with the structure and support of school-based approaches. The few programs that have been evaluated so far provide considerable promise regarding the effectiveness of school-based mentoring. They also underscore the importance of ensuring continuity and quality in all mentoring.

Literature Cited


Additional resources

1. MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership offers helpful advice and information about school-based programs


3. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's National Mentoring Center also provides resources and advice to school-based mentoring programs. ([http://educationnorthwest.org/nmc](http://educationnorthwest.org/nmc))