

High School Students as Mentors

FINDINGS FROM THE
BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS
SCHOOL-BASED MENTORING
IMPACT STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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BBBS of Central Ohio, in Columbus, OH

Katie McKee, Jennifer Voit, Julianna Nemeth
Executive Director (ED): Edward Cohn

BBBS of Colorado, Inc., in Denver, CO

Sandy Karr, Jim Davis
CEO (through November 2004):
Katherine Balsley
CEO (beginning February 2005):
Dave DeForest-Stalls

BBBS of Eastern Maine, in Ellsworth, ME

Lucy Barnhart
Program Director (PD): Pat Saunders

BBBS of Eastern Missouri, Inc., in St. Louis, MO

Kristen Slaughter, Jessica Deslauriers, Bridget
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BBBS of Greater Cleveland, in Cleveland, OH

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BBBS of North Texas, in Dallas, TX

Mike O'Teter, Naomi Scott, Kelly Adams
CEO: Charles Pierson

BBBS of Northeastern Arizona, in Show Low, AZ

Karen Burchwell
ED: Doris Raspa

BBBS of Northwest Georgia Mountains, Inc., in Dalton, GA

Staci Halyak, Kim Parrish
ED: Willa Dendy

BBBS of The Bridge, in Wilkes-Barre, PA

Joe Swortz, Tanya Olaviany
PD: Ronald Evans

Staff at Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) were supportive partners throughout the project. Keoki Hansen developed the original design for the project, served as liaison with participating agencies and BBBSA and reviewed all instruments and drafts of the report. She was not only an invaluable partner throughout the project, but also a driving force behind the success of the evaluation. Joe Radelet served as a wise and experienced voice for both BBBSA and the larger mentoring field.

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Heidi Jacobs provided final copyediting for the report. Malish & Pagonis designed the report, and Chelsea Farley and Laura Johnson, as always, did an excellent job coordinating its publication.

School-based mentoring (SBM) is one of the fastest growing forms of mentoring in the US. SBM programs ask volunteers from the community to develop relationships with students by meeting regularly with them at their school. Meetings typically take place for about an hour a week during or after school, focus on a range of social and academic activities and continue for approximately one school year.

Recently, SBM programs have begun to match participants with high school student volunteers. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) began using these volunteers in earnest about seven years ago, in 2001. Today their program has close to 50,000 high school volunteers mentoring younger students. However, little is known about whether and how these volunteers might benefit youth. Their age could make them particularly well suited to relate to younger youth; yet their own developmental needs may prevent them from investing in a relationship that, at times, offers little in return. These characteristics likely require distinct program practices to support matches involving high school mentors and may translate into distinct benefits for mentored youth.

The BBBS School-Based Mentoring Impact Study

To explore the quality of these matches, the program practices that support them and their benefits to youth, we drew on data from a large-scale, random-assignment impact study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) SBM program conducted by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) in collaboration with BBBSA. The study aimed to assess impacts as well as to describe the structure of these programs and the support provided to matches. (See Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, McMaken and Jucovy, 2007, for the findings from the study.) Ten BBBS agencies participated in the evaluation, involving 1,139 youth in 71 schools nationwide. Half of the youth (the “Littles”) were randomly selected to be matched with volunteer mentors (their “Bigs”), while the other half did not receive mentoring

during the study but were placed on the agency’s wait list to be matched when the study ended, 15 months later. The youth, their teachers and their mentors were surveyed at three time points: as youth were beginning their program involvement in Fall 2004 (the baseline), at the end of the 2004-05 school year (the first follow-up), and again in late Fall 2005 of the next school year (the second follow-up). We also surveyed and spoke with BBBS staff and interviewed teachers, principals and school liaisons.

Findings in the Herrera et al. (2007) report reflect impacts and programmatic implications for all youth participating in the study. However, close to half the Littles in the study were matched with volunteers who were in high school at the time of their involvement (a proportion that is fairly reflective of BBBS programs at a national level). This enabled us to use the data from the study to address several questions specific to high school mentors and their matches:

- How do matches with high school Bigs differ from those with adult volunteers?
- How do the Littles and their mentors benefit from the match?
- What are the characteristics of the BBBS mentoring programs that use high school Bigs? Are practices within these programs associated with match success?

The study is one of the first large-scale, national evaluations of high school volunteers in SBM programs.

BBBS School-Based Mentoring with High School Bigs: Key Findings

Almost half of the high school volunteers (49 percent) were juniors, and about one quarter (26 percent) were seniors when they were matched with their Littles. An additional quarter were either sophomores or freshman in high school. The high school volunteers often participated with a larger group of high school students, as part of a class or community service requirement (two fifths received credit for their participation).

1. Results from the study suggest that high school volunteers have several valuable strengths.

They bring to the match extensive exposure to, and experience with, children. About half (49 percent) reported having had “a lot” of contact with youth ages 9 to 14 in the year before they volunteered, 47 percent reported having mentored informally in the past, and 18 percent had previous experience mentoring in a formal program like BBBS.

The high school Bigs showed hints of approaching their matches in ways that could potentially be linked to match success. For example, they involved their Littles in decision-making more often than adults, an important indicator of match success (Morrow and Styles 1995). And they engaged in academic activities with their Littles less often than adults—a type of activity that has been linked with lower levels of mentor satisfaction and weaker youth benefits (Karcher 2004; Karcher 2007).

Overall, Littles’ relationships with high school Bigs were similar in length and quality to those with adults. Their matches at the second follow-up were the same length as those of adults; at the first follow-up, they were, on average, slightly longer than those of adults. Littles matched with high school Bigs, like those matched with adult volunteers, reported fairly high-quality relationships, and the high school and adult Bigs reported similar levels of relationship quality.

2. However, high school Bigs also present challenges.

Relative to adults, high school Bigs were less consistent in attending match meetings and less likely to “carry over” their matches into the subsequent school year. High school Bigs missed significantly more match meetings over the course of the school year (an average of 4.8 meetings) than adult mentors (an average of 3.5 meetings). High school seniors and those who received school credit for their participation were less likely than younger high school mentors and those who did not receive credit to carry over their match. Bigs in “high-school-only” programs

(90 percent of our sample) were also less likely to carry over their match than those high school Bigs in programs with both high school and adult volunteers.

Littles matched with high school Bigs improved relative to their non-mentored peers in only one measure, teacher-reported social acceptance.

By contrast, youth matched with adult Bigs performed better than their non-mentored peers in 12 of the 31 outcomes tested, including academic performance, school behavior and attendance. Additionally, when directly comparing the size of these impacts, youth matched with adult Bigs benefited significantly more than those matched with high school Bigs in six social and school-related outcomes: college expectations, youth-reported grades, parent-youth relationship quality, classroom effort, positive social (i.e., “prosocial”) behavior and classroom misbehavior. Youth matched with high school Bigs benefited more than those matched with adults in only two social outcomes: social acceptance and assertiveness. Thus, on average, those youth matched with high school mentors in the first year of their program involvement benefited very little from their mentoring experience, at least in those outcomes we tested (most of which focused on school-related areas). However, this was not true across all high school Bigs programs.

3. Practices varied among the high school Bigs programs in this study, and particular practices were linked with match success.

Those high school Bigs who met in the presence of other matches in one large space, such as the school gym, (78 percent of all high school Bigs) reported several benefits to this meeting structure, and their matches lasted longer than those meeting independently. However, their Littles reported lower levels of youth centeredness, possibly resulting from high school Bigs having difficulty focusing on their Littles’ needs while in the presence of their own peers.

High school Bigs who received at least two hours of training (42 percent of all high school Bigs) reported experiencing higher-quality and closer relationships with their Littles than those who received less training. Their Littles also reported

higher-quality relationships. Additionally, by the second follow-up, their matches had lasted longer than those with Bigs who had received less training.

Those high school Bigs who reported receiving higher-quality training were more likely to carry over their match into a second school year and had longer matches by the second follow-up.

High school Bigs' reports of higher training quality were also associated with their own reports of higher-quality relationships at the first follow-up. Bigs' reports of higher-quality support from BBBS staff yielded similar associations.

Frequent communication with BBBS staff was associated with positive outcomes for Littles matched with high school Bigs. Relative to Littles in programs where the high school Bigs had infrequent communication with BBBS staff, Littles in programs with more frequent communication experienced larger benefits in five social and academic outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although there are challenges in using high school volunteers, there are also many indications that carefully outlining the parameters of high school mentoring programs could improve their ability to benefit youth. This suggestion is in line with past work that found more consistent impacts yielded by high school mentors. For example, Karcher (2005) found that high school volunteers benefited their mentees in both school and parent connectedness. However, the focus of his evaluation was a very structured program that involved extensive orientation and training, relied on structured activities and a curriculum focused on connectedness, involved parents in the program and provided extensive support to the high school volunteers (Karcher, in press).

The high school Bigs programs in this study were not drastically different from those involving adult Bigs. Yet high school students come to the program with their own set of developmental needs, including facing a major developmental transition (for seniors) and a desire for peer interaction that, in some cases, appeared to have been met at the

expense of focusing on their Littles. Although a few of the programs involved in this study were structured to accommodate some of the differences between adult and high school volunteers, the programs do not have a standardized set of practices that reflect the distinct needs of these younger volunteers. Our analyses suggest that young volunteers may need very different types of support, training and structure to be successful in their matches.

Our recommendations are as follows:

1. Consider how to use high school Bigs' natural strengths.

Although the Littles matched with high school Bigs improved relative to their non-mentored peers in only one area (social acceptance), their impacts in one additional peer-related area (assertiveness) were significantly bigger than those experienced by Littles matched with adults. These benefits correspond with mentor reports of what they focused on in their match meetings: Adult mentors reported focusing on academics more than the high school Bigs, whereas the high school volunteers focused more on improving the Littles' relationships with others. High school Bigs' understanding of how to help their mentees improve in peer-related areas—or helping them improve in these areas simply by virtue of their age and status—may be an important strength that programs should try to capitalize on.

2. Ensure that young volunteers understand the importance of consistency.

High school Bigs were more likely than their adult counterparts to miss meetings, and a majority of BBBS staff working with high school Bigs reported that consistent attendance was a challenge for them. Inconsistent mentoring, in many cases, could be worse for a child's self-esteem than no mentoring at all (Karcher 2005). Thus, training for high school volunteers should make this a central focus, and, if the students receive school credit for volunteering, this credit should be made contingent on consistent attendance.

3. Provide matches with opportunities to interact with other youth; however, use a group setting for match meetings only with significant supports in place.

Although the high school Bigs reported many benefits to meeting in the presence of other matches, their Littles reported lower levels of youth centeredness than those who met outside of this context. This type of meeting structure may require significant supervision to ensure that the high school volunteers focus attention on their Littles as opposed to their own peers.

4. Provide significant communication with, and support for, high school Bigs.

Both adults and high school Bigs appeared to benefit from strong training and support. However, support seemed to be particularly beneficial to matches with high school Bigs. For example, stronger support by program staff was associated with match length only in the high school sample. In addition, Littles matched with high school Bigs in programs with relatively frequent communication with BBBS staff benefited more than their non-mentored peers in several outcomes, and many of these benefits were significantly bigger than those received by Littles in programs with less staff communication.

5. Provide a *minimum* of two hours of training (pre-match and ongoing) to high school mentors.

Those high school Bigs who had received at least two hours of training by the first follow-up had longer lasting matches by the second follow-up and had higher-quality and closer relationships with their Littles. Training content should be carefully considered to ensure that high school volunteers not only feel prepared to mentor a child but also have the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge base.

6. Try to involve high school mentors before their senior year.

Not surprisingly, seniors were less likely than younger high school students to carry over their match into a subsequent school year. Programs

that want to keep their volunteers past one school year should make this goal explicit to seniors to ensure that this is possible for them.

7. If providing high school Bigs with class credit, consider providing credit only after two semesters of service or after they carry their match over into a subsequent school year.

In this study, those high school Bigs who received class credit were less likely to carry over their match than those who did not. It is likely that students volunteered until the end of the commitment required for receiving credit, but no longer. Thus, making credit contingent on a full year (or more) of service may be important in keeping young volunteers on board.

8. Consider mixing adult and high school programs.

High school Bigs in programs that also used adult Bigs stayed with the program longer than those with only other high school volunteers. Perhaps this difference reflects differences in mentors' original motivation for volunteering (e.g., high school volunteers may have participated in large part for the group experience). However, the high school volunteers could have also been positively influenced by the presence of adults, who tended to be more consistent mentors. In mixed programs, adults could also be trained to serve as role models to the high school Bigs.

These types of changes in the BBBS high school Bigs model will require significant effort and may increase the cost of the high school Bigs program. However, there are several reasons to invest such efforts in the program. First, and most importantly, high school volunteers have the potential to make a substantial difference in their Littles' lives, as evidenced both in evaluations of more structured programs and in those programs in the current study with very strong staff support. Second, high school volunteers represent an efficient way to reach many children through school-based programs. And although they do require more and different kinds of support than adults, they also have many unique strengths. Finally, high school volunteers may also benefit from the

experience themselves and are more likely to volunteer in the future than their peers without volunteering experience (Toppe et al. 2002).

Although findings from this study suggest several strategies for improving SBM programs, they should be considered preliminary until further studies can confirm that their implementation significantly improves outcomes for youth mentored by high-school-age volunteers. SBM programs that do not yet recruit high school mentors should wait to start such programs until clear guidelines are put in place. Similarly, those that are currently using high school volunteers should wait to expand until the field can provide guidance on how to design these programs and shape their expansion.

BBBSA is already initiating several of the changes suggested in this study in its high school Bigs program. The organization has convened a group of six of its strongest BBBS agencies to review these and other findings and share their own experiences and strategies to improve their current model. Our findings suggest that these changes will be well worth the effort.

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