



## Using Text Messaging to Support Success Mentors

As you scale your Success Mentors program, you may find yourself seeking solutions to help you communicate with and support larger numbers of Success Mentors serving students in your schools. In order to be successful in building meaningful relationships with students and helping them overcome barriers to attendance, all Success Mentors should receive initial training that covers key topics, including the role of a mentor, setting goals and expectations, communicating effectively with youth and families, and addressing common challenges. However, ongoing support and training is also needed to ensure that mentors are reflecting on their experience, growing their mentoring skills, and aware of resources that may be useful to the students and families they engage with.

In many schools, Success Mentors are teachers and staff who meet with students all throughout the school day. Without a regularly scheduled meeting time/place for mentors to congregate, swap stories and challenges, and seek guidance, providing this ongoing support can be a challenge. Fortunately, there are creative ways to stay in touch with your mentors. Sending text messages to your Success Mentors can be an effective strategy for providing key tips, reminders and recommendations about their mentoring work with students.

Lots of millennials (and older folks as well) look regularly at our phones throughout the day. While a healthy open rate for an email is somewhere between 9-18%, **90% of text messages are opened and read within the first 3 minutes!**

### Text Messages Support New York City's Success Mentors

Mentor NY, a MENTOR affiliate organization that supports the quality and quantity of mentoring relationships in New York State, utilized text messaging to connect with and support Success Mentors during the pilot of this program in New York City. In the past, Mentor NY had received positive feedback about sending 2-Minute Mentoring Tips to mentors via email, but realized that most teaching staff members are not at their computers all day long. So they decided to try texting.

Mentor NY's goal was to give mentors some snippets of mentoring wisdom in a text message. First, this would get them thinking about a particular issue or event impacting their mentees, or a particular best practice they could use in their work. Second, by linking to an online resource or page on their website, Mentor NY could prompt mentors to engage with important resources and material to strengthen their skills and knowledge.

Mentor NY used a system called [www.mobomix.com](http://www.mobomix.com), which worked well to support the sending of text messages to large numbers of mentors at once. Other sites, like [eztexting.com](http://eztexting.com) and [textrequest.com](http://textrequest.com), provide other options. As you consider this strategy, look for a system that lets you start small for a few cents per text (Mentor NY spent 3 cents per text with no monthly fee). This way, you can upgrade if you find the strategy successful and want to expand.



To get started, you will need to set up a system to collect cell phone information. This can be done through an online platform like Eventbrite, or manually at a meeting or conference.

In addition, you may want to consider setting up an email blast with the same information for mentors who do not have smart phones. This may be particularly helpful if you are working with mentors who are seniors, or mentors who are especially active on email.

A staff person at Mentor NY created several text messages and website pages at a time so that 4-6 weeks-worth of tips and recommendations were prepared to go out at any given time.

So what did Mentor NY find? They had a click through rate of anywhere from 28-65% for their text messaging. Their website usage also went up since more people were accessing resources on their sites. Not a single mentor asked to be removed from the text messaging list. Email blasts, which were sent to mentors who did not have smart phones, had a 40-60% open rate.

### **Designing Your Text Message Curriculum**

Each text message you send to mentors should be short but engaging. Each one should have a link to a web resource where mentors can find more detail about the practice or issue being shared. Many of Mentor NY's messages contained simple words of encouragement to keep mentors motivated and to remind them that they can make a difference.

Below is a sample list of the text messages and the follow up pages that reside on the Mentor NY website. You can build a similar page on your school website that holds more information that you can link to in your messages.

You can find additional Success Mentors resources to link to in your messages on MENTOR's website [here](#). There are also a wealth of additional resources for mentors on the OJJDP National Mentoring Resource Center, [here](#).

**Text 1:** *This text was sent after a major hurricane hit New York City, damaging many homes and impacting many communities. Texts can be a helpful way to respond to important events and give mentors guidance for how to support young people.*

**Text line: Hurricane Sandy! Now what? Your mentees will be so glad to see you! Thanks for being there for them! (Link to website page)**

Content for website page:

This has been a challenging week for almost everyone in the NYC area. I congratulate you for hanging in there for your mentees! We New Yorkers are pretty resilient, especially when faced with challenges.

Your mentees will have had to face many of the same things that you have struggled



with this past week - maybe no power, no heat, no water. Maybe they were worried about loved ones who live near the water or they can't reach by phone. Maybe their parents get paid for hourly work so on top of everything else, there's a worry about no income.

At our first day of work today, everyone (my co-workers and I) had to share our stories. What happened in our neighborhoods - what happened to our house or dog or relatives- what trees fell down....It's a pretty normal reaction to extreme experiences. So here are some things you might see with your students.

\* Don't be surprised if your mentees don't come to school on Monday. They may be staying with relatives outside the city until power and heat are restored. They may not be able to get to school without the subways or buses. It may be a while before everything is back to normal.

\* Do reach out to the families if you don't see them in school - not to criticize, just to let them know that you hope that they are fine. Let them know you're looking forward to seeing them soon. Let them know that you are thinking about them and care what has happened to them and their families.

\* Expect that they will have stories that they want to share and talk about (just like my co-workers and me!). That's a normal thing to want to do. You can be empathetic and listen. Sometimes just being able to vent helps a person move forward!

\* Listen carefully for any special problems in their neighborhoods. Don't expect to be able to solve electricity or heat issues yourselves! Do report serious problems to the school counselors or social workers in case they may be able to request assistance for families.

\* If your student makes it to school on Monday, congratulate him/her! It's an accomplishment when dealing with this kind of upheaval to be able to get back to the regular routine. Make sure he/she knows that you are pleased that school is important to him/her.

\* You can congratulate each other for being a great mentor/mentee pair. You both got back to school and back on track!



You will make a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people!

**Text 2:**

**Text line: 90% of success is showing up! (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

A famous man once said, "90% of success is showing up." As we all navigate the challenges of the past few weeks, we may feel as if we don't have a lot of "wisdom" to provide to our mentees.

We may not know when the electricity will be back on or when they will be able to go back home or go back to their own schools...

We may not be able to answer many of the questions that mentees have.

But we can surely SHOW UP!

Being there - being a constant and caring mentor can mean a great deal to a youth who has faced Hurricane Sandy, snow, winds and more.

Showing up means a lot!

Being there matters and you will define the SUCCESS in Success Mentors.

Thank you for being there.

You are making a difference.

**Text 3:**

**Text line: My mentee's family doesn't return my calls. Now what? (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

You want to be welcoming and encouraging but you need to talk to them to be able to do that! This is a challenge!

- Talk to your mentoring program coordinator about what other mentors have tried. They'll have some suggestions that have worked.



- Perhaps you could start with a note home or a card with some positive comments about looking forward to meeting them at a family summit or school meeting.
- Is there some positive news to report (student has been at school on time for .....days in a row - even if it's only 2!)?
- If you have connected with the student, a positive recognition of him/her would be great. (He always has a great attitude; she's helpful to other students; it's clear she loves art....)
- When the family summit or school meetings are planned, drop a note saying that you are really looking forward to meeting Tom's parent or Sally's mother because it's clear that he/she has a good family behind him/her. (Or some positive characteristic about your student.)
- Encourage your student to bring his/her parent in to meet you so that you can congratulate them ALL for his/her improvements.

You will make a difference!

Thank you

#### **Text 4:**

**I'm concerned that my mentee's family will take a few weeks off during December instead of just the official school holiday. What can I do? (Link to website page).**

This is can be a real challenge. When families go home to other countries to visit relatives, it can be exceedingly expensive and time consuming. So some families extend their vacations to be longer than the days that the students have off.

Content for website page:

- Talk to your mentoring program coordinator about what other mentors have tried. They'll have some suggestions that have worked.
- The focus should be on the great success that your mentee has made so far. Improved attendance, reduced tardiness, better progress reports, better grades, better attitude...now is the time to highlight the improvements!



- You want to keep recognizing your mentee's improvements and keep tying it to being in school, on time, EVERY DAY. You'll need to keep making that connection for your mentee and the family.
- How about making the days just before the school break and just after the school starts again ones where you have special activities and incentives for the students? Things that they can only do (or earn the right to do) if they are there on those days. Your other team members could brainstorm with you ideas to make it work for many students.
- The additional piece about a successful activity or incentive just before and after the school break is to make sure that the students KNOW about this well in advance. Make sure that they are excited about participating and can go home and talk about wanting to be in school.
- Is your student participating in a scheduled school activity that you could watch him/her in (like a holiday concert or a special basketball game) that is right around the school break? If you would agree to come cheer him/her on, maybe that would be an incentive to wait to leave until after that happens.
- You may not be able to completely change the whole family's habits but you can start to make them think, in a positive way, about how their student has improved with their help and how they can improve even further.

#### **Text 5:**

#### **Should I get my mentee a holiday gift? (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

This is a common question. It's a generous thought and we often want to share gifts with people we care about.

However, you are a mentor. That's not a family member, friend or relative. Your real gift to your student is more precious than anything that one could buy - it's your time and attention!

You don't need "things" to celebrate your time together.

In addition, there are lots of potential complications to buying gifts for your mentees: not all of us celebrate the same holidays, you could offend a family member...



- You might choose a gift that a student's family could not afford, thereby setting up potential feelings of competition with the parents.
- You might choose a gift that your student wants but that, unknown to you, has been forbidden to the student by his/her parent.
- Students might and will compare gifts from their mentors to see who has the most "generous" mentor. Let's not give them this added level of complexity to the relationships.
- So please NO gifts.

If you want to recognize the season of giving, how about helping your student plan a way to help others? Perhaps you could help him/her volunteer to sing carols at a nursing home or to younger students. Maybe you could volunteer at a soup kitchen with a group of students together. These gifts benefit the recipient and the giver as well!

The best gift you can give a student is your time and attention. Nothing could be better than helping him/her feel connected to school and on the way to a better school year. What an amazing gift!

#### **Text 6:**

**My mentee is coming to school more but still getting here late! I'm frustrated! (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

So first, congratulate yourself and your mentee! You've made progress and that is huge. They don't have much chance to learn if they're not in school and you are moving your mentee ahead. Don't forget that!

Obviously, you are having an impact. And, of course, you want to take it to the next level – being there on time for all the classes!

- Talk to your mentoring program coordinator about what other mentors have tried. They'll have some suggestions that have worked.
- Now is absolutely the time to congratulate your mentee and his/her family. Each new day that he/she is in school is another chance for continued learning.
- Look at what might be adding to the student's tardiness. Does he/she have a long bus/subway ride? No parent at home to wake him/her up? What is the first class for the day? Try to think about what the hurdles are. Maybe you can be creative about a solution.



- Is your student signed up for the automatic wake up calls from the celebrities? It's a fun way to get started in the day. If not, sign up directly here: <http://www.wakeupnyc.org/>
- Since you have seen improved attendance, you KNOW that you are making a difference. Think about some of the things you've learned about your mentee. What would be a good motivator for her/him? Is it being part of the incentives that the school can offer? Or something else?
- See if you can set up your own incentive for the student around making it to school 2 days in a row, then 3 days in a row, etc. Keep recognizing and rewarding on-time attendance.
- Is there something new that your student would like to do at school? One Success team started a newspaper that a formerly chronic absent student runs as the editor. She gets there EARLY every day to make sure that her reporters are out there getting stories! What would make your student truly engaged and energized?
- Keep congratulating your student, his/her family AND yourself. You are part of an important step for this student.

You will make a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people!

#### **Text 7:**

**My mentee says his teacher "hates me" and "picks on me"? (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

This is a tough one to manage. You will want to think carefully how you navigate around this subject with your mentee!

- The first thing to do is to understand a lot more about what is causing the student to feel this way. Are there specific things that the teacher questions him/her about (like being late or not finishing homework)? The student might see those as indicating being picked on while the teacher might be doing his/her job.



- My middle school mentee assured me that the Assistant Principal had it out for her because he kept asking her why she wasn't in class. In telling me about it, she left out the fact that she was in the hallway, skipping class at the time!
- You don't want to dismiss how a student feels, even if the teacher has a good reason to be holding him/her accountable.
- With my mentee, I wanted to think about what would motivate her. All I knew for sure was how to keep him from bothering her. Can you guess how to do that? Right, don't skip class!
- I didn't ignore her feelings but kept focusing on what would be best for HER.
- The other strategy that you can take with a mentee is to share some of your real-world experiences in working with people who might be harder for you to get along with. We all have colleagues, bosses, and clients with whom it might be challenging to work. And we need to make the best of it. Perhaps you can brainstorm how to do that with your mentee using a personal example. Ask him/her to think about how you can manage it.
- Then you can ask if you two can apply some of these ideas to his/her situation. What might work for your student?
- There may be some reality to the student's feelings. We can't always make everyone like us. But we can learn to work with all different kinds of people. If you can help your mentee do that, he/she will have learned a really valuable life skill!

And remember, you are making a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people!

**Text 8:**

**What works better, bad news or good news? (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

Start with the good news – always!

We want the students to be there every day and on time. That's our goal.



So do we start talking to a student by citing all the times that they're absent or late?

- “Wow, I can’t believe you missed 6 days of school in the last two weeks!”

I don’t know about you but I would want to walk away from someone who started a conversation with me like that!

- How about working from a strength-based perspective? That means, start with the strengths and build from there.

So what if you started with, “It seems like the past two weeks have been a challenge for you. I’m glad you’re in school today and were able to overcome those challenges for a bit! Good for you.”

“By the way, if you want to talk about what’s going on, I’m cool to listen.”

“Is there something that I could help you with?”

- And maybe try this, “Hey, you made it 2 days last week and 2 days this week. You’re on track to hit 50% if you come tomorrow. Could you try for that?”

And you could celebrate 50% with a high five or whatever is upbeat for your mentee.

- I’ll never forget a mentor who met with a student who was getting 4 D’s and 1 F. She looked carefully at his record and when she met him, she congratulated him. He looked at her as if she were crazy! She said, “You don’t get good grades but I see that you come to school every day. I bet you WANT to do better. I can help you with that.” She turned his life around with that vote of confidence, by starting with his strength – his desire to be in school and to do better.
- See if you can’t think about each of your students and find what the strength is for him/her. Start with that and perhaps you’ll get farther along down the road!
- And let me know how this works! [jlcohen@mentorkids.org](mailto:jlcohen@mentorkids.org)

And remember, you are making a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC’s young people!



**Text 9:** *This text directs mentors to helpful resources in the community. Please note – these are NYC resources only, but your city or town may have similar ones. Start by pulling together as many as are available in your community and put them into one text message/e-mail blast so that mentors have them all in one place. Perhaps it's an afterschool homework help center or hotline. Maybe it's help at the libraries or volunteer tutoring from high school students.*

## **10 WAYS TO CONNECT STUDENTS TO CRITICAL RESOURCES (Link to website page)**

Content for website page:

**1) Truancy Task Force Electronic Help Center:** Comprehensive listing of resources from academic tutoring to support dealing with asthma available in your neighborhood.

[www.nyc.gov/everystudent](http://www.nyc.gov/everystudent)

**2) Truancy Task Force Student Success Map:** An interactive directory tailored for *Every Student, Every Day* pilot schools pinpointing vital local resources, including public libraries and recreation centers.

[www.nyc.gov/studentsuccessmap](http://www.nyc.gov/studentsuccessmap)

**3) WakeUp! NYC:** The Task Force created this multimedia campaign to help students get up and get to school each and every morning. Students can sign up for calls from various celebrities like Trey Songz, Magic Johnson and Whoopi Goldberg. Follow the link to learn more and to sign up for these free calls.

<http://www.wakeupnyc.org/>

**4) Beacon:** These are school-based community centers serving children, youth, and adults. There are currently 80 Beacons located throughout New York City, operating in the afternoons and evenings, on weekends, during school holidays and vacation periods, and during the summer. These programs are free.

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/beacon\\_program\\_faq.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/beacon_program_faq.shtml) (FAQ)

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/beacon\\_program.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/beacon_program.shtml) (Overview)

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/search.shtml?program=Beacon> (Search Beacon sites)

**5) Cornerstone:** Year-round engaging activities for adults and young people, located at 25 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Community Centers throughout the five boroughs. Cornerstone



youth programs are designed to help participants acquire the skills and attitudes they need to graduate from high school, succeed in their chosen career, and give back to the community.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/search.shtml?program=Cornerstone%20Program>

**6) DYCD Youth Connect:** A free and confidential information service that connects youth to jobs, afterschool programs and training opportunities. Call 212-227-4005 for more information.

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/youth\\_connect/youth\\_connect.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/youth_connect/youth_connect.shtml)

**7) Teen ACTION:** These programs allow youth between the ages of 13 and 21 to design and implement a meaningful service project that meets a need in their community.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/search.shtml?program=Teen%20Action%20Program>

**8) NYC Ladders for Leaders:** An innovative program that offers high school and college students the opportunity to participate in summer internships with some of the most dynamic corporations and businesses in New York City.

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/jobs/nycladders\\_for\\_leaders.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/jobs/nycladders_for_leaders.shtml)

**9) Dial-A-Teacher:** A homework help program for elementary and middle school students. Call 212-777-3380 Monday through Thursday, from 4 to 7 p.m., to talk to a teacher.

<http://www.uft.org/dial-a-teacher>

**10) And More! Check to see if your school has the following programs:**

☐ **21st Century Community Learning Center (21stCCLC):** An after school program providing youth development activities, academic enrichment and parent outreach. 21stCCLCs are located in 254 schools in all five boroughs.

<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>

☐ **Out-of-School Time:** The Out-of-School Time (OST) Program provides a mix of academic, recreational and cultural activities for young people (grades K-12) after school, during holidays and in the summer.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/html/afterschool/search.shtml?program=Out%20of%20School%20Time>



**Text 10:**

**Seeing progress? Terrific – and keep working with those students! (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

By this time of year, you may have started to see some students coming to school more often and more often on time! That's so great and you should congratulate yourself.

- You might be thinking that you want them to come every day, not just most days!
  - That's ok – keep shooting for improvement but don't forget to recognize how far they have come and the progress that has been made.
- You might even have some students who are now technically not “chronically absent”. That would be such a great accomplishment for them and for you!
  - Now what – do you stop seeing your mentees if they're not absent any more? NO WAY! You want to keep meeting with your mentees and encouraging them to maintain their attendance.
  - Use this new found attendance to encourage better class engagement or turning in those homework assignments.
  - Help the students finish the year strong and with success.
- It could be a good time to reach out to your student's family and offer your congratulations to them, too.
- And keep up the good work! Your success will rub off on the students' friends and classmates.

You are making a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people!

**Text 11:** This text relates to the data that is shared with mentors about their mentees' attendance. No matter what platform or system your school uses to share attendance data, this text can be adapted and used to clear up any misunderstandings or confusion about the data being shared with mentors.

**Will looking at the statistics help me do better with my mentee? (Link to website).**



Content for website page:

That's a good question! You have a lot to do to juggle several mentees so looking at statistics could seem like more work.

With so many students, it can be easy to confuse who is coming on time and who is still missing days. And it can be complicated to look for patterns in behavior across 15 students at once! The data dashboard is designed to pull the data together in a way that's easier to understand.

- Talk to your mentoring program coordinator about how other mentors use the data dashboard. Their ideas may show you how a quick glance makes all the details easier to understand.
- Are you clear about what each part of the dashboard means? Could your mentoring program coordinator or another mentor sit down to explain to you the different sections?
- Would it help to have a regular part of your Success mentor meetings dedicated to understanding and using the data dashboard to figure out what is going on?
- Do you see patterns in your student's behavior? Is every Tuesday morning a problem? Does he/she have a part time job that keeps him/her out late on Monday nights? Or is it every A day or B day? Is the student avoiding a particular class that's a problem or challenge for him/her?
- If you are not there every day, is it possible to tie tardiness or absence to the days when YOU are not there? Don't underestimate how important you may be to making the student WANT to be in school! You can test this out by changing up your days of work and see if it has an impact.
- And maybe showing your mentee the dashboard could be an eye-opener about patterns of behavior. I know that I think that I am going to the gym every day but when I look at the calendar, I realize that it's 5 times a week (still good but not as good as 7!) But it FEELS like 7 days a week to me. So looking at the calendar helps keep me honest about it.
- All these strategies are designed for you to figure out what works best for each student. You are learning a lot more about what will help each one or not. Take a moment to think about how the data dashboard could help you for some students.

And remember, you are making a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people!



**Text 12:**

**Spring Fever (Link to website page).**

Content for website page:

The days are so sunny and (sometimes!) warm. Even as adults, it can be a tough time to want to be at our desks. So it might be hard for students to want to be in school.

Still, there's a lot of learning going on in school that we don't want kids to miss.

This could be a great time to have some incentive challenges- pizza, coupons for snacks, even playing a game:

- How about having an assembly honoring kids who have good attendance AND improved attendance?
- Could you do a field trip (even just to a pizza place down the street) for kids who have 3 weeks straight attendance (or some good record)?
- If you meet with your team as a group, could you meet outside one day when everyone is there? On a playground or the front steps?
- If you meet with your team as a group, maybe you do a community project that the kids choose. You could visit a nursing home or senior center. You could clean up and/or plant a neighborhood lot. Only the students who meet the attendance criteria get to participate.
- Maybe now is a time to create a Success Mentoring newspaper for your group. Ask them to help think about Good News stories and get them to the computer to print and distribute. Writers can give their opinions about music or lunch or the Knicks – they have to earn the right to get their opinion published by being in school enough.
- If your mentors are willing, maybe a basketball game – mentors vs. mentees would be interesting to kids. Or maybe it's a Connect 4 or Jenga competition. Again, only those kids who have reached milestone attendance can play. For example, to play on Friday, you have to be in school all week (or 4 out of 5) or whatever you decide.

Keep thinking creatively for what will motivate YOUR students! You know them pretty well by now and you CAN do it!

And remember, you are making a difference!

Thank you for your commitment to NYC's young people



### Questions?

Do you have questions about how to implement text messaging with your Success Mentors? Contact Delia Hagan at MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership at [dhagan@mentoring.org](mailto:dhagan@mentoring.org), or Jean Lahage Cohen, Executive Director of Mentor NY, at [jlcohen@mentorkids.org](mailto:jlcohen@mentorkids.org).